

# Guatemalan land-reform priest may seek presidency

By Mike Tangeman  
NC News

NUEVA CONCEPCION, Guatemala — Father Andres Giron has survived assassination attempts in his campaign for land reform in Guatemala, and now the controversial priest might face a rupture with the Vatican over his desire to run for the Guatemalan presidency next year.

"If I have the people organized, I will do it," Father Giron said in an interview at his parish rectory in Nueva Concepcion, on Guatemala's sweltering southern coast. Explaining that his decision will rest on whether a presidential bid would be the best way to further promote agrarian reform, Father Giron said he believes he has a chance of winning "because all the peasants will vote for me ... I am sure of it."

Father Giron believes that an unjust distribution of land is at the root of the extreme poverty that gives his country of 8.2 million people the lowest standard of living in all Central America. Yet, in a country where nearly two-thirds of the agricultural land is controlled by less than 3 percent of the landowners, promoting agrarian reform can be a controversial and dangerous business.

Since his return to his native Guatemala in 1984 after three years in exile — first in Rome, then at St. Bede's Parish in Hayward, Calif. — Father Giron has survived several assassination attempts. His land reform tactics have also been criticized by Guatemala's bishops, even though the basic injustice of Guatemala's inequitable land distribution is one thing upon which Father Giron and the bishops agree.

In a February, 1988, pastoral letter titled "The Cry for Land," the Guatemalan bishops' conference cited extreme rural poverty in calling for an equitable distribution of state-owned properties and under-cultivated private properties.

But according to Auxiliary Bishop Juan Gerardi of Guatemala, general secretary of the conference, the bishops disapprove of Father Giron's personal involvement in the leadership of the pro-land reform movement.

Furthermore, Bishop Gerardi said, the bishops are worried by persistent rumors that Father Giron might violate church practice by running for president in 1990

— rumors Father Giron does not deny. "It's one of my biggest dilemmas ... it's on my mind all the time," said Father Giron.

He said he knows such a move would run afoul of Pope John Paul II's repeated admonitions to Catholic clergy worldwide to stay out of electoral politics, but said he is considering asking for a sabbatical from his priestly ministry. Bishop Gerardi, however, said the Guatemalan bishops would not be in favor of that option.

Canon 285 of the Code of Canon Law states that "clerics are forbidden to assume public office whenever it means sharing in the exercise of civil power."

Father Giron, meanwhile, said he knows direct disobedience of the Vatican leaves him open to possible excommunication. "But excommunication is for the birds," he said. "Nobody is going to take God's love away from me — nobody, not even the pope. I respect him as my superior, but if the people ask me ... I am ready to run."

For Father Giron, the road that led to his reputation as a headline-making social reformer in Guatemala has its roots in the slums of Memphis, Tenn. While teaching Confraternity of Christian Doctrine classes as a La Salle Christian Brother there in 1968, he got involved in the U.S. civil rights movement and met the man who has inspired his work in favor of land reform in Guatemala — the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. "At the beginning, I thought the only way of changing this country (Guatemala) was through violence," Father Giron said. "He changed my mind."

In 1985, he founded the National Campesino Pro-Land Movement, which through protest marches and threatened land takeovers pressured the government into providing low-interest loans for the purchase of four plantations. Formerly landless peasants now work the plantations collectively.

Father Giron said that approach might work for the short term, but it is "a very timid way of getting land." To truly solve the problem of poverty, he said, "We must distribute land in a radical way."

Studies back up Father Giron's charges of a land tenure system skewed in favor of the rich. A recent government survey of rural land showed that 65 percent of Guatemala's 10.3 million acres of agricul-

tural land is divided among less than 3 percent of the landowners. One study by the U.S. Agency for International Development found that while some 2.8 million acres of coastal plantation fields lay fallow, nine out of 10 people in the mountainous highland area lived on plots so small they could not produce enough to meet their basic needs.

"This is creating people who eat only once a day, and to me that's sinful," Father Giron said. "When you earn only \$1.25 a day and you pay 48 cents for a pound of beans, 35 cents for a pound of

rice, 13 cents for a pound of salt, 19 cents for a pound of sugar, and you have eight kids and you're supposed to feed them every day and clothe them ... to me that's sinful."

Such beliefs have won Father Giron enemies among the country's large landowners and military. Last September, armed men dressed in military fatigues stopped the priest's car on a deserted country road and opened fire. The shots missed Father Giron, but killed an elderly man and wounded a 17-year-old seminarian riding in the car.

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