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Bolivian bishops rebut 'prayer as anesthesia' charge

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LA PAZ, Bolivia -- Responding to comments by Bolivian President Evo Morales -- who said in regard to the coup in Honduras that the "church hierarchy used prayer as an anesthesia so the people would not become free" -- two of the Bolivia's leading bishops came to the defense of Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Mariadaga of Tegucigalpa, Honduras, and the practice of prayer.

Bishop Jesus Juarez Parraga of El Alto, secretary-general of the Bolivian bishops' conference, said July 17 that prayer gives people "the strength to commit to the changes necessary" for a more just society, and that "this vision of faith ... is far from old ideologies that see religion as a threat to their power."

The bishop said the Bolivian church "has received criticism and accusations in times of dictatorship and democracy" because of its faithfulness to Jesus' message.

"In light of repeated efforts to find divisions between an alleged grass-roots church and the church hierarchy, the Catholic Church affirms its unity, because it is one people of God made up of bishops, priests, religious and laypeople," he said.

His comments came a day after Morales accused some members of the Latin American church hierarchy of being "the best tool of the [U.S.] empire to keep people from becoming free."

Speaking at an event July 16 marking the 200th anniversary of the revolution that freed La Paz, Bolivia's seat of government, from colonial rule, Morales said he was responding to statements by Cardinal Rodriguez and the Honduran bishops that seemed tolerant of the June 28 ouster of Honduran President Manuel Zelaya. The Honduran president had become aligned with Morales, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and other left-leaning Latin American leaders.

"Some members of the Catholic church hierarchy used prayer as an anesthesia so the people would not become free," Morales said. "When they cannot dominate us with the law, then comes prayer, and when they cannot humiliate or dominate us with prayer, then comes the gun."

He added that his remarks were not directed at priests at the grass roots who are involved in social work.

Cardinal Julio Terrazas Sandoval of Santa Cruz also responded to Morales, saying in a July 19 homily that prayer is "the shortest path to unite everyone in a single heart, a single spirit."

He defended Cardinal Rodriguez, calling him "my brother" and saying the Bolivian church could not "remain silent about the scandal of so many lies" about the Honduran prelate.

"Our church in Bolivia has to say we do not agree with what could happen, with the pain and suffering of our sister church in Honduras," he said.

The exchange is the latest in an ongoing war of words between Morales and some Bolivian bishops, mainly Cardinal Terrazas. In another salvo, Morales skipped the traditional Te Deum Mass on July 16, instead attending an outdoor interreligious ceremony in the plaza outside the presidential palace.

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