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## **New Leader of Mexican Catholic Church a Protégé of Pope Francis**

*by Carlos Navarro*

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The appointment of Cardinal Carlos Aguiar Retes as the new leader of the Mexico City archdiocese, the Arquidiócesis Primada de México, could represent a significant change in the tone of the Roman Catholic Church in Mexico. A protégé of Pope Francis, Aguiar Retes is expected to adopt many of the pope's positions, including dialogue and the support for the dignity of all people regardless of religious affiliation.

When he is installed on Feb. 5, 2018, at the Metropolitan Cathedral in Mexico City, Aguiar Retes, who previously served as head of the nearby Diocese of Tlalnepantla, will become the de facto leader of the Mexican Catholic Church. He replaces Cardinal Norberto Rivera Carrera, who was required to resign upon turning 75.

Rivera's tenure was marked with conflict and controversy with the political class and with civil society. Among other things, he is accused of protecting priests singled out for pedophilia, including Marcial Maciel ([SourceMex, April 11, 2007, Nov. 10, 2010, March 20, 2013](#)), the founder of the secret cult-like organization Legion of Christ, which came under investigation by the Vatican.

There was also the perception that Rivera and other Mexican Catholic leaders were supportive of privileged Catholics at the expense of the marginalized and the poor. Pope Francis included this concern in an address to the bishops' organization, the Conferencia del Episcopado Mexicano (CEM), in Mexico City in 2016.

"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 then ([SourceMex, Feb. 17, 2016](#))

During Rivera's tenure, there were also numerous allegations that some priests and bishops had accepted donations from criminal organizations to fund projects at parishes and dioceses around the country ([SourceMex, Sept. 28, 2005](#)). Among those accused of cozying up to the cartels was Aguiar Retes, who as 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 towns or municipalities ([SourceMex, April 23, 2008](#)).

Aguiar Retes' comments on drug traffickers have apparently not sullied his reputation. The cardinal took a hard line against organized crime in his first public address since his appointment to the Mexico City position. He did so, however, by supporting the controversial public safety law, the Ley de Seguridad Interior, which in essence gives the government the right to dispatch the military to perform the functions of local police to fight criminal organizations ([SourceMex, Dec. 6, 2017](#)). The Chamber of Deputies approved the initiative by a large margin, and the measure is expected to win approval in the Senate.

"I believe this law is necessary because it gives the armed forces a legal framework to intervene," he said.

Aguiar Retes has said he would follow the same policies as his predecessors regarding abortion, thus opposing a law in Mexico City that recognizes a woman's right to terminate a pregnancy ([SourceMex, Oct. 15, 2008](#), and [Feb. 8, 2017](#)). He did not touch on other controversial themes that the CEM has addressed, including the legalization of medical marijuana ([SourceMex, May 3, 2017](#)) and gay marriage ([SourceMex, May 25, 2016](#)). However, he promised "zero tolerance" against pedophilia and pointed out that the CEM has adopted a set of rules that would make it impossible to conceal any cases of sexual mistreatment of children.

"His appointment to the Mexico City Archdiocese comes as the city of nearly 9 million people recovers from a devastating earthquake, which killed more than 300 people ([SourceMex, Sept. 27, 2017](#))," said the US-based National Catholic Reporter newspaper. "It also comes as the church struggles with changing social attitudes Mexico City, where leftist governments have ruled for the past 20 years and approved measures such as same-sex marriage, less-restrictive divorce laws, and the decriminalization of abortion; Rivera vociferously opposed these changes, but was unable to mobilize the masses—and Catholics at large—against them."

### *Closer to the people*

Aguiar Retes' point of emphasis during his address was the theme of "ecclesial renovation," in which he promised openness and placing a priority on taking care of the needs of the most disadvantage groups in society—a mandate from Pope Francis to Catholics around the world. This would mean not only tending to those who attend the Catholic Church but engaging with "all the different sectors" of society.

"Our pastoral mission cannot consist only of maintaining religious traditions and cultural devotions," Aguiar Retes said. "Our church practices have to focus on service to people from all walks of life, resulting in new ways to express our faith."

Along those lines, Aguiar Retes promised to discard the top-down patriarchal focus of the Catholic Church and instead adopt a "horizontal style" of interaction with clergy and the laity, in order to develop a system where many important decisions are made by consensus.

"Carlos Aguiar brings the experience developed as leader in Tlalnepantla, where the norm was not a church of rituals, but a church that is alive, a church that responds through the Gospel to the challenges of families, children, and the most vulnerable populations," journalist Lourdes González Pérez wrote in a guest column in *El Financiero*

The emphasis on the priorities of Pope Francis is no coincidence. In 2007, when the pope was still Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Buenos Aires, Aguiar Retes collaborated with him in writing a document for bishops in Latin America and the Caribbean that emphasizes a more pastoral role on behalf of the poor.

"The document, which became known as the Aparecida document, for the city in Brazil in which it was written, calls for Catholics to prioritize reaching people on the peripheries of society," said The National Catholic Reporter. "It has become a guide of sorts for the current papacy."

Bernardo Barranco, a sociologist who specializes in religion, said Aguiar Retes' appointment coincides with similar moves by Pope Francis around the world. "I think the reading here is that the

pope has prepared for more than a year, with [Cardinal] Aguiar Retes, to have important people, loyal people, at the head of a church as important as the Mexican church.”

According to Barranco, one of the challenges of the new leader will be to restore faith in the Catholic Church following the “disaster” that his predecessor left in the Archdiocese of Mexico City. Rivera created a diocese that was both top heavy in bureaucracy and ineffective, he said.

Jorge Traslosheros, a history professor at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) in Mexico City, said the cardinal is comfortable operating in the world of politics.

“Don Carlos Aguiar Retes is a man capable of speaking with the president of the republic and, half an hour later, he is [in] the poorest neighborhood of Tlalnepantla, having a bite to eat with the woman selling tamales,” Traslosheros said.

The cardinal spoke of his history of working with politicians of all parties in the two communities in México state where he served, including four administrations from the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) in Texcoco and leaders from the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and the conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) in Tlalnepantla. “I will do the same in Mexico City,” Aguiar Retes said. The Mexican capital has been governed by the PRD

### *Close connection to Peña Nieto questioned*

Some analysts, however, expressed concern that Aguiar Retes might be too close to the PRI. Álvaro Delgado, a columnist for proceso.com, which publishes the weekly newsmagazine Proceso, suggested that the cardinal was “equally or more conservative” than his predecessor. According to Delgado, the close connection with the PRI was evident in the months leading to the gubernatorial election in México state, when President Enrique Peña Nieto met with all the bishops of dioceses in the state and asked them to support the PRI candidate Alfredo del Mazo, who eventually won the race by a narrow margin ([SourceMex, June 14, 2017](#)).

“He kissed the ring of all of the bishops, but he knelt before only one: Carlos Aguiar Retes, the bishop of Tlalnepantla,” Delgado wrote. “Aguiar, as bishop of Tlalnepantla, had a very close relationship with Peña Nieto since the time when the president was governor of México state, to the point that he publicly supported his candidacy as president of Mexico. He took him to Rome, along with his then-girlfriend, Angélica Rivera, to present him to then-Pope Benedict XVI.”

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