

Paraguayan president apologizes for fathering three women's children

ASUNCION, Paraguay – Paraguayan President Fernando Lugo, a former Catholic bishop facing accusations that he fathered children with three women, asked the country's forgiveness but said he would not resign.

Meanwhile, the archbishop of Asuncion, the Paraguayan capital, called for the country's Catholics to see the crisis as an opportunity for grace.

During a press conference April 24, President Lugo said: "I am human, and therefore nothing human is alien to me. While asking forgiveness for these circumstances, I must insist that I always told the truth."

The scandal erupted April 8, when Viviana Carrillo, 26, filed a paternity suit claiming Lugo had fathered her child, who will turn 2 in May. The president admitted that the child, conceived while Lugo was still a bishop, was his and agreed to pay child support.

Since then, a second woman, Benigna Leguizamon, 27, has filed suit claiming Lugo is the father of her 6-year-old son, and a third woman, Damiana Moran Amarilla, has claimed that her 16-month-old son is the president's.

Paraguay's bishops have called the scandal an embarrassment to the church. Without referring to it directly, Archbishop Eustaquio Cuquejo Verga of Asuncion said the country "is going through a time of mental and spiritual pain" that he likened to the paschal suffering.

"Faith is being put to the test, not only through spiritual doubt, but through existential doubt," Archbishop Cuquejo wrote in a message issued April 24. "We do not like to suffer. It is difficult for us to accept the reverses of life, the disillusionment, the emptiness of the soul."

The archbishop called on Catholics to “recognize that every time of crisis is a time of grace” and respond by “seeking the change God asks of us.”

At the press conference, President Lugo said, “I did not want to hurt anyone. ... Because of the storm of stories about me, I have decided to respond with prudence, which is not the same as concealing information or avoiding” the topic.

Neither confirming nor denying the second and third paternity claims, the president said the cases would be handled “one by one,” either directly or in court. He said he would not allow personal matters to interfere with his platform of change for the country.

President Lugo said he would accept his responsibilities as a father and, more broadly, would promote “efforts to address issues related to paternity.” While recognizing “personal errors,” he said the more important thing was “valuing, perhaps belatedly, but strongly, the blessing of human life.”

The president, who was elected in April 2008 and took office in August, said there were rumors of a plan to destabilize his government.

“I want to calm the Paraguayan people as much as possible” about the rumors, he said. “I want to make it very clear that we will not resign.”

The paternity scandal is not the only problem President Lugo has faced recently. Despite a campaign pledge to reach more equitable terms with Brazil over electricity from the Itaipu dam, he has made little progress on the issue.

But while some opposition politicians said his apology was not enough, political observers said they doubted the paternity scandal would bring down the government.

Meanwhile, the aftershocks rippled across the border to neighboring Argentina, where street vendors in Buenos Aires hawked T-shirts, one of which said in Spanish, “I am not Lugo’s kid.”