

Argentine president-elect to mend relationship with church

BUENOS AIRES, Argentina – In a conciliatory gesture toward the church, Argentine President-elect Cristina Fernandez received the Vatican secretary of state alongside her husband, former President Nestor Kirchner, in Buenos Aires.

Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone met with the presidential couple Nov. 14 at the end of his trip to Argentina to preside over the first beatification of an Argentine Mapuche Indian, Ceferino Namuncura, in the Patagonian community of Chimpay.

After the meeting, Cardinal Bertone said he hoped Fernandez, who was elected Oct. 28 with 45 percent of the votes, would be able to “take the country out of purgatory and elevate it to paradise.”

“The president always says he took his people out of hell and into purgatory. I hope that the future president will be able to take the country even higher, with everyone’s collaboration,” said the cardinal, referring to Kirchner’s well-known claim of having rescued Argentina after the catastrophic economic crisis in 2001.

Fernandez, who will be sworn in Dec. 10 for a four-year term, has signaled she will attempt to mend government-church relations, which deteriorated dramatically during her husband’s administration.

A few days before being elected, Fernandez spoke out against abortion.

At the meeting with Cardinal Bertone, she also invited Pope Benedict XVI to visit in 2008 to mark the 30th anniversary of the resolution of a territorial dispute between Chile and Argentina over the Beagle Channel on the most southern tip of the continent. The Vatican is credited with averting armed conflict between the neighboring nations by mediating a resolution.

Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio of Buenos Aires, president of the Argentine bishops’ conference, is expected to request a meeting with Fernandez to congratulate her on her election victory, a strong sign of a potential rapprochement.

Relations between the church and the government reached a crisis point in 2005 when the head of Argentina's military diocese wrote a letter to Health Minister Gines Gonzalez containing a quotation from the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 9, Verse 42: "And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe (in me) to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were put around his neck and he were thrown into the sea."

Gonzalez had spoken out in favor of abortion in cases of rape. Abortion is illegal in Argentina except if the pregnancy was the result of the rape of a mentally disabled woman or if the woman's life is at risk.

Bishop Antonio Baseotto's comments at the time were received angrily by Kirchner, who recalled the image of bodies thrown from planes into the sea during the 1970s' military dictatorship. He asked the Vatican to replace Bishop Baseotto as head of the military diocese.

The Vatican refused, but Kirchner's government downgraded his civilian rank.

Bishop Baseotto resigned with he reached the church's retirement age of 75 this year. His replacement is one of the pending issues Fernandez will face after she is sworn in Dec. 10.

Only the pope can choose his successor, but as president Fernandez must approve the choice under an agreement signed by the Vatican and Argentina in 1957.

Fernandez, 54, is the first woman in Argentina's history to be elected president. A lawyer, Fernandez joined the Peronist Party during the 1970s as a student activist. She long has held national office and became an outspoken senator in 1995, when her husband largely was unknown outside his remote Patagonian province.

Most Argentines say the biggest challenge Fernandez faces is economic. Kirchner brought the country back from the 2001 economic crisis, but despite five years of strong growth there are signs of fraying, with inflation rates rising and a string of corruption scandals.