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Catholic Bishops Challenge President Enrique Peña Nieto to Provide Answers on Major Reforms

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The Roman Catholic hierarchy has traditionally enjoyed a cozy relationship with the federal government, whether the presidency was in the hands of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) or the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN). While the prelates have not always agreed with the decisions of the executive branch, they have generally been reluctant to criticize the president. There were a few exceptions, including the late Bishop Samuel Ruiz García and Bishop Raúl Vera López, who frequently spoke out against government policies that hurt the poor (SourceMex, Jan. 19, 2000, and Jan. 26, 2011). Some Catholic bishops clashed with the PRI-led governments on other issues, including a controversy on the alleged role of the Catholic Church in supporting criminal organizations (SourceMex, April 23, 2008).

So, when Mexico's bishops' conference (Conferencia del Episcopado Mexicano, CEM) invited President Enrique Peña Nieto and Interior Secretary Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong to dialogue on recent reforms and national issues at their annual retreat in early May, the expectation was that the two sides would hold a polite dialogue, even in areas where there was disagreement. The bishops instead took the opportunity to press the administration on important matters, including major reforms proposed by the Peña Nieto government and subsequently approved by Congress. In particular, the bishops questioned whether energy reforms would be beneficial to Mexico.

Sharing sense of dissatisfaction from ordinary Mexicans

The bishops took the opportunity during their 80-minute audience with Peña Nieto to share the sense of dissatisfaction they had been hearing from parishioners and citizens on the street. "We want to convey what we hear from people of different social strata, their angst and anguish and—allow me to say—their annoyances. We do so with honesty and a true desire to serve," Cardinal Francisco Robles Ortega told Peña Nieto and Osorio Chong at the meeting in the community of Cuautitlán Izcalli in México state.

"We are greatly concerned about the future of our country. In the face of the recent constitutional reforms that were approved, we convey the sense of unease on our part and on the part of our people, and we wonder how these changes will benefit those members of society who are disfavored," said Robles Ortega, who is archbishop of Guadalajara.

The bishops said they did not oppose reforms in taxation, energy, telecommunications, education, and other areas. Congress has already approved each of these reforms, including the changes to the Constitution that would make them possible (SourceMex, Oct. 23, 2013, Dec. 11, 2013, and Dec. 18, 2013). However, the secondary laws to implement the reforms are still pending.

The CEM suggested the reforms were approved without regard to public opinion or to their impact on the majority of the population, and the bishops suggested that secondary laws should include mechanisms that promote equity. "This was an important, sensitive, and opportune dialogue because it addressed the reforms that we consider necessary," said Bishop Eugenio Lira, secretary-
general of the CEM. "But we are worried about some aspects dealing with the implementation of the reforms."

In urging the president and the Mexican Congress to consider the greater good in addressing the secondary reforms, the CEM joined other members of society in calling for the government to take a more holistic approach to structural changes in Mexico. In late April, Mexican filmmaker Alfonso Cuarón challenged Peña Nieto to answer 10 questions about Mexico’s energy reforms, including issues dealing with corruption and environmental protection (SourceMex, May 7, 2014).

Some observers pointed out that the Catholic Church's decision to question the administration was a change from the previous policy of accommodation. "For the first time in many years, the bishops directly confronted the president, albeit in a lukewarm and conciliatory manner, with their doubts about the path that our country is taking," columnist Bernardo Barranco wrote in the daily newspaper La Jornada.

**Influence of Pope Francis**

In an interview with the daily newspaper Reforma, Lira said the CEM alluded to statements by Pope Francis during conversations with Peña Nieto. "As Pope Francis has said, as long as the problem of inequity is not resolved, nothing else will be resolved," said Lira, who is auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Puebla. "That is why we insist that the reforms be made to benefit all of society, not just a few groups."

Observers agree that recent comments from Pope Francis—an Argentine elected to the papacy when he was known as Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio—have had an impact on the manner in which the CEM engages with the administration. "Church observers say the status quo is shifting. ...The bishops see their plans of playing a more prominent role in public policy diminished, and Pope Francis, who clashed with presidents while archbishop of Buenos Aires, Argentina, prefers prelates to side with the people instead of the powerful," said US-based Catholic News Service.

"Throughout the first year of the papacy of Jorge Mario Bergoglio, we have questioned the passivity of the Mexican Catholic Church, especially its hierarchy, to assume a new attitude that the pope has demanded," said Barranco.

