

U.S. Archbishops Call Attention to Central America

By Jim Lackey

Washington (NC) — Three U.S. archbishops who toured Central America in February have urged immediate attention to the needs of the region's displaced persons.

They also criticized efforts to isolate Nicaragua "from access to critically needed resources" and said they would prepare a confidential report for the president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops on discussions they had with church and government leaders in the region.

The three prelates — Archbishops James A. Hickey of Washington, Patrick F. Flores of San Antonio, Tex., and Peter L. Gerety of Newark, N.J. — made their comments in a joint statement released in Washington Feb. 17. The three had visited El Salvador, Nicaragua and Honduras from Feb. 1 to Feb. 9.

"The human suffering and misery of displaced persons and refugees must continue to be an urgent concern for us all," they said, citing in particular the plight of Salvadoran citizens who have lost their homes and villages during El Salvador's civil war.

The three noted that they had been invited to Central America by church officials there, and said it was "a great privilege" to talk firsthand with the region's bishops, priests, religious and laity.

"Much conflict has occurred in Central America in recent years and the church has suffered there," the U.S. archbishops said, "but we found the church in that region to be alive, vibrant and full of hope."

The planned March 2-9 visit to Central America of Pope John Paul II "has occasioned an enormous outpouring of enthusiasm among the local people," according to the three prelates.

In addition to meeting with church officials, the three also made "courtesy calls" on government officials of the three countries they visited.

While in El Salvador, they noted, they expressed concern to Salvadoran President Alvaro Alfredo Magana and to the president of El Salvador's Supreme Court about the "judicial processes" following the deaths in 1980 of Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador and four American churchwomen and the 1981 deaths of two U.S. land reform workers.

Salvadoran courts have yet to convict anyone in connection with those murders.

"Concerning Nicaragua," the three archbishops said, "we want to stress our conviction that the cause of peace would not be best served by isolating Nicaragua from access to critically needed resources."

They said they intended to urge the U.S. government "to avoid actions or statements that would tend to further such isolation."

The statement also said the

three recognized "the need to support the church in Nicaragua in its efforts to maintain those basic human freedoms essential to its Christian heritage."

The three archbishops termed "tragic" the plight of increasing numbers of displaced persons.

"Their homes and villages have been destroyed by military action; they have had to seek shelter elsewhere, often in areas far removed from their place of residence," they said.

But because many of the displaced are still within their own country, the archbishops said, they cannot be classified as refugees under United Nations definitions.

"We urge a review of this problem and a multilateral solution," they said. "The resources available in El Salvador are inadequate to meet these needs."

It is also "urgently necessary" to assist Salvadoran, Nicaraguan and Guatemalan refugees who have fled to Honduras, they said.

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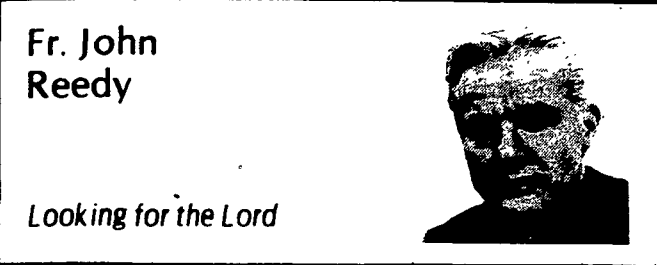
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Looking for the Lord

Changes Needed In Bank

The ugly publicity about the Vatican bank has gone on for too long. Twice recently the bank was again in the news.

The Wall Street Journal reported that the priest who is second in command at the bank has now been notified by Italian authorities that he is under formal investigation for possible violations of the law.

Public Broadcasting presented an hour-long, lurid treatment of the life and death of Roberto Calvi, Calvi's financial manipulations resulted in the collapse of Banco Ambrosiano. He died hanging from a bridge in London; British authorities are reviewing their initial judgment that his death was suicide.

Archbishop Paul Marcinkus, head of the Vatican bank, was involved in the affairs of Calvi's institutions. Calvi seems to have been a trusted adviser of Marcinkus in his running of the Vatican bank.

In my judgment, the PBS television report was guilty of sensationalism and smear in its treatment of Archbishop Marcinkus — unless the producers know a lot more than has been published at this time. And if they do know more, they certainly didn't present sufficient evidence to support the innuendo.

Whatever the facts, the public perception of the Vatican bank has become a scandal which needs to be confronted.

The facts and the relationships are very complicated, but I think that reasonable, prudent people would judge that Archbishop Marcinkus was guilty of bad judgment, at least, in giving Vatican prestige to Calvi's financial high wire

act, in serving as a board member for one of his banks, in his apparent reliance on the advice of Calvi and Michele Sindona (another Italian banker, now serving time in a U.S. prison).

I am not suggesting that the Church sacrifice the reputations of the archbishop and his associates for the sake of public relations. Their rights must be respected.

But their rights do not necessarily involve retention of their positions. Ways could be found to make it clear that a change of personnel does not constitute a judgment of misconduct.

The Church must deal with large amounts of money, but its handling of financial matters should be (and appear to be) open, responsible and cautious.

High risk speculation, use of the Vatican's national independence for investment benefit, cutting corners on legal requirements — all of these tactics seem inconsistent with the character and purposes of the Church.

Ordination, even to the hierarchy, does not confer financial competence. The Vatican should assemble a board of professional financiers who are known for their ability and integrity, with overall policy determined by the pope and his ecclesiastical advisers.

Moreover, the system will never be what it should be — at least in these times — until there is some regular report on the stewardship of Church resources to the people who constitute the Church.

From all I've heard about Archbishop Marcinkus, I have no doubt that he has offered his resignation to the Holy Father. For the welfare of the Church, it would seem that it should be accepted ... and a whole new system of financial management should be established.