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Paraguayan president visits Bush, says citizens hurt by poverty

Patricia Zapor Catholic News Service | Oct. 29, 2008

WASHINGTON
Paraguayan President Fernando Lugo, a former Catholic bishop, visited the White House and told reporters he ran for office "in order to change the history of our country."

"We are profoundly hurt in our souls by poverty, by the exodus of our young people, by the lack of education, by people who don't have roofs over their heads," Lugo said in a brief photo op with President George W. Bush after their meeting Oct. 27. "We are profoundly moved by those people."

Lugo, 57, served as bishop of San Pedro for a dozen years before retiring in 2005 to run for political office. He was elected president in April and took office in August. In July the Vatican granted his request to be laicized, in keeping with church laws prohibiting clergy from being involved in electoral politics.

In his remarks at the White House, Lugo said the pain of his people "is also impregnated with courage and decisiveness." He said his administration comes into office "as Christians, because our Christian duty is to serve the poorest and the neediest of our people."

Lugo noted that some people have asked why he would visit the White House so close to the end of Bush's administration.

"I think that it's particularly important to visit President Bush in his last days in the White House ... to impress upon the world the importance of democratic institutions," Lugo said through a translator. "Our personal history is not as important as the history of our respective peoples."

Bush said he was impressed by Lugo's commitment to his people and his strong stand against corruption in government. He said he told Lugo that the United States wants to help Paraguay aid its people.

"We want to help with education and health care," Bush said. "We believe in the social justice agenda" and in the importance of the United States helping influence "the lives of citizens that simply want a more hopeful day."

Lugo said his goal is to help Paraguayans such as a farmer who told him: "What we need is bread. We don't care if it comes from the left hand or from the right hand; we just need somebody to give us food."

"That's why we're here ...," Lugo said, "to recover Paraguay's dignity as a nation."

"I told President Bush that we have a lot of dreams, collective dreams, but also my personal dream," Lugo continued. "Our dream is that Paraguay be known not for its corruption, but for its transparency and for its dignity as a people and as a country. And we believe, we're convinced, that we will be able to achieve that."

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