

Puerto Rican governor's actions set off 'time bomb,' bishop says

VATICAN CITY (CNS) — The president of the Puerto Rican bishops' conference said the actions of Gov. Ricardo Rossello and his administration were the final straw for residents of the U.S. commonwealth who have suffered through years of financial mismanagement, corruption and the devastating aftermath of Hurricane Maria.

In a telephone interview with Catholic News Service July 23, Bishop Ruben Gonzalez Medina of Ponce said the massive protests in the island's capital, San Juan, were "a manifestation of the people and their outrage, as well as their exhaustion from having been 'cogido de bobos' ('taken for idiots')."

The July 10 arrest of two former senior officials of Rossello's administration who were charged by the FBI with corruption, as well as the release of offensive text messages between the governor and his staff, have left Puerto Ricans questioning "what kind of a person do we have leading our people."

"This was all a time bomb and it exploded," he said.

Rossello is facing an onslaught of criticism after the Center for Investigative Journalism published nearly 900 pages of private chats July 11 between the governor and his staff in which they make light of the victims of the 2017 hurricane as well as make several violent, homophobic and misogynistic remarks aimed at political and public figures.

Although the governor said he would not seek re-election and no longer lead his party, his refusal to resign sparked further outrage, causing hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans to march in protest July 22 to "La Fortaleza," the governor's mansion.

Despite the indignation and anger felt by his compatriots, Bishop Gonzalez told CNS he was impressed by the unity and respect felt at an event "that was not organized by a specific group but rather a reality that began among the people."

The bishop attended the protest, along with Bishop Eusebio Ramos Morales of Caguas, secretary of the bishops' conference. Archbishop Roberto Gonzalez Nieves of San Juan, he said, was "unable to attend because he is still recovering from surgery."

"The words that I heard the most were, 'Thank you for being with us; thank you for being present,'" Bishop Gonzalez recalled. "We are not the protagonists of these protests, we are not going there with a flag that says, 'Here is the bishop. We are Catholics.'"

Instead, he said, the presence of the bishops at the protest was meant to accompany Puerto Ricans who are rediscovering values that "the church has proclaimed and that has been sown into the hearts of men and women."

The unity shared among all men and women on the Caribbean island, he added, is a commitment to "establishing a better Puerto Rico."

Nevertheless, Bishop Gonzalez told CNS that true change can only come if Rossello listens and accepts the growing demand for his resignation by those he was elected to serve.

Rossello, he added, has lost "the trust of the people." The bishop questioned whether the governor is fit "to lead a dialogue if nobody wants to listen to him, not even members of his own party."

"Yes, I do believe" he should resign, Bishop Gonzalez said. "Forgiveness is one thing, and no one is opposed to forgiving him. But he must also realize that actions have consequences, and one of those consequences is that the people have lost trust in him. This is what the people are asking. How are they going to be governed by someone whom they can't trust?"

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