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'Padre Miguel' takes a world stage

Patricia Lefevere | Apr. 27, 2009

Fr. Miguel díEscoto Brockmann at the United Nations (U.N. photo/Eskinder Debebe)

UNITED NATIONS -- The short, round, elderly man in the gray, striped suit greets diplomats, opens a conference on world hunger, holds a midafternoon press conference and presides daily over the work of the 192-member U.N. General Assembly.

He also answers to and prefers to be called ?Father? or ?Padre Miguel? over ?Mr. President? or ?Your Excellency.?

For the past seven months, Maryknoll Fr. Miguel d?Escoto Brockmann has served as president of the world?s largest global forum, the U.N. General Assembly, at its New York headquarters. Last spring the Group of Latin American and Caribbean States within the United Nations unanimously chose the former foreign minister of Nicaragua as president. D?Escoto will hold the post throughout the United Nations? 63rd session, which closes in September.

Surprised to be selected? No, dumbfounded, d?Escoto told NCR during an interview April 6 in his office overlooking the East River. ?I have never campaigned for any post. Look at me, I?m so decrepit!? said the 76-year-old priest, who quickly noted that he and the reporter were both wearing striped trousers.

At once playful and serious, d?Escoto greets visitors with a kiss on each cheek, then a hug. When conversing, he is spontaneous, reflective, at times prayerful.

Amazingly, his worsening case of Ménière?s disease, with its habitual bouts of dizziness, has not bothered him much since taking on the U.N. job. ?Thank God,? he murmurs, hands clasped, eyes tilted upward.

Q & A with Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann [1] by Patricia Lefevere

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Despite traveling overseas often, presiding over daylong meetings and studying a panoply of troubling issues that call for action by General Assembly members, d?Escoto appears at home here, happy to hold the rudder of this ship of nation-states.

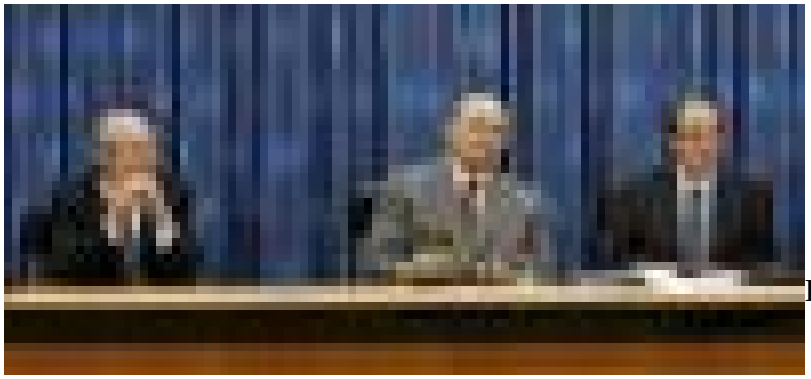
While he holds no illusions that poverty, hunger, disease, climate change, war and disarmament will be solved during his 12 months on board, he is engaged with each of these concerns. Humanity must ?replace selfishness and individualism with a spirit of brotherhood and sisterhood? if all are to survive, he said in a tone of urgency.

Travels the globe

In late February and early March, d?Escoto flew to Finland, Switzerland, Bahrain, Syria, Iran and China. He met with some 20 heads of state, urging them to participate in the June 1-4 gathering here on the impact of the economic downturn on development.

Plans for the high-level summit have been underway since late October. Its success is critically important to d?Escoto, who is convinced that the failures and frauds on Wall Street and in other world markets are having fatal consequences across many societies.

Small farmers, urban workers, women, children and families now face food shortages, reduced social services and unemployment, the president told a recent interactive panel on the global financial crisis. These people ?were as distant from the origins of the crisis as the bankers were from their small farms in Kenya, Cambodia and Ecuador.? Yet they would suffer the most, he said, adding: ?It?s no longer acceptable that the poor and vulnerable pay the costs of the world?s mistakes.?



D?Escoto believes the United Nations -- with its system of regional commissions, specialized agencies, funds and programs -- is well suited to help prevent the financial crisis from igniting wider human tragedy. Rather than accepting ?quick-fix half measures agreed behind closed doors,? he said, the whole world has to be part of formulating a solution.

