

Argentines fed up with nation's decay

by Cynthia R. Rush

Argentine press sources report that during the 35-minute audience held with President Carlos Menem in late October, Pope John Paul II expressed his concern over the extreme poverty faced by many Argentines, and lectured Menem on the need to make changes in economic policy. According to the Nov. 1 issue of the intelligence weekly *ABC Político*, the Pontiff also warned that "moral deterioration"—a reference to the government's notorious corruption as well as to Menem's personal behavior—is what leads to the type of economic crisis now existing in Argentina. The Pope has reportedly received detailed reports on the national situation from the country's bishops.

The Pope's warnings apparently fell on deaf ears. On the recommendation of the World Bank, on Nov. 19, Menem signed a decree authorizing the "rationalization of state sector companies," which will lead to mass firings of public sector employees, shutting down of several public companies, and the beginning of a new round of privatizations. In October, the government achieved a \$300 million Treasury surplus, \$100 million above what the International Monetary Fund (IMF) had demanded. According to the daily *Clarín* of Nov. 4, the government attained this goal by maintaining a "rigid wage policy, and by the finance undersecretary [responding with] a resounding 'No!' to the provinces and the health and social action sectors." Saul Bouer, the finance secretary in question, says he intends to make no concessions on his "rigid" wage policy.

A report in the Nov. 11 issue of Brazil's *Jornal do Brasil* reveals the cost to the Argentine people of such policies. Ramon Dano Medina, economics professor at the University of Tucumán in northern Argentina, says that poverty levels in the province's rural areas, where the economy depends on the now-collapsed sugar industry, "are like those of Africa or northeastern Brazil . . . lack of schools and malnutrition are creating a new generation of slave laborers." In another northern province, Jujuy, 47% of households live below the poverty line. Each year 900 new cases of tuberculosis are reported, almost all of them fatal because of lack of medical attention. The school year has been reduced to 75 days, because teachers are out on strike the rest of the time.

Carlos Menem says that the crisis afflicting the provinces is due to the fact that the local governments haven't done a good enough job in applying economic "adjustment." His advice to government officials who meet with him, according to the Nov. 7 issue of *Somos* magazine, is to disregard protest: "Cover your ears and go ahead and do what you have to do."

Moral outrage

The citizens of Argentina are repudiating the IMF's policy of sacrificing living standards, health, education, and other vital services to guarantee foreign debt payment. Demonstrations protesting economic collapse, non-payment of wages, or demanding wage increases and better social services, occur almost daily around the country. But protest is now also increasingly addressing issues like corruption, nepotism, and government abuses, which citizens see as a sign of the disintegrating moral fabric. Argentines are rejecting the institutions and political parties they see as responsible for the current crisis.

Although the government is nominally Peronist, the Peronist governors and legislators in the provinces are getting trounced. In Jujuy, citizens fed up with the corruption of Gov. Ricardