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Pope Francis Shines Spotlight on Violence, Poverty, Indigenous Rights During Visit to Mexico

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Keeping to the spirit of his recent trips to Africa, South America, and the United States, Pope Francis used his visit to Mexico to challenge the political culture and the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and to shine the spotlight on the marginalized populations. In his first speech on Mexican territory after arriving in Mexico City on Feb. 12, the pontiff set the tone for his visit. “The Mexico of violence, the Mexico of corruption, the Mexico of drug trafficking, the Mexico of cartels, is not the Mexico that our mother [the Virgin Mary] wants,” Francis said.

The pope’s agenda was known several weeks ahead of his visit, and included stops in San Cristóbal de la Casas in Chiapas, Ciudad Juárez in Chihuahua, and Morelia in Michoacán to address issues of indigenous rights, drug violence, and immigration (SourceMex Dec. 9, 2015).

“His itinerary involved visits to sites that symbolize some of the problems our country is facing, addressing issues that question the confidence in our laws, our institutions, and our co-existence,” columnist José Buendía Hegewisch wrote in the daily newspaper Excélsior just days before the pope’s arrival.

“There is a sense of unease within the government and some sectors of the Catholic hierarchy about the messages that Pope Francis is going to deliver during his visit to Mexico,” Bernardo Barranco, an expert on the Mexican Catholic Church, wrote in a column published in the daily newspaper La Jornada the day before the pope’s arrival. “There is special concern about the critical comments he is expected to make at the sites that he chose, locations marked by inequality, violence, desperation, and especially corruption.”

Pope denounces drug violence

The pontiff added another important stop: the impoverished city of Ecatepec, just northeast of Mexico City. Francis used an outdoor Mass in Ecatepec on the second day of his trip to draw attention to the wide economic disparities in Mexico. In his homily, the pope asked Mexicans to envision “a land of opportunities where there will be no need to emigrate in order to dream, no need to be exploited in order to work, no need to make the despair and poverty of many the opportunism of a few, a land that will not have to mourn men and women, young people and children who are destroyed at the hands of the dealers of death.”

The city, located in México state, is a study in contrasts. Criminal organizations contribute to an atmosphere of violence in many of its neighborhoods. At the same time, developers are taking over some sections of the city to construct luxurious shopping centers that sell goods that most of the residents cannot afford.

The Diocese of Ecatepec has also seen its share of scandal. In 2010, allegations surfaced that Bishop Onésimo Cepeda Silva used his power and connections to help a prominent entrepreneur...
perpetrate a complex scheme to defraud the company Arthinia of valuable paintings by several prominent artists (SourceMex, Nov. 10, 2010).

Other allegations involving improper behavior on the part of the church have surfaced over the past decade, including charges that some priests and bishops had cozied up to criminal organizations. Some church leaders have openly accepted money from drug cartels to fund projects at parishes and dioceses around the country. In 2005, the late Aguascalientes Bishop Ramón Godínez Flores candidly admitted to reporters that some drug traffickers, who were motivated by a desire to be "purified," were giving large sums of money to his diocese (SourceMex, Sept. 28, 2005). In 2008, Bishop Carlos Aguiar Retes, who was then bishop of Texcoco, made controversial comments suggesting that drug traffickers were "very generous with the people in their communities," even paying for public utilities in their town or municipality (SourceMex, April 23, 2008).

In both those cases, the Conferencia del Episcopado Mexicano (CEM) issued statements categorically denying that drug money had infiltrated the church in any form. That changed in 2010, when news broke that the attorney general’s office (Procuraduría General de la República, PGR) was investigating a parish priest in the Diocese of Pachuca, in Hidalgo state, who knowingly accepted money from the late Heriberto Lazcano, one of the top leaders of the Zetas drug-trafficking organization to construct a chapel in the community of Tezontle.

"Corruption is behind the violence, insecurity and the protection of various forms of organized crime,” Barranco said in La Jornada.

