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The Price of Sugar

by Sr. Rose Pacatte

NCR Today

In October 2007, I reviewed a feature-length documentary, "The Price of Sugar." I wrote:

The film informs viewers about human-rights violations that are almost invisible. It inspires and illumines the meaning of Catholic social teaching by showing exactly what it means to put the gospel into practice and empower the poor and stateless. Intriguing, heartbreaking, informative and hopeful; intense. (See: *Eye on Entertainment*, *St. Anthony Messenger*).

A year later I wrote a blurb about the film in view of its release on DVD.

Then I heard from a producer at Uncommon Productions that the film had been blocked from commercial distribution because of a libel lawsuit filed by the Vicini Group that was accused of human rights violations in the film by a Catholic priest, Fr. Christopher Hartley.

A Massachusetts judge is due to hand down a summary judgment in August regarding the future of the film as well as the Web site associated with it.

My more current, longer review of "The Price of Sugar" appears in *NCR* along side Tom Roberts two investigative articles about the complex issues surrounding the film, the sugar industry, and Fr. Hartley's statements and activities as pastor of the parish in the Dominican Republic that included the Vicini sugar plantations.

A lawyer from Patton Boggs, the firm representing the Vicini Group, was present at a screening of "The Price of Sugar" earlier this year at the City of Angels Film Festival. She came up to me after the panel and introduced herself. I was pretty surprised that Patton Boggs had thought that the festival was important enough to send a representative. Though a bit flustered I did ask her what she thought of the panel that I

had chaired and she declined "to comment on what went on here today." She did point out to me, however, that though I did say that the Vicini Family was not suing for damages, I failed to state clearly that the Vicini's were suing "to get back their good name." It was a public forum so I am not sure why she did not say something during the Q & A to make the point.

At a time when the human cost of the industrialization of the world's food supply is being questioned (see the *NCR* review of *Food, Inc.*), "The Price of Sugar" takes its place in a growing line of books, films, television, and news reporting that draw our attention to and stir our consciences human rights violations, health of workers and consumers, and the environment.

I interviewed Fr. Hartley extensively regarding the film by phone in 2007, and then early in 2009 to get an update on the situation in the Vicini plantation, as he knew it. I met Fr. Hartley in May at the Catholic Media Convention where he introduced the film at a screening and then followed up with extensive remarks and a Q&A. He is articulate, clear, interesting, and seemingly well informed.

Although there may be questions about Fr. Hartley's comments and conduct in relation to the film or in subsequent interviews, the situation on the sugar plantations have been described in magazine articles as well as another 2007 documentary, "Sugar Babies."

I don't think we have heard the last of "The Price of Sugar."

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