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Eyes open in the Amazon

Barbara Fraser | Sep. 20, 2010

A sign protesting the Peruvian government's threat to deport Lasallian Br. Paul McAuley (left) reads: "Committee Against the Expulsion of Br. Paul McAuley -- defending the life of our forests and the rights of the Amazonian people is not a crime!" (Barbara Fraser)

IQUITOS, PERU -- On a steamy Sunday afternoon, Br. Paul McAuley huddled in a thatched-roof shelter with a group of college students from remote indigenous communities. The promised government meal subsidy had not arrived, and the students were out of food. There had been no breakfast or lunch that day, and there was no money for dinner.

Their urgent need temporarily eclipsed the threat hanging over McAuley, who has been their adviser, supporter and friend for the past decade. A month earlier, Peruvian immigration officials had announced that they were revoking his visa, accusing him of disturbing the peace. Although he had won a stay, McAuley, a De La Salle brother from England, did not know if he would be around long enough to see the young people graduate.

The students had rallied round, taking to the streets to urge the government to rescind its order.

?We?re standing up for him as we would for another indigenous person,? said Rogelio Necca, 22, a Matsés student. ?We don?t want Brother Paul to leave.?

Slight and soft-spoken, with gray hair and glasses, McAuley doesn?t fit the mold of an agitator. But he has a steely resolve that made the desert bloom around a school in a Lima shantytown where he was principal in the 1990s.

In Peru?s Loreto Region, a vast swath of rainforest in the northeastern corner of the country, he is determined to help indigenous communities learn to defend their rights and stave off threats to the forest and rivers on which their lives and livelihoods depend.

And that, apparently, has annoyed some authorities.

?We were doing a campaign slowly and quietly about the dangers of a couple of parts of the [proposed new] forestry law, and I suspect that touched a nerve,? McAuley said.

Peru?s use of its natural resources is contentious. With annual growth of up to 10 percent in the past decade, the country was touted as Latin America?s answer to the Asian tigers. Instead of high-tech industries, however, the export of raw materials drives the economy.

The story is familiar around Iquitos, a once-opulent town carved out of the tropical forest by rubber barons who enslaved or relocated entire populations of indigenous people to work on the plantations. Now timber, oil and gas have replaced rub-ber as the region?s export commodities. Three-quarters of the Peruvian Amazon is divided into concessions that overlap hundreds of indigenous communities.

Indigenous students who arrive in Iquitos -- after growing up in open-sided, thatched-roof dwellings in villages with no electricity, connected only by rivers -- step into an alternate reality.

When he moved to Iquitos from Lima in 2000, McAuley said, ?I was totally ignorant of what the jungle was about.? He began working with the young people, helping them organize, find living quarters and negotiate a food subsidy with the regional government and ?opening their eyes to the global reality.? He visited their remote communities, learning about the ?complete [government] neglect,? pollution from oil drilling and other threats to the forest and rivers on which the indigenous people depend for survival.

It was, he said, ?a huge field for education.?

Some students are a two- or three-week trip by river from their homes, without cash for rent, books, photocopies or school supplies. ?Their families can?t send them money,? said McAuley, who arranged for about 30 youths to live in traditional-style dwellings on the grounds of a former De La Salle retreat house in Iquitos.

When McAuley founded the Loreto Environmental Network in 2004, his message of environmental stewardship dovetailed with that of indigenous people?s right to territory, culture and livelihood.

A package of presidential decrees issued in 2009, which indigenous leaders said would make it easier for private companies to strip their lands of natural resources, sparked protests that ended with a violent confrontation in Bagua, in north-central Peru, in June 2009, leaving 34 people dead. Two months later, official papers show, immigration authorities decided to revoke McAuley?s residency, but they did not act until June 30, 2010.

McAuley, who was not involved in the events in Bagua, is one of about half a dozen foreign bishops, priests and religious harassed or threatened with jail or expulsion in the past few years. All are active in issues related to communities, extractive industry and the environment.

Amid the uncertainty, McAuley said, his religious life as a brother witnesses to community and solidarity. His troubles also cast his vow of celibacy in a new light.

Without family obligations, he said, ?you?re free -- you can take risks that others can?t take. Others can?t speak out. If they do, they?ll lose their jobs and their families will suffer. It makes sense of religious life.?

Nevertheless, when the deportation threat arose, two women offered to marry him so he could qualify for permanent residency. ?I said, ?It?s a lovely gesture, but it will get me in trouble with my community,? ? he laughed.

Born in Portsmouth, England, in 1947, the son of an Irish naval officer, McAuley was drawn to the De La Salle

Brothers? community life and teaching vocation. After a stint teaching elementary school and a few years in Nigeria -- where he found himself helping with C-sections at a makeshift hospital -- he moved to the De La Salle house in Rome.

Though far from the grass roots, he encountered the wave of theology and Christian community sweeping from Latin America.

?I understood how we are called to be on the borderline between what we do very well [in teaching] and opening up the next stage -- something that would push education a bit further, overcoming limitations that we?d always accepted,? he said.

In 1990, McAuley traded Rome for a shantytown in the Lima desert, becoming principal of a school where the classrooms were built of straw mats. Determined to create a healthy environment, he made the school an oasis, with trees and a hydroponic garden.

Now, despite the troubles and setbacks, the Amazon has captured McAuley?s heart.

?The frustration makes me work harder,? he said. ?I try to be creative, I try to be positive, I try to infect others with my concerns.? And he remains committed to the students. ?While there?s one of them that needs help to get through the university and survive,? he said, ?it?s worth it.?

[Barbara Fraser is a freelance writer living in Peru.]

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