The pope has been pushing the Mexican bishops to speak out more in defense of the poor. In November 2013, Papal Nuncio Christophe Pierre met with the CEM, urging the bishops to abandon their regal behavior and become true pastors.

"This prompted the bishops to use their meeting with the president to express the concerns and discomfort of the people, and thus they positioned themselves as representatives of the faithful," said Barranco. "For me personally, this change of tone has been a pleasant surprise."

Two weeks after the meeting with Peña Nieto, 70 bishops from the 119-member CEM traveled to the Vatican to meet with Pope Francis. At the meeting, Cardinal Robles Ortega briefed the pontiff on the situation in Mexico, including the concerns about endemic poverty and the unrelenting drug-related violence that has gripped the country for many years.

The pope—who met with each of the Mexican bishops individually—reiterated the message that the prelates should remain close to the people. The pope also offered the bishops reassurances that he is closely following the problems that Mexico faces on a daily basis.
Five questions for Peña Nieto

At the meeting with Peña Nieto in Cuautitlán Izcalli, Cardinal Robles Ortega presented five questions to Peña Nieto. "These are questions that not only seek clarity but they also constitute real concerns about the major reforms," said Barranco.

Regarding the energy reforms, the prelate said a large segment of the Mexican population does not feel that the changes provide any guarantees that "the resources of our country will be used to overcome the serious deficiencies suffered by a large part of Mexican society." Robles Ortega said Mexicans want to ensure that all investments—whether public or private, national or foreign—will be used to promote social, human, and community progress and care for the environment."

"What guarantees do we have that recent education reforms will promote full development for all?" Robles Ortega also asked the president. He said the bishops would like to see changes that recognize and support the role of parents and society in education and not a reform that "will feed a new bureaucratic structure that will defend its own interests."

The Sindicato Nacional de los Trabajadores de la Educación (SNTE), the country’s largest teachers union, has endorsed the reforms. However, a smaller regional union has vigorously opposed the changes (SourceMex, Sept. 11, 2013).

Regarding tax reform, the CEM president asked, "What guarantees do you have that the changes will result in tax collections that are truly equitable, responsible, and clear? Will the government use the tax revenues honestly and transparently to construct a country with fewer inequalities?"

Robles Ortega also asked whether public investments resulting from the increased revenues would result in new opportunities for dignified and well-paid employment. "Or will the changes provide another opportunity for evasion for those who want to take advantage of the financial resources of our country," he asked.

The bishops also raised questions about electoral reform, suggesting that the goal should be to "consolidate a genuine democracy and true citizen participation.

Peña Nieto took the same approach as he did with Cuarón, promising he would review the questions and provide answers. In a reply to the CEM five days after the meeting with the bishops, the president offered similar responses to those that he provided to Cuarón, often speaking in generalities and reiterating some of the concepts that he used in defending each of the reforms.

Regarding the energy reforms, the president said one of his goals is to use Mexico’s natural riches as a means to promote an equitable, harmonious, and sustainable development that will benefit Mexican families. "[The energy reforms] will attract investments and help us update our technology so that we can boost oil production and increase development of gas, thus improving Mexico’s competitiveness," said the president.

On education reform, the administration said the changes intend to create the conditions where development can occur at all levels of society. Three goals were cited: improve the quality of education, promote increase professionalism among teachers, and incorporate all schools into a national system of education. "We want to promote social participation in education," said the president’s response.
On tax reform, the administration said it was necessary to improve collections and ensure a just taxation system. "Additionally, we want greater transparency and efficiency in the manner that we spend resources. We want to simplify payments and impose a system of taxation that has as a goal social responsibility," said the Peña Nieto government. "[Our goal] is to increase the universe of contributors as well as reduce the informal economy and eliminate tax evasion."

"The political and electoral reforms represent a transformative step toward the consolidation of a democracy that provides results," said the administration. "The changes in the political system will promote a greater equilibrium among the branches of government while benefiting dialogue and agreement to the benefit of all Mexicans."

The comment about politics in Mexico was a stark contrast to the report that Cardinal Robles Ortega presented to the pope. "[There are] deep divisions in some sectors of society, many times provoked by the interests of political parties and powerful groups that are not seeking the common good, but their own well-being," said the CEM president.