

VENEZUELA - Latin American Catholic Church divided over Chávez

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Father Jesús Silva, a Uruguayan priest, has lived in the Caracas slum of El Valle for 26 years.

"People of Venezuela's eternally excluded and exploited social classes live here," Silva said, pointing to the tin roofs and unfinished brick buildings. "Today these people have a man in whom they confide," he continued, referring to President Hugo Chávez.

But Venezuela's Catholic Church hierarchy has stood against Chávez since he took office in 1999. The late Cardinal José Ignacio Velasco was present in the Miraflores Presidential Palace April 12, 2002 during a failed attempt to oust Chávez, and signed a decree giving power to Pedro Carmona, creating some negative publicity for the Church (Latinamerica Press, April 22, 2002 and Feb. 26, 2003).

Other high-ranking Catholic Church officials have not only aligned themselves with the anti-Chávez activists but have become dissidents themselves.

One of them is Cardinal Rosalio Castillo, who in his frequent interviews and television appearances almost always speaks out against Chávez. Before a 2004 recall referendum on Chávez (Latinamerica Press, Aug. 25, 2004), Castillo told the Italian daily *La Stampa* that "80 percent of Venezuelans completely oppose Chávez's policies. The president has brought 20,000 Cubans into the country. Some are doctors, others are instructors, but all come with one goal: to indoctrinate. And this is Cubanization."

Differing views

But how does the Catholic Church in the rest of Latin America see the polarizing leader?

The Colombia of recently re-elected President Álvaro Uribe is so close geographically to Venezuela while, politically, the countries are on opposite ends of the spectrum.

"I think that the part of the Colombian Church that accepts and supports Uribe's policies don't see Chávez in good light," said Italian missionary Antonio Bonanomi, who has lived in Colombia for 27 years. The sector that supports Carlos Gaviria, an ex-senator who garnered record support for his left wing party in the May election, is sympathetic to the Venezuelan leader, he added.

"Personally, I have appreciated his declarations against the imperialist politics of the United States," Bonanomi said about the Venezuelan leader. "Chávez has spoken the truth that no one dares to say. I've also appreciated some of his government's social policies in health care and education. Nevertheless, I must admit that I don't like certain folklorish and pretentious behaviors of his, his populist and egocentric style that instead of developing the conscience and rational consensus of the people, exploits emotions and irrationality. Only one process founded in conscience and protagonism of popular organizations has a future."

For Mexico City-based priest Jorge García Castillo, it is difficult to gauge how the Catholic Church in Mexico views the Venezuelan president. "I know that they view him with suspicion and that they consider him an unconditional ally of [Cuban President] Fidel Castro. However, to say that the hierarchy is not with Chávez does not mean to say that it approves of US policy."

Guatemala's issue

South of Mexico is Guatemala, a country that both Chávez and US President George W. Bush view with high interest. The Central American nation is vying for a post among the 10 temporary members on the 15-member United Nations Security Council. Venezuela is its rival, and the United States has lobbied hard for Guatemala to win the Oct. 16 vote, but after 10 rounds of voting with no winner, the selection was suspended until the following day.

Opinions vary in the Guatemalan Church, says Father Rigoberto Pérez Garrido, a pastor in the very Mayan department of El Quiché. "But the part of the Church that identifies itself with the Latin American reality and suffers the consequences of the so-called free trade, sees the formation of a continental bloc born out of political platforms of some countries, in particular Bolivia and Venezuela, as a positive thing."

As in Venezuela, repeated political and social crises in Argentina have influenced the Catholic Church's views, splitting the institution into one camp allied to the group in power and another that favors the poor.

Argentine priest Juan Carlos Greco says that sympathy for Chávez is rooted in the fact that he is a "rock in the shoe of the United States."

"They say that Chávez is against the Church? The Church says that Chávez is a paranoid dictator? At times, what's missing is a better dialogue between the two sides, and it would certainly be desirable if the Venezuelan Church did a self-evaluation," Greco says.

Following the historic election in 2005 of Bolivia's first indigenous president, Evo Morales, the newly-elected leader did not hide his strong ties to Chávez and Castro. The Bolivian Church has remained circumspect. Only the bishop in the impoverished La Paz suburb El Alto, Jesús Juárez, has expressed any enthusiasm for the change.

In Venezuela, Silva always carries the Venezuelan Constitution with him. Pocket-sized versions of the document are available all over the capital. "This Constitution has much of the Church's social doctrine. This is a new constitution that was discussed throughout the country. The president is a Catholic, no doubt about it," he said.

To understand the dilemmas facing Venezuela's Catholic Church, Jesuit priest Jesús Gazo, known as Chávez's spiritual advisor, says "It makes me sad that the official Church has been deceived by the country's minority, a part that identified with the right and with the dominant economic groups."

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