

Mexican bishops say NAFTA is leading to country's death

MEXICO CITY - Mexico's Catholic bishops have pleaded with the federal government to renegotiate a trade treaty with the U.S. and Canada that they say is leading to the cultural death of their nation.

The bishops said the Jan. 1 abolition of agricultural tariffs under the North American Free Trade Agreement is putting poor Mexican farmers out of business and threatening the destruction of entire rural communities.

They said farmers and their families are now being driven to migrate to cities in Mexico or to the U.S., which "currently has a very strong and anti-humane immigration program."

In a mid-January statement, the bishops' social action commission called on the state to "analyze the legal possibilities and economic feasibility of renegotiating the agricultural section of the free trade agreement in order to protect more decisively the interests of the poor rural and indigenous communities who are in the majority."

"There exist legal, economic and moral conditions to renegotiate this section, which should be the priority for the government and legislators," said the statement, signed by 10 bishops.

"No system is untouchable when it generates death," the bishops added.

The bishops argued that the 14-year-old agreement has effectively pitted poor Mexican farmers against heavily subsidized U.S. and Canadian producers with whom they cannot compete.

They warned the government that the consequences of libertarian trading conditions could include the temptation of poor farmers to grow crops for illegal drugs which in turn could see a surge in violent crime.

Mexico may not be able to feed itself if it succumbs to demands to produce biofuels

from grain, they said.

The bishops said they fear the threat to Mexican flora from the import of genetically modified seeds for growing crops. They also expressed concern that communities whose focus has been the farming of beans and corn will begin to break down.

“When the laws of the market impose upon the rights of the people and communities, profit becomes the supreme value and serves the large interest groups, excluding the poor and generating a global economic system which is both unjust and inhumane,” said the bishops.

“We are worried that this openness of trade, although beneficial for some powerful and technologically advanced farmers, will bring painful consequences for those whose survival depends on the land,” they said.

“In the present circumstances they will never be able to compete with the enormous subsidies the U.S. and Canada give their farmers and will remain in a disadvantaged position unless there are measures implemented that regulate and compensate for the difference in our economies,” the bishops said.

“We require new structures which promote authentic human cohabitation, which restrain the arrogance of others and which facilitate constructive dialogue aimed at social consensus,” they added.

The bishops invited all Mexican Catholics to show their solidarity with the rural communities and said that no one should be surprised that they themselves had taken a stand.

“We cannot limit the practice of our faith to the celebration of ritual and ethereal preaching,” the bishops said. “It is clear that the words of Jesus do not allow us to remain in the comfort of selfishness and passivity, but rather exhort us to do all we can for the poor.”

The bishops’ intervention comes after the January removal of the last remaining duties on white corn, beans, sugar cane and powdered milk.

The statement was signed by Auxiliary Bishop Gustavo Rodriguez Vega of

Monterrey, president of the bishops' social action commission.

Other signatories included Archbishop Rafael Romo Munoz of Tijuana and Bishops Luis Flores Calzada of Valle de Chalco; Miguel Alba Diaz of La Paz; Abelardo Alvarado Alcantara, auxiliary of Mexico City; Carlos Garfias Merlos of Netzahualcoyotl; Rafael Martinez Sainz, auxiliary of Guadalajara; Domingo Diaz Martinez of Tuxpan; and Felipe Arizmendi Esquivel of San Cristobal de Las Casas.

The statement was welcomed by the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development, the development agency of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, which said the trading arrangements are unfair.

Clare Dixon of CAFOD's Latin American and Caribbean department, which has worked in Mexico for 30 years, said NAFTA had primarily benefited big business.

"Economic growth that tramples on the poor isn't progress," she told Catholic News Service in a Feb. 4 interview, "and wealth accumulated at the expense of the poor isn't wealth."