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Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador gestures as he delivers his final State of the Union address at Zocalo Square in downtown Mexico City Sept. 1, 2024. (OSV News/Raquel Cunha, Reuters)



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Mexico's outgoing president has compared himself to St. Francis of Assisi, highlighting his personal parsimony as a calling card in a country notorious for corrupt politics — while overlooking his own willingness to welcome politicians with checkered records into his political party.

Mexico's Interior Ministry published a short video in late August of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador on X, formerly Twitter, and Facebook, in which he states: "Money doesn't interest me, although I've said that not everyone who has it is evil."

The video, which begins with the president hugging a tree and shows him enjoying simple pursuits such as playing baseball, eating unpretentious meals and meeting Mexicans involved in traditional ceremonies, continues with him insisting: "I'm just like St. Francis: I need little, and the little I need, I need little of it. I don't care about material things. It doesn't interest me."

The comments were originally made Aug. 20 at López Obrador's daily press conference in response to a rambling question from a friendly media outlet about his political opponents — and ended with him calling for "everyone" to "continue purifying the country's public life."

López Obrador leaves office Sept. 30 after overseeing a populist and popular administration, in which he pushed a scheme of cash stipends for seniors and students, raised the minimum wage and spent big on megaprojects such as a railway around the ecologically sensitive Yucatán Peninsula and a massive oil refinery.

Part of his popularity came from perceptions of personal austerity as he portrayed himself unpretentious: wearing rumpled suits, taking commercial flights and slashing his own pay. He would make periodic pleas of poverty, too, in which he would show his empty wallet and claim to not have a credit card or few assets other than a home

in Chiapas state.

"He knows that this is his principal (political) investment because whoever doesn't get corrupted, which is almost impossible in Mexican politics, has a very high stature," Ilán Semo, a historian at the Jesuit-run Iberoamerican University in Mexico City, told OSV News. "He's going to try to become this figure."

Semo noted, however, that López Obrador has abided many politicians accused of corruption — so long as they support him — and repeatedly defends partisans accused of improprieties.

The president's sons have also been accused of living lavishly and steering government contracts to friends — charges López Obrador denies. Critical journalists probing his government, meanwhile, have had their personal information exposed at his press conferences.

The president often insists that he has "moral authority," and uses his austere image — along with politics of austerity in government spending early in his six-year administration, which he often called "Franciscan poverty."

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Mexico's bishops have had a distant relationship with López Obrador, who blasted them as supposedly tied to the "oligarchy" after urging him to change his security strategy after the 2022 murders of two elderly Jesuits in their parish by a notorious drug cartel boss.

In August, López Obrador attacked the Jesuit-sponsored Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez Human Rights Center for its work legally representing the families of 43 missing students from the Ayotzinapa teachers' college. He branded the renowned human rights group "unfair," then insisted, "If the pope, who is from the same Jesuit order, knew about them, he would pull them by the ears, because Pope Francis is consistent."

The families accuse the president of losing interest in solving the 2014 atrocity — in which their sons were abducted by police and handed over to drug cartel thugs — after the investigation raised uncomfortable questions over the role of the army, which the López Obrador has heavily depended on and handed enormous power to

during his administration.

López Obrador's prótegé, Claudia Sheinbaum, won the June 2 election with with more than 60% of the vote, and his Morena party — named for the country's patroness, Our Lady of Guadalupe, referred to as "La Morena" — and its allies came close to winning super-majorities in both houses of congress, allowing them to pass constitutional amendments with minimal opposition support.

The president leaves office amid a political storm as he pushes a suite of 20 constitutional reforms including an overhaul of the judicial branch, which would put all judges — including members of the supreme court — to a popular vote.

U.S. Ambassador to Mexico Ken Salazar has voiced concerns the judicial reforms could damage Mexico's democracy, while investors have expressed worries over the rule of law and the country's currency has dropped in value.

Mexico's bishops' conference has expressed concerns, too, especially over the large majorities claimed by Morena and its allies through the distribution of congressional seats — a process questioned by the opposition.

"In a true democracy there are 'majorities,' but without any detriment to 'minorities.' Minorities find in democracy their own spaces of representation to have a presence in discussions of public order. The orderly and legal coexistence of 'majorities' with 'minorities' is essential for a healthy democracy that is ethical, fair, socially correct and inclusive," the bishops said in an Aug. 14 statement.

"We call upon all Mexicans to unite their forces and wills around democracy, the system of government that we have collectively chosen to promote the common good of the nation."

Sheinbaum will take office Oct. 2 amid numerous challenges in the country, including violence, corruption and immigration.