Critics of the United Nations often refer to it as an inflated bureaucracy and a ?talk shop.? But it is the organization?s uniquely representative and democratic makeup that give the priest hope for the emergence of a fairer, more just world -- one in which the virtue of solidarity takes pride of place and nonviolence becomes a lifestyle, d?Escoto said.

D?Escoto tries to stay in touch with ambassadors from the member states as well as representatives of some of the 70 permanent observer missions at the United Nations. He also lauded the work of the more than 3,500 nongovernmental organizations -- several of them representing religious orders and institutions -- that facilitate the work of the United Nations.

Our interview is delayed briefly by a visit from two Maryknollers. At the close of our conversation, d?Escoto?s office fills with 17 permanent representatives from member states. These are the facilitators he has assigned to

help with the June financial summit.

Many at the United Nations see the need to construct a new international financial architecture, he said, one corresponding to the realities of economies that are interdependent and global. Currently, Columbia University Professor Joseph Stiglitz, a Nobel Prize-winning economist, is coordinating a team of specialists within the framework of the United Nations to advance proposals for a new economic architecture for the world, d?Escoto said.

?People need to regain confidence in their governments and financial institutions,? but that won?t occur without the full participation of all member states in responding to the crisis, he said. The transformation from ?the exclusive clubs of the G-8 or the G-20? to a partnership with the rest of humanity is what d?Escoto envisions when he sets as his top goal ?the profound democratization of the U.N.?

Food security

Food is a good place to start, he said. Everyone needs it, yet almost a billion people are hungry and undernourished. Many millions face starvation in the wake of crop failures, droughts, soil depletion, pollution, price volatility, unsafe food supplies and lack of access to existing food stocks. With the quadrupling of gas prices in 2008, many Third World farmers could not afford the fertilizers and seeds needed for growing their crops and thus severely underplanted their small farms.

The consequences of smaller harvests and of the use of prime agricultural acreage for producing biofuels are yet to be quantified. Still, d?Escoto warned that unless broad and innovative changes in our food policies occur, ?we will see hunger once again spread across the world like a medieval plague.? Such a catastrophe -- in the face of agricultural abundance and the technological and financial means to end world hunger -- is ?not only shameful, it is ... downright sinful,? he said.

To prevent global famine, d?Escoto and U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon have urged member states to recognize the right to food as a human right, specified in international law.

To this end, d?Escoto?s senior advisor for food policy and sustainable development, Br. David Andrews, arranged a forum on the global food crisis and the right to food April 6 at the United Nations. Andrews, a Holy Cross brother and former director of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, is senior representative at Food & Water Watch in Washington.

Experts from agriculture, commerce and academia saw the food crisis as not separate or independent from other converging problems, including the climate, energy, water and credit crises. It?s not hard to see that if all God?s children are to be fed, ?the days of dominance by the monoculture of industrialized food corporations are numbered,? in d?Escoto?s view. ?The hungry cannot wait till tomorrow,? he said.

Not far from his office, near the General Assembly hall, hangs a poster recalling the words of the late U.N. Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjold: ?The U.N. was not created to take humanity to heaven, but to save it from hell.? The message still fits the reality of the tasks facing the aging padre. ?The poor have been my lifelong concern,? he said.

Born in Los Angeles in 1933 to a Nicaraguan diplomat and his wife, d?Escoto spent his youth in Nicaragua. He returned to the United States at 14, attending a Maryknoll-run high school in Illinois before joining the order?s seminary in New York in 1953. After his ordination in 1961, he earned a master?s degree at Columbia?s School of Journalism.

It was through Maryknoll that he saw and followed the model of many missionaries who dedicated their lives to

the poor. In 1963 d?Escoto founded the National Institute of Research and Population Action, intended to empower disadvantaged slum dwellers in Santiago and other Chilean cities.

His community-organizing skills proved invaluable in late 1972 when he mobilized assistance for survivors after an earthquake killed 6,000 and destroyed much of Managua, the Nicaraguan capital. In 1973 he set up the Nicaraguan Foundation for Integral Community Development, now one of the most respected nongovernmental organizations in the country.

Two years earlier Maryknoll had asked d?Escoto to direct its social communications office in New York. In 1970, he and editor Philip Scharper established Orbis Books, which has since become a leading religious publisher of works on spirituality, theology and current affairs. Its authors include Gustavo Gutíerrez, Lucien Legrand, Jon Sobrino and many others who have brought a Third World perspective to American readers.

While living in New York in the 1970s d?Escoto also founded Grupo de los Doce (Group of 12), comprised of progressive intellectuals and professionals who backed the Sandinista National Liberation Front in its efforts to overthrow the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza Debayle in Nicaragua. Shortly after Somoza fled in 1979, d?Escoto was named foreign minister in the government of rebel Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega, a position he would hold through the 1980s.

Papal scolding

Serving in the government with him were Jesuits Fernando Cardenal, his brother Ernesto Cardenal, and Alvaro Arguello, and Fr. Edgar Parrales of the Managua archdiocese.

It was bearded and beret-headed Ernesto Cardenal, Ortega?s cultural minister, who drew the ire of Pope John Paul II when he landed at Managua?s airport on March 4, 1983.

The pontiff chastised the kneeling Jesuit poet who looked surprised -- as were millions of television viewers -- to see the pope raise a finger at him. D?Escoto missed a similar scolding, he reckons, by being at a ministerial meeting in New Delhi.

By the time of the pope?s arrival, d?Escoto said Rome had already suspended him as a priest. He recalled weeping when he received the news in 1982. Though the suspension still pains him, he has chosen not to protest it.

While d?Escoto might have been suspended in his priestly functions, his order has continued to see him as a member. ?He is a Maryknoll priest,? Maryknoll Provincial Fr. Edward Dougherty told *NCR*.

While foreign minister, d?Escoto brought before the International Court of Justice in The Hague a successful suit against the U.S. government for its sponsorship of the CIA-directed Contra war in Nicaragua. President Reagan refused to recognize the court?s 1986 decision and Washington has never paid the estimated $17 billion in reparations it owes Nicaragua.

D?Escoto has been called a lot of names in the past 40 years -- ?Marxist-Leninist? and ?showcase communist? for his 30-year devotion to Ortega and his support of retired Cuban President Fidel Castro. The priest continues to serve as a policy adviser to Ortega, who is back in power as Nicaragua?s president.

At the United Nations, critics have called d?Escoto ?blunt? and ?preachy.? Some count him a fierce critic of Washington and Jerusalem. In January he called the Israel incursion into Gaza a ?crucifixion? and the 1,300 Palestinian deaths ?a genocide.? Mark Kornblau, spokesman for the U.S. Mission to the United Nations, told The Associated Press in March: ?It?s hard to make sense of Mr. d?Escoto?s increasingly bizarre statements.?

As General Assembly president he has also taken heat for calling ?unfortunate? the International Criminal Court?s decision to grant an arrest warrant for Sudan?s President Omer al-Bashir. D?Escoto felt the court should have delayed its ruling in light of the fact that a joint delegation of the African Union and the League of Arab States had visited the United Nations to explain that Bashir had begun talks with the top rebel group in Darfur.

D?Escoto?s detractors believe he?s in the pocket of African and Arab states and their sympathizers, who make up a large portion of the United Nations. At a press conference March 17, he said the African visitors had urged the United Nations to ?give peace a chance,? but he went on to say the West was notorious for getting involved in things it did not understand, with its arrogant ?shoot-and-find-out-later? approach toward solving world problems.

Such outspokenness is not in the usual vein of diplomacy. Neither, however, is his greeting to delegates as he closes a session on the global food crisis with the salutation: ?Brothers and sisters all.?

?This is a different kind of president; he?s not your typical U.N.-sounding figure,? noted Molly Anderson, a research fellow on sustainable agricultural policy at the Wallace Center in Arlington, Va. Wallace was a presenter at the U.N. food forum.

With only five months left at the helm of world talkers, policymakers and global doers, Padre Miguel could yet make it the most interesting time in the life of the General Assembly.

Patricia Lefevere is a regular NCR *contributor.*

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