Others criticized the church for what they viewed as a sin of omission. “For the past decade, when violence was overflowing throughout the country, the church took on the role of spectator. During this time, 150,000 people have died, and another 10,000 to 20,000 have disappeared. Many have been displaced from their homes or buried in clandestine graves extending throughout Mexico,” Jorge Carrasco Araizaga wrote in the weekly newsmagazine Proceso. “These violations of human rights have been insufficient to move the passionless Catholic hierarchy in Mexico.”

The history of the church’s cooperation with the criminal organizations and its failure to adopt a more proactive stance in the face of violence stand in contrast to Pope Francis’ call for an end to drug-related violence in Mexico, coinciding with his decision to visit Ecatepec and Morelia.

**Mexican bishops urged to take on different priorities**

At a Mass with 160 members of the CEM at the Metropolitan Cathedral, Francis urged the church hierarchy to take on different priorities, particularly the marginalized and powerless. The pope did not mince words in his call for the bishops to abandon their symbols of ecclesiastical power. “Be vigilant so that your vision will not be darkened by the gloomy mist of worldliness; do not allow yourselves to be corrupted by trivial materialism or by the seductive illusion of underhanded agreements; do not place your faith in the ‘chariots and horses’ of today’s pharaohs,” he told the bishops.

“Francis’s sharp criticism came on a morning filled with symbols of temporal and ecclesiastical power, marking a discordant note on the first full day of a trip to Mexico designed to demonstrate his devotion to the powerless,” noted The New York Times.

Other observers pointed to the history of the Mexican Catholic Church of protecting pedophiles, and in particular to the case of Cardinal Norberto Rivera (SourceMex, Nov. 10, 2010, and March 20, 2013).
“Cardinal Rivera is a symbol of clerical impunity on the issue of pedophilia in Mexico,” columnist Sanjuana Martínez wrote in Sinembargo.mx. “He has been and continues to be the great protector of pedophile priests. His archives contain hundreds of records of victims who were abused sexually by predators who were under his protection.”

“It is appropriate to point out that Pope Francis has announced that he intends to end this cancer that has touched all parts of world,” Martínez added. “If this is so, then he is obligated to ask Norberto Rivera to give up his post to atone for his crime of protecting the perpetrators [of pedophilia].”

Some observers said the pope’s message on corruption was also directed at Mexican politicians. “It is no coincidence that President Enrique Peña Nieto removed Emilio Lozoya Austin as director of the state-run oil company PEMEX on the eve of the pope’s visit,” columnist Álvaro Delgado wrote in Proceso, where he alleged that Lozoya was deeply involved in the bribery scandal involving a Mexican subsidiary of the Spanish company OHL (SourceMex, June 3, 2015).

Upholding indigenous values

On the third full day of his visit to Mexico, the pontiff traveled to Chiapas to celebrate Mass with members of several indigenous communities at the Víctor Manuel Reyna soccer stadium in the capital city of Tuxtla Gutierrez. The Mass featured readings in several of the native languages of Chiapas, along with a traditional dance of prayer and the participation of married indigenous deacons.

In his homily, the pope denounced the aspects of Mexican culture that has misunderstood and excluded indigenous peoples from society in a “systematic” and “organized manner.”

"Some have considered your values, culture and traditions to be inferior," he said. "Others, intoxicated by power, money and market trends, have stolen your lands or contaminated them."

At the end of the Mass, local priests gave the pope a pair of Bibles translated into Tzotzil and Tzeltal, two of the principal indigenous languages in Chiapas. The Bibles took 25 years to translate, according to church authorities.

The pontiff last stop in Mexico was in Ciudad Juárez, where he denounced not only mistreatment of Mexican and Central American migrants, but also the conditions that have forced impoverished citizens to attempt to cross into the US in search for a better life. Francis decried the global “human tragedy” that forces people to migrate unwillingly, risking death. “Each step [is] a journey laden with grave injustices: the enslaved, the imprisoned and extorted,” the pontiff said.

The pope also used the visit to the border city to demand fair wages and reasonable hours for workers at maquiladora plants. “God will hold accountable the enslavers of the day,” he said in response to a worker who related the harsh working conditions she had to endure.

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