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Judge OKs sugar plantation documentary

by Joshua J. McElwee

A federal judge has given the go-ahead for the continued distribution of a documentary that portrays working conditions for immigrant Haitians at sugar plantations in the Dominican Republic as akin to modern-day slavery.

Finding for the defendants, U.S. District Judge Douglas P. Woodlock in Massachusetts ruled Aug. 16 that the makers of *'The Price of Sugar'* didn't recklessly include information that was blatantly false in their work.

The ruling comes three years after *'The Price of Sugar'* was first released to U.S. audiences.

In 2007 the wealthy Catholic family that operates the sugar plantations featured in the documentary filed an anti-defamation lawsuit, which stopped some companies from releasing the film on DVD.

Tom Curley, a lawyer with the firm that defended the film, told *NCR* Aug. 24 that the producers are very happy with the ruling.

'They believed in the film all along and it's gratifying to have the judge dismiss the defamation claims which were brought against them,' Curley said.

Produced by William M. Haney III and Uncommon Productions of Waltham, Mass., the film depicts life on sugar plantations as described by Spanish-born priest Fr. Christopher Hartley. (Read a profile of Hartley and a review of the film in *NCR*, July 10, 2009.)

In the film Hartley alleges that the plantations owned and operated by the Vicini family engage in human trafficking by luring Haitians over the border to work in the Dominican Republic.

Hartley, who worked for a time in the Bronx, has garnered some controversy. After nine years in the Dominican Republic he was dismissed by Bishop Francisco Ozoria of the San Pedro de Macorís diocese in 2006.

According to a declaration filed in court by Ozoria, the reason for the dismissal had to do with harming the level of trust necessary between a bishop and a priest.?

Felipe and Juan Vicini, representatives of the family that owns the plantations, had claimed in court that the allegations made in the movie are false and that many of the scenes and people interviewed, contrary to presentation in the documentary, were not on Vicini property or employed by the family.

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