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Mexican bishops deny church accepts donations from drug lords

by Brigitte Schmitt by David Agren by Catholic News Service

MEXICO CITY (CNS) -- Several Mexican bishops denied that the Catholic Church accepts donations from drug lords after the president of the Mexican bishops' conference said drug traffickers have been "very generous" to the church.

Cardinal Norberto Rivera Carrera of Mexico City said the church condemns drug trafficking as a social evil and that it never accepts drug money.

"The money that comes from narcotics trafficking is ill-gotten and therefore can't be cleaned through charity projects," he said April 5 in a statement released by the archdiocese.

Auxiliary Bishop Marcelino Hernandez Rodriguez of Mexico City emphasized during his homily April 6 that money laundering carried out by making donations to the church is completely unacceptable.

Archbishop Jose Martin Rabago of Leon, former president of the Mexican bishops' conference, categorically denied that clergy in his region accept donations from drug traffickers. He rejected suggestions that the church would sanction contributions from traffickers for social projects.

On several occasions, church officials have made it clear the church preaches salvation and that everyone who honestly repents will be forgiven. But this does not mean the church approves of drug trafficking or would accept "dirty money," said Archbishop Martin.

Bishop Carlos Aguiar Retes of Texcoco, president of the Mexican bishops' conference, acknowledged that murderous narcotics trafficking gangs provide funding for the construction of churches in some of the country's most impoverished villages.

"They are generous and often they provide money for building a church or chapel," Bishop Aguiar said after the bishops' conference meeting April 1-4. He added that drug kingpins undertake other forms of "charity" by financing public works projects.

"In the communities where they work ... they will install electricity, establish communication links, highways (and) roads," he said in comments that received nationwide media attention.

The bishop emphasized that the church does not condone narcotics trafficking, but also that he was "saying how it is."

He added that narcotics traffickers often come to prelates in search of spiritual guidance.

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"There has been a rapprochement with them as it's known that discretion is going to be kept," Bishop Aguiar said. "What they want is to encounter peace in their consciences. What they're going to get from us is a sharp response: Change your life."

Comments from Catholic officials on the subject of donations from narcotics trafficking have been less clear in past years.

The late Bishop Ramon Godinez Flores of Aguascalientes drew intense criticism in 2005 after he said in a television interview that the church had no responsibility for scrutinizing the sources of large donations and that "all money can be transformed just as a corrupted person can also be transformed."

His statements were quickly disavowed.

The Mexican government has been waging an ongoing battle against well-armed narcotics trafficking gangs. The battle, which has been a priority for President Felipe Calderon, has already claimed more than 857 lives in 2008, according to the Grupo Reforma newspaper chain, and largely has been carried out by members of the Mexican military.

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