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Bolivian cardinal discusses U.S.-Latin America relations

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 29, 2008 All Things Catholic

In ancient Rome, the office of "tribune" was created to represent the common people, the plebeians, over against the patrician magistrates, meaning the elite ruling class. Over time the office basically lost this founding ideal, but the idea of a "tribune" as a voice for the common person still survives in other contexts -- for example, in its widespread use as a name for newspapers.

In much of the global south, especially in places where a majority of the population is Catholic, the "job description" of a Catholic bishop often includes acting as a tribune in the original sense -- meaning a representative and a voice for the country's people, as opposed to its government and ruling class.

This week brought a classic case in point, in the form of a visit to Washington, D.C., by Cardinal Julio Terrazas Sandoval of Bolivia.

So far, '08 campaign rhetoric in the United States has largely ignored Latin America. Below the radar, however, several important policy measures regarding Latin America are percolating in Washington, including renewal of trade preferences for the Andean nations of Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru and Colombia. Those preferences, which allow goods to enter the U.S. market duty-free, were created in 1991 to fight the drug trade by encouraging other sectors of the economy. Over the years, two million jobs in the region have become dependent upon the preferences.

The preferences expire today. They've been renewed by the House for another 10 months, and should be passed by the Senate -- though the outcome is in some doubt, in part because populist governments in Bolivia and Ecuador have nationalized assets of some U.S. firms, in part because the Bush administration is committed to passing a massive free-trade agreement with Colombia. The White House and Republican legislators worry that renewing the Andean preferences would take Democrats off the hook for approving the Colombia deal.

In this context, Terrazas came to Washington to plea that the people of Bolivia not be held hostage to a political dispute between Washington and La Paz, or to the larger dynamics of the Colombia free trade pact. I sat down with Terrazas on the margins of the Catholic Social Ministry Gathering in Washington, D.C., to discuss the trade deal and other Latin American questions.

You came to the United States in part to meet with members of Congress about U.S. policy towards Latin America, and Bolivia in particular. What have you found?

In general, I would say that the understanding is more theoretical than practical, in part because Latin America is enormously diverse, and that's not always clear from a distance. I sense an intention to have a new kind of relationship, but they haven't yet figured out how to do that in a practical way.

With regard to Bolivia, because we're relatively small from an economic point of view, we're not seen as a country to which the United States should be paying much attention -- despite the fact that there are high levels of poverty that desperately need attention. For the people I met, Bolivia is often seen as a card that can be played as part of the larger diplomatic game, especially with regard to Colombia and the desire for a free trade agreement. Obviously, we don't like to think of ourselves as a lasso that can be used to pull along other issues.

I've also tried to encourage people to consider the plight of the Bolivian people and not exclusively the language of the government, which at this stage is fairly hot with regard to the United States. If they cut these trade preferences that we've had for 20 years, it will dramatically effect Bolivians, particularly 40,000 small businesses and tens of thousands of people who depend on them. The message that would send to the Bolivian people is obviously not a good one.

From the outside, Bolivian President Evo Morales seems like a left-wing populist similar to Castro and Chavez. How are relations with the church?

It's clear that Bolivians have put their faith in a change that was absolutely necessary. There was tremendous injustice that had endured for centuries, and it was important to open that up, to make possible greater opportunities for the majority of Bolivians.

Unfortunately, what [the Morales government] has done is to make such a clean break with the past that it's leaving a lot of people out of the march towards the future. For example, there's a deep tension between those who live in the highlands of Bolivia and those who live in the plains that is being provoked in the current political situation. The government doesn't like it when we say it, but they really are losing a historical moment to move forward and to combat some of these injustices.

So far relations with the church have been fairly good, and they don't go after us very frequently. There have been some moments of tension, but by and large the church is still quite respected.

There's been concern in the Vatican about a left-wing movement sweeping across Latin America, including Bolivia, Venezuela, Argentina, Ecuador, and other nations, which sometimes has anti-clerical dimensions. Is this a real danger?

This idea of church/state conflict is not true in every country, or even in every part of the countries you just mentioned. It's focused on certain high-profile issues, especially in Venezuela. We know these voices very well, particularly the voice of Chavez. I frankly don't see a great worry in the Vatican, because much of the social teaching of the church concerns matters such as land reform or equal distribution of wealth that are also on the agenda of these new governments. Naturally whenever there's violence or exploitation we have to speak out against it, but there's also a lot of common ground with these governments and potential for collaboration.

Another source of tension in Latin America these days is the coming election in Paraguay, and the candidacy of Bishop Fernando Lugo for the presidency. As you know, Lugo requested laicization but the

Holy See refused, telling him to stay out of politics. He's running anyway on a left-wing populist platform, and the polls suggest he could well win. How is he seen by the Latin American bishops?

I don't think we see it as a real source of worry, or as something that demands a major response from us. Even though he's very committed and dedicated, Lugo doesn't seem to have been able to draw from the wells of his faith to figure out how to advance his goals from within the content of his episcopal ministry, so he's decided to go into politics. We hope that he manages to achieve a balanced vision, and that he also avoids some of the temptations that always seem to come with being in a position of power.

If he's elected, how will CELAM react?

I don't think the mere fact of him being a cleric involved in politics will, in itself, generate a huge reaction, because as you know we've seen it before. At the same time, we won't feel limited or intimidated because there's now a bishop, or an ex-bishop who's now in elected office. We'll still speak our mind and advocate for our issues as we always have, and as we would with any regime.

But you wouldn't refuse to deal with him until he resolves his canonical problems with the Holy See?

You can't ignore the president of a country. We'd interact with him as we would any elected official.

What policies could the United States adopt that would be of greatest help to your people?

What we're looking for is a gesture that expresses the values, the good values, which we know the American people have. We're also asking, despite some of the conflicts that go on at the level of governments, for you to think about the poor people in Bolivia and extend a hand to them. What we need to see from the United States is that you're not so worried about these words that provoke conflicts among leaders, and that you're really on the side of life and the life of the Bolivian people.

The trade preferences are very important in this regard. What extending them would show is that the United States is concerned about Bolivia, a poor country still struggling to escape its poverty. It would show that the United States really does want Bolivia to advance, not to fall back.

Here in the United States, we're in the middle of campaign season. What hopes do you think Latin Americans have for the 2008 elections in the United States?

We hope that it's an outcome good for the entire continent. We hope we don't have first-class countries and second-class countries. We hope that the United States turns its face to this hemisphere, knowing that there are always other foreign policy situations to draw your attention away from your own neighborhood. There's an old image we use sometimes. We hope that Latin America is not seen as the backyard of the United States, but as the central square, the *plaza mayor*, in which we can all meet.

Finally, a not-so-serious question. If Bolivians could vote in the American election, who do you think they'd pick?

A majority voted for Evo Morales already, and something tells me they would vote for him again ? even here!

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