News



José Gregorio Guarenas, of the human rights vicariate in Caracas, pays a visit Feb. 16 to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Washington. Guarenas said that even though the work of human rights has its perils, it is part of a historic moment the church is going through in the South American nation and thanked the church in the U.S. and elsewhere for helping the vicariate carry out its humanitarian mission. (CNS/Rhina Guidos)



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The load of worries carried on the shoulders of José Gregorio Guarenas, coordinator of Human Rights for the Vicariate of Caracas at the Archdiocese of Venezuela, is heavy.

His work doesn't solely focus on concerns affecting the life of members of the Catholic Church, such as recent cases of nuns facing obstacles in ministering to political prisoners in Venezuelan prisons.

It also stretches to concerns that a deteriorating social situation in the South American nation is augmenting human trafficking among the poorer segments of Venezuela's population.

But in the face of all those challenges, he said there's something he wants the world to know.

"This crisis has affected all of us, the church included," said Guarenas in a Feb. 16 interview with Catholic News Service in Washington. "But it's important to note that we have maintained our sense of hope and the [Catholic] Church has played a fundamental role in maintaining that hope. This is not the end."

With help from the Catholic Church in the United States and elsewhere in the world, Venezuela's Catholics have been able to maintain ministries among the country's most downtrodden. While facing some stiff challenges, food and medicine regularly reach the country's poorest through the church's global humanitarian network Caritas.

Yet the church struggles to maintain its work in institutions such as schools, prisons and jails and clinics where church members regularly minister.

Permits for construction of new church schools linger. Women religious who minister in prisons are forced to wait for hours under sun or rain and often are asked to take off their crucifixes before entering. The government wants to know who's receiving medicines and why, said Guarenas, who has dealt with human rights in the country for more than 30 years.

Some report government officials have started appointing their own priests and bishops, a sort of "parallel church."

The vicariate's human rights office has long documented those types of violations, even as its staff has faced constant threats, been photographed without their consent and faced general harassment, Guarenas said.

"We've had to bring our profile down, decreased public events, not so much because of persecution by authorities but by pro-government groups," he said. "We've faced more aggression from groups of supporters of the government than from the government itself."

During Guarenas' mid-February visit to Washington, funded in part by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Collection for the Church in Latin America, he and a colleague connected with other human rights advocates in the U.S. capital to talk about the situation in Venezuela.

For more than 50 years, the collection has funded pastoral programs, seminarian and religious formation, and various ministries as a sign of solidarity between Catholics of the United States and those in Latin America.

Fr. Leo Perez, director of the collection, told CNS Feb. 17 that the trip was facilitated by the collection so Guarenas and his colleague could dialogue with other advocates on human rights issues.

And there's no shortage of issues in what was once the richest country in South America, largely because of its oil supply.



Venezuelan migrants are seen in in San Cristobal, Venezuela, Oct. 12, 2020, amid the coronavirus pandemic. (CNS/Reuters/Carlos Eduardo Ramirez)

Venezuela saw its fortunes take a turn in the last decade because of mismanagement of resources and a drop in the value of oil, which plunged even more after political crisis scared off investors.

Inflation soared, jobs went away. Average wages now are about $25 a month. They can be as low as $3 a month for those making a minimum wage, Guarenas said.

"The primary reason why Venezuelans leave is because of the economic situation," he said. "The second reason is political, but that's on a smaller scale."

Almost 6 million Venezuelans have left their homeland, according to the most recent figures from the U.N. Refugee Agency.

That exodus is causing pain inside and outside of the country, Guarenas said. Working-age adults have left the country to be able to send back money so their

families can survive, often leaving the elderly alone or leaving them caring for younger children who cannot make the trip outside of the country.

Some church members have tended to the needs of the elderly, but it is a growing crisis, Guarenas said.

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In countries where they have sought refuge, in nearby Colombia, Chile, Brazil, as well as the U.S., Venezuelans have encountered xenophobia, faced physical threats, closed borders and even death, Guarenas said.

But the crisis also is fueling an increase of human trafficking of women and children as well as a type of slave labor of younger workers, Guarenas said.

His office, with financial help from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Collection for the Church in Latin America to promote human rights, has been trying to locate the whereabouts of three boats full of people who disappeared in 2020 and have never been heard from again.

"Economic necessity has forced people to accept a variety of conditions and it's something even the families don't want to talk about," he said.

In June 2021, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with Vatican officials in Rome about Venezuela, trying to find a path toward dialogue and a solution to the crisis — a task made difficult since the U.S. does not recognize Nicolás Maduro as the president but Juan Guaidó, whom some recognize as president-in-exile.

Following the meeting, reports surfaced that a church official had read a letter from a Vatican official at a meeting of a large Venezuelan business group. Maduro publicly responded saying the Vatican had sent a "letter that was a compendium of hatred, of venom," the Reuters news agency reported.

Guarenas said he was not aware of recent efforts by the Vatican to find a solution out of the crisis but said that when it comes to dialogue, "like a lot of dialogues in Venezuela, it goes nowhere."

He said that even though the work of human rights, in any part of the world, presents its challenges and dangers, he remains steadfast that "we don't do this out

of ideology ... except for the mandate of Jesus Christ, 'For I was in prison, and you visited me,' " he said, quoting from the book of Matthew.

What keeps him going, along with those who work with him, is the belief that "we belong to a historic moment," he said.

"The universal church can help in maintaining us [as] a focal point of interest because ... that which is not spoken about, for some, does not exist," he said.