News



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Bishop Eugenio Scarpellini of El Alto, Bolivia, died July 15 after contracting COVID-19. He was 66.

The Italian-born bishop was remembered by colleagues as a tireless promoter of missions, who worked to improve relations with the government and intervened to defuse tensions in 2019 after protests over election irregularities rocked the South American country.

"We have physically lost a brother, but his spirit will always accompany us. His is a spirit of struggle and work and, above all, an unshakable conviction in missions," said Archbishop Ricardo Centellas Guzman of Sucre, president of the Bolivian bishops' conference. "He was convinced that the church should live its missionary dimension."

His remarks were reported by Agencia de Noticias Fides, run by the Jesuits in La Paz.

The Bolivian bishops' conference said Scarpellini "was a missionary in Bolivia since 1988, a pastor of the church, who distinguished himself by his dedication to the poorest and his tireless struggle for justice."

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Fides reported the bishops' statement said Scarpellini was hospitalized in El Alto — situated at an elevation of more than 13,000 feet next to the capital, La Paz — but on July 15, he twice suffered "cardiac arrest, and the doctors were unable to do anything."

Scarpellini was born Jan. 8, 1954, in Verdellino, Italy, and ordained in 1978. He was drawn to the priesthood at a young age, telling his parents at his first Communion, "I want to be a priest."

According to an interview posted on the Diocese of El Alto's Facebook page, Scarpellini was inspired by the local priest in his hometown, but also his Uncle Eugenio, a seminarian killed in World War II.

Scarpellini arrived in Bolivia as a missionary of the Diocese of Bergamo, Italy. He called his arrival in South America "a second baptism," and subsequently became a Bolivian national.

When becoming a citizen, he recalled being asked, "'Why do you want to be Bolivian?' I said because of gratitude to a country and a church that has welcomed me."

He held several positions in the Archdiocese of La Paz until being elevated to auxiliary bishop of El Alto in 2010 and made bishop there in 2013.

Scarpellini served as secretary-general of the Bolivian bishops' conference and also became director of the Pontifical Mission Society in Bolivia, according to Fides. He subsequently served as the society's director for the Americas and helped organize the V American Missionary Conference in 2018 in Santa Cruz, Bolivia.

"He gave us the example of what Pope Francis is also concerned with: evangelization and preoccupying ourselves above all with those that are the most

distant," said Bishop Waldo Ruben Barrionuevo Ramirez of Reyes.

In a 2015 interview with Catholic News Service, Scarpellini spoke of shortages of priests in Bolivia and a crisis of vocations as young men who would previously enter the priesthood saw economic opportunities elsewhere.

"The way to get ahead now goes down different roads," Scarpellini said. "On one hand, there is a sharp reduction in the number of vocations. On the other, I would say that there has been a purification in the motives of those entering."

But he said missions were so important that he wanted his diocese to be one that sent missionaries to serve in other places, even if there were few priests to spare.

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