

Mexican rural sector ailing

Ioan Grillo/CNS

MEXICO CITY — Miguel Garcia Bautista's family has been farming wheat on a 10-acre plot in the Mexican state of Zacatecas since Garcia's grandfather purchased the land in 1937.

But now Garcia, a burly 37-year-old with four children, said he might have to sell his family's farm and look for work elsewhere as competition from inexpensive U.S. wheat is forcing him out of business.

"I love to work the land, I love my home. But when I can't feed my kids, I think about going to the other side (the United States) to make a living," he said.

The case of Garcia and millions of other Mexican *campesinos*, or peasant farmers, has been taken up by church officials who have joined in a campaign to save the Mexican countryside.

On Jan. 29, the social commission of the Mexican bishops' conference released a lengthy statement calling on the Mexican government to do everything in its power to rescue the ailing rural sector.

Two days later, several priests were among tens of thousands of *campesinos* and trade unionists in a march to Mexico City's central square.

The situation has been heating up since Jan. 1, when tariffs on most agricultural products imported from the United States were eliminated under the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Mexican farm groups said they are unable to compete with heavily subsidized U.S. producers and fear the rural sector could be devastated.

"The results of this accord have been beneficial to some farmers, but the majority of farmers, small producers, *campesinos* and indigenous people have experienced a severe deterioration in their economic activity and quality of life," the bishops said.

The church is especially concerned about the countryside because it is home to one in four Mexicans and some of the country's most fervent Catholics.

For example, 97.4 percent of people in the rural state of Zacatecas are Catholic, compared to 91.5 percent in Mexico City, according to government statistics.

Moreover, church officials are worried a depressed rural sector will lead to further migration.

"Families can fall apart when the head of the household is working in the United States and only commu-



Reuters/CNS

Mexican farmers, lifting a caricature of President Vicente Fox, hold a demonstration in the streets of Mexico City Jan. 31 urging the Mexican government to renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement. The farmers seek protection from cheaper U.S. agricultural imports.

nicates with his wife and children by telephone," Bishop Mario Espinosa Contreras of Tehuacan said at a Jan. 30 news conference.

In January, the Mexican and U.S. bishops released a joint statement asking the Mexican and U.S. governments to make basic changes in immigration law and practice. Now, the Mexican bishops are seeking cooperation with Catholics in the United States over farming issues.

"We want to discuss this subject with bishops of our brother churches in Canada and the United States. We encourage dialogue among producers in the three countries," the bishops said.

Dominican Father Miguel Concha, Mexican superior of his religious order, said the U.S. government acted irresponsibly last May by passing a farm bill that raised subsidies to U.S. producers to \$19 billion per year.

"The increase in U.S. subsidies hit Mexican farmers hard. It shows a total disregard for the problems here," said Father Concha, a participant in the Jan. 31 march.

Advocates of the North American Free Trade Agreement said the problems of Mexican farmers are due to their own inefficiencies. Whereas most U.S. producers run huge operations using the latest technology, many Mexican producers are small holders using traditional methods.

Nevertheless, the Mexican bishops' statement defended the *campesinos'* traditional way of life.

"We are witnesses to the deep re-

spect our brothers in the countryside have for the earth. Our indigenous brothers have a relationship with the land that is communitarian and religious," the bishops said.

Free-trade advocates also criticize the Mexican government for failing to prepare its farmers for the elimination of tariffs in 2003, even though the North American Free Trade Agreement was signed a decade ago.

Church officials are petitioning the government to strengthen its support for the rural sector.

"We call on the government to listen to society, to talk with the *campesinos* and use all resources at its reach to help the population. ... Free-trade accords are not immovable," the bishops said.

Farm groups are demanding the authorities restore tariffs on U.S. farm products and were due to meet with government officials Feb. 10. But Mexican President Vicente Fox has said he will not renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement, despite threats by militant *campesino* groups to block the U.S.-Mexico border and halt production in the countryside if no action is taken.

Auxiliary Bishop Abelardo Alvarado Alcantara of Mexico City, general secretary of the bishops' conference, told Catholic News Service the church supports the path of dialogue, not confrontation.

"We only support peaceful, democratic methods. We are against all violence and illegal action," he said.

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