

New San Salvador archbishop says no to mining

Gene Palumbo | Feb. 27, 2009

SAN SALVADOR, EL SALVADOR -- When the Vatican announced last December that José Luis Escobar Alas would be the new archbishop of San Salvador, perhaps the most frequently asked question here was, "What will he say on the mining issue?"

A Canadian company, Pacific Rim, has been pushing to get government permission to begin gold and silver mining. The Catholic church has opposed the plan, urging the government not to grant permission, and one of the leaders of the church opposition has been Fernando Sáenz Lacalle, the outgoing archbishop.

"It's not just to risk the health of our people and to damage the environment," Saenz said in December, "just so that a few people who don't live here can walk away with 97 percent of the juicy profits, and leave us with 100 percent of the cyanide" used in the mining. "Not one drop of cyanide should enter El Salvador" for the mining, said the archbishop.

Tensions increased in the days preceding Escobar's installation here Feb. 14, as some legislators came out in support of the mining and Pacific Rim threatened to bring a multimillion-dollar lawsuit against the country under the terms of the Central American Free Trade Agreement signed by El Salvador, Canada and the United States.

In his homily at the installation Mass, Escobar was quick to make his position clear. With President Antonio Saca sitting in the front row of the cathedral, Escobar issued what he described as a "vehement call" to the government "not to permit the exploitation of the mines."

He said mining would, "in an expanding and permanent way," damage the country's water sources. "We should not have to suffer this way," he said. "We are a very small and densely populated country that has already suffered so much."

Escobar ended his homily by urging the government to "work tirelessly ... promoting social justice, effectively combating poverty, and developing a national plan that will guarantee constant development."

As if to emphasize his seriousness about the issue, two days later Escobar spent his first working day as archbishop at a forum on mining cosponsored by Caritas and Oxfam.

Commenting on the homily in a newspaper column, Jesuit Fr. José Maria Tojeira, president of the Jesuit-run University of Central America here, noted the "deafening applause" that greeted Escobar's reference to assassinated Archbishop Oscar Romero. Escobar had called Romero "a martyr" and invoked his intercession "in a special way." Tojeira added that the forcefulness of Escobar's remarks on mining was important because it signified "a concern for the country and a concern for the poor."

Escobar, 49, was previously bishop of the San Vicente diocese. After entering the minor seminary there at the age of 11, he studied at seminaries in San Salvador and Mexico, received a licentiate degree in philosophy at the

Jesuits' Gregorian University in Rome, and was ordained in 1982.

Returning to San Vicente, he did parish work and served as rector of the minor seminary and vicar general of the diocese. He was named auxiliary bishop there in 2002, and bishop in 2005.

In an interview with the archdiocesan radio station, Escobar said his 12 years of seminary had been "like a dream" and that his 26 years as a priest "have been the same -- so much so that sometimes it's hard to believe that all these years have gone by."

He said he was taken by surprise when the papal nuncio told him he had been appointed archbishop. "I never thought they would name me," he said, and when they did, "I was in a critical situation -- I felt tempted not to accept." He said prayer and meditation helped him to make the final decision.

"I was very happy in San Vicente. That doesn't mean that I don't receive this new appointment with joy, but humanly speaking, I would have been happy to stay in San Vicente all my life. That had been my plan."

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