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Cardinal Álvaro Ramazzini poses for a photo during an interview at his office in Huehuetenango, Guatemala, March 22. (AP/Moises Castillo)

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As more than 100 men carrying an elaborate float of Jesus halted before him, Cardinal Álvaro Ramazzini lost no time in calling for social justice — the hallmark of the Catholic bishop's decades-long frontline ministry.

"Let's hope that this procession may revive in the heart the willingness to discover Jesus Christ present in the person who suffers," Ramazzini said in an impromptu speech, pointing to the dozens of elderly and disabled lining a street in Guatemala City's oldest neighborhood. "If we don't have that ability, don't tell me you're Christian — I won't believe that."

Elevated by Pope Francis to the top hierarchy of the Catholic Church, Ramazzini has continued his unflinching focus on the poor, the Indigenous and the migrant. That has garnered him great affection from the marginalized, and many threats of violence, including rumors of an arrest warrant, as his native Guatemala struggles through political turmoil and remains a hotspot of migration to the United States.

At the procession during the Easter season, he didn't mince words for Guatemala's government. He denounced the lack of social security provisions for the elderly that left many feeling like "indigent beggars," before placing on the float a plaque honoring the eldercare volunteers at whose invitation he had driven six hours from his diocese.



Faithful, accompanied by their nurses and volunteers, wait to watch the annual Jesus del Consuelo procession in Guatemala City March 23. As more than 100 men carrying a religious float halted nearby, Cardinal Álvaro Ramazzini lost no time in calling for social justice — the hallmark of the Catholic bishop's decades-long frontline ministry. (AP/Moises Castillo)

Many of the elderly whom volunteers had taken in their wheelchairs and walkers to the processional route could hardly believe their eyes when they saw the 76-year-old cardinal saunter down the street to mingle with them, said group organizer Teresita Samayoa Bautista.

"This is to evangelize with actions," she said. "To me, he was the voice of a people who can't speak and are suffering. Just like Jesus would do. This is what you call commitment to a people, no matter if they're religious or not."

In a recent interview with the Associated Press in his modest office in Huehuetenango, Ramazzini said experiencing Guatemala's challenges, from the civil war onward, cemented his commitment to translating faith into action.

"Here's how we will be judged at life's end, right? 'I was hungry, you didn't give something to eat. I was thirsty, you didn't give me something to drink. I was in prison, and you didn't visit me,' " Ramazzini said, quoting from the Gospel. "I try, as far as my human weaknesses and my limitations allow, to make this what guides my life."



Cardinal Álvaro Ramazzini receives the red biretta from Pope Francis inside St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Oct. 5, 2019. (AP/Andrew Medichini, File)

Out of more than 400,000 Catholic priests in the world, there are only 128 cardinal electors — the role Ramazzini assumed in 2019 — charged with serving the pope as

his main counselors in governing the church, and electing the next one.

That opens doors across continents "at levels to which many Guatemalans have no access," Ramazzini said. He tries to leverage his meetings with church and political leaders "to convey the concerns and needs of the people I serve with every day."

For most of the 50-plus years since his ordination, Ramazzini has been bishop in San Marcos and then Huehuetenango. These mountainous, predominantly Indigenous regions were hard-hit by Guatemala's civil war, which only ended in 1996, and have struggled with extreme poverty and drug-trafficking since, pushing hundreds of thousands of local youths to migrate to the United States.

Outspoken in the defense of Indigenous groups, natural resources, and democratic rights, Ramazzini has also been advocating for what he calls a "strictly and essentially human" approach to migration. Last fall, he became president of the Latin American Bishops Conference's migration network.

Ramazzini argues that as long as people can't find jobs that pay them enough to ensure they and their families can survive, they will continue to embark on dangerous journeys — where pervasive criminal networks prey on them en route and their rights are hardly protected once they arrive at their destination.



Cristel Cordona, second from left, shows photos of a recent marriage to visiting Guatemalan Cardinal Álvaro Ramazzini, at St. Anne Catholic Church in Carthage, Mississippi, Dec. 20, 2019. Ramazzini was at the parish to participate in a listening session with immigrants impacted by arrests by immigration agents at seven Mississippi food processing plants. (AP/Rogelio V. Solis, File)

And while the United States has no problem allowing in the likes of Argentine soccer star Lionel Messi, who recently moved to Miami, the cardinal added, "For the hundreds of migrants who are working day and night, day and night to support the U.S. economy ... for them nothing, the migration situation cannot be fixed."

Supporting migrants on both sides of the border is as much a priority for Ramazzini as for his counterpart in the United States, Bishop [Mark Seitz](#) of El Paso, Texas, who has a shelter literally in the backyard of his diocesan headquarters and chairs the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' migration committee.

"You'd be hard-pressed to find another leader in the church or otherwise in Central America who is more trusted by the poor than he," said Seitz of Ramazzini, with

whom he's been working for a few years to find ways for the church to address the root causes of migration.

Not that the church in Huehuetenango has the financial resources to alter the dire situation — there isn't enough money to create jobs that would keep people in country or even "to guarantee that people don't miss three meals a day," Ramazzini said.

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Nonprofits that work in the region, such as Global Refuge (formerly known as Lutheran Immigrant and Refugee Service) and Pop No'j, which focuses on Indigenous groups, say that every hamlet has sent migrants north because of poverty and the allure of U.S. jobs. Staggering smuggling debts mean most of those who are deported only try again, lest they lose the small land plots families put up as collateral and need to grow what little they eat.

Even some of the volunteers in the Catholic diocesan migrant ministry have recently migrated themselves, said Fr. Fredirick Gandiny, who leads the program from his parish in Santa Ana Huista, a village less than a dozen miles from the border with Mexico.

The ministry's main mission has become assisting children and empowering women who tend to be excluded from decision-making, even though they are the vast majority of those left in their communities.

But migrant ministry can be dangerous because networks of smugglers operate all along the border, Gandiny said, so those in ministry rely on "the grace of God."



Cardinal Álvaro Ramazzini, with a raised arm, delivers an impromptu speech to members of the Jesus del Consuelo brotherhood during their annual procession in Guatemala City March 23. (AP/Moises Castillo)



Cardinal Álvaro Ramazzini, center back, waits for the start of a religious procession in Guatemala City March 23. (AP/Moises Castillo)



Cardinal Álvaro Ramazzini speaks during an interview at his office in Huehuetenango, Guatemala, March 22. (AP Photo/Moises Castillo)



Cardinal Álvaro Ramazzini, center, and Catholic volunteers wait for the arrival of a religious procession in Guatemala City March 23. (AP/Moises Castillo)



Cardinal Álvaro Ramazzini and a Catholic volunteer walk past a sawdust carpet in Guatemala City March 23. (AP Photo/Moises Castillo)

During the civil war, Ramazzini received death threats and needed bodyguards. Late last year, during a series of attempts by Guatemalan prosecutors to prevent progressive President-elect Bernardo Arévalo from taking office, the [cardinal heard](#) he might be charged and detained.

The country's bishops conference had urged respect for the electoral process. Ramazzini said he wrote a personal letter to the attorney general, asking if she was acting in a manner coherent with her Catholic faith, but didn't receive a response.

Having ministered to prisoners in Huehuetenango's jail, Ramazzini has worried about the conditions he'd face if he ended up behind bars like others who fought against corruption.

"So yes, I imagined myself a bit like that, right? Without freedom. But well, these are the risks," Ramazzini said. "One knows that life is in the hands of God."

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