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## Vatican Suggests That Mexican Drug-cartel Members Could Be Excommunicated

by LADB Staff

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The Vatican has added another complication to the already inconvenient relationship between Mexico's Catholic Church and the country's drug-trafficking organizations. In mid-January, the Vatican's second-ranking official Cardinal Tarciso Bertone suggested that excommunication could be a possibility for members of Mexico's powerful drug cartels. Bertone, who one newspaper called the "pope's prime minister," made the comment to Latin American reporters at the Vatican before traveling to Mexico to meet with Mexican bishops. The statement put the Mexican bishops conference (Conferencia del Episcopado Mexicano, CEM) in a difficult position, with the Catholic Church accused of hypocrisy because it has at times looked the other way when accepting large donations suspected of coming from the country's drug cartels.

Cardinal calls fight against drugs "an obligation" Bertone expressed the Vatican's deep concern about the surge in drug-related violence in Mexico in the past few years, which claims thousands of lives each year. The Mexico City daily newspaper *El Universal* says drug-related violence was the cause of more than 5,000 deaths reported in Mexico during the first 11 months of 2008. "The fight against drug trafficking is an obligation," the cardinal said. "The trafficking of narcotics represents the most hypocritical and terrible way of killing the dignity and personality of today's youth."

In this context, Bertone suggested that Catholic Church authorities could assist in the fight against drugs by using some of the means at their disposal. Among these, he mentioned excommunication, which bars a Catholic from receiving the sacraments and participating in public worship. "Certainly, excommunication is a very harsh deterrent that the church has used to deal with the most serious crimes in its history, from the very first centuries," Bertone said when asked if the censure would be appropriate. But the Vatican official also expressed doubt about whether banning drug traffickers from church life would be a sufficient deterrent. "But I should observe that excommunication is a punishment that touches only those who have some form of ecclesiastical conscience, an ecclesiastical education," Bertone said.

The CEM did not respond directly to Bertone's comments, but a high-level CEM official agreed that the Mexican Catholic Church has not done enough to help reduce drug-related violence. "With all humility, we must recognize that we have failed because this is everyone's responsibility, including that of the Catholic Church," said Nuevo Laredo Bishop Gustavo Rodriguez Vega, who is in charge of the CEM's commission on pastoral-social issues. Officially, the CEM has been supportive of President Felipe Calderon's efforts to fight drug trafficking but has also urged dialogue and an end to violence.

In late 2008, CEM president Bishop Carlos Aguiar Retes of Texcoco went as far as to suggest an amnesty program for drug traffickers who assist the government's campaign against organized crime. Aguiar's proposal received an endorsement from legislators of the three major parties in

the Chamber of Deputies. "We should offer amnesty to these people [who have participated in the drug trade] as long as the information they provide is useful," said Deputy Raul Cervantes, a member of the opposition Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). Deputies Edgar Olvera of the governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) and David Mendoza of the center-left opposition Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) echoed Cervantes' comments, which were addressed during a hearing of the public safety committee (Comision de Seguridad).

Olvera suggested that the government could set up a witness-protection program to assist people who provide information against drug cartels. Cartel donations to church again questioned Some political commentators questioned the CEM's lack of political skill. "I do not doubt the good intentions of Carlos Aguiar on the need to open the doors of the church to everyone, no matter what their background and regardless of whether they belong to organized or drug-trafficking gangs," wrote columnist Bernardo Barranco V. in the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada. "But I question these declarations as inopportune because they reopen well-founded suspicions regarding donations of the drug trade to the church and the possibility that these organizations have infiltrated the religious structures of our country." The CEM's support for the government's anti-drug efforts and its proposals for dialogue cannot mask the reality that the Catholic Church has depended on donations from drug cartels to finance operations ranging from parishes to seminaries (SourceMex, September 28, 2005 and April 23, 2008). "They are very generous with the societies of their towns," Aguiar said in April 2008. "In some remote towns, they put up lights, communications, roads, at their own expense.... Often they also build a church or a chapel."

Barranco also mentioned recent comments by another CEM leader, Auxiliary Bishop Victor Rene Rodriguez Gamez of Texcoco, who suggested that the Mexican Catholic Church should strive to "evangelize" members of the military. This suggestion, Barranco said, should also be viewed with suspicion because the Catholic Church in Latin America has had a history of siding with repressive military governments. "More than developing pastoral positions for drug traffickers and another for the military, the Mexican Catholic Church must show solidarity with the defense of human rights, justice and the rule of law," said Barranco.

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