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The controversy regarding the involvement of drug traffickers in the Mexican Catholic Church flared up again in early April after a Roman Catholic bishop suggested that violent drug traffickers have provided "generous support" for their communities, including constructing public infrastructure such as highways and private buildings such as churches. The comments from Bishop Carlos Aguiar Retes drew an immediate rebuke from fellow members of the Conferencia del Episcopado Mexicano (CEM) and from politicians from opposition parties. Some evangelical organizations demanded an immediate investigation.

Aguiar made the comments after a CEM meeting on April 4. "[The drug traffickers] are very generous with the people in their communities, and in general they install electricity, telecommunications, highways, roads, paid for by them," said Aguilar, who is CEM president. "They are very generous, and many times they also build a church or a chapel." This is not the first time that a Mexican Catholic bishop has acknowledged that drug traffickers have donated large sums of money to the church.

In 2005, Bishop Ramon Godinez Flores of Aguascalientes acknowledged that major drug traffickers were giving large sums of money to the church to become "purified" (SourceMex, September 28, 2005). And in 1993, former attorney general Jorge Carpizo McGregor accused Cardinal Juan Sandoval Iniguez of allowing the drug cartels to launder money through the Archdiocese of Guadalajara (SourceMex, October 01, 2003).

These accusations were part of a long-standing feud between Sandoval and Carpizo. Sandoval has accused Carpizo of covering up the facts related to the assassination of Cardinal Juan Jose Posadas Ocampo at the airport in Guadalajara. The government's version was that Posadas was an innocent bystander in a drug battle between drug cartels. Sandoval contended that Posadas was killed because he had information linking high officials in the administration of former President Carlos Salinas de Gortari with major drug-trafficking organizations (SourceMex, June 13, 2001, June 04, 2003, and January 30, 2008).

Aguiar, bishop of the Diocese of Texcoco in Mexico state, did not specify in his comments whether the drug traffickers were donating money directly to the Catholic Church to use for building places of worship or whether they were supporting the construction works in other ways. The bishop's statements caused a stir in Mexico, where drug-related violence has escalated significantly in recent years (SourceMex, August 10, 2005, February 08, 2006, January 24, 2007, and July 26, 2007).

By some estimates, more than 3,000 people died in 2007 as a result of violent confrontations between the various drug organizations in Mexico. Aguiar was very careful to denounce the violence.
associated with the drug-trafficking organizations. "I'm not justifying this; I'm simply saying what is evident," he said. He also noted that even the smallest drug distributor causes "immense" damage to society. The bishop stressed that drug lords should be forgiven if they repent. "Some have approached us and asked for orientation about how to change their lives," he said, adding that they come "from all levels." Aguiar suggested that traffickers should be given a legal opportunity to start a new life through a witness-protection program similar to one in Colombia.

Comments make fellow bishops uncomfortable

The Texcoco bishop's comments created some uncomfortable moments for fellow members of the CEM. A spokesperson for Mexico City Cardinal Norberto Rivera said the bishop's comments could be misconstrued as being soft on the traffickers. "Our position is the church's traditional one that categorically condemns drug-trafficking activity as immoral," said Rivera's spokesman Hugo Valdemar. Other church officials expressed similar concerns. "We reject the use of money that is obtained from death and blood and suffering of many people," said Bishop Jose Guadalupe Martin Rabago of the Diocese of Leon in Guanajuato state. "[The church] does not endorse the behavior of the drug traffickers," the CEM later said in a statement.

Aguiar's comments also attracted reactions from Mexican politicians. Federal deputies from the opposition Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and the Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) said the CEM, rather than endorse funding local projects by drug-trafficking organizations, should push for a change in Mexico's economic system, which has resulted in major societal inequalities. Poverty, said PRD Deputy Javier Gonzalez Garza, is one of the reasons why communities embrace the drug traffickers as their benefactors.

Deputies from the governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) endorsed Aguiar's proposal to provide some protection to drug traffickers who seek to repent. Attorney General Eduardo Medina Mora appealed to the bishops not to consort with the leaders of the drug cartels. "These people are not generous," he said. "What they are doing is destroying our families and our communities." Still, the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR) said it had no plans to investigate the Catholic Church to determine whether any laws were being broken. Among those who have sought an investigation of the Catholic Church is the Confraternidad Nacional de Iglesias Cristinas Evangelicas. Arturo Farela, who heads the organization, asked the government to determine if the Catholic Church was involved in any form of money laundering on behalf of the drug organizations.

A similar request came from the Barra Nacional de Abogados Cristianos, an organization of lawyers who are members of evangelical churches. Alfonso Farrera, president of the organization, accused Aguiar of encouraging impunity with his comments. "[The bishop] is supporting delinquency," said Farrera. "He is sending an erroneous message to drug traffickers and to society that these illicit actions can be purified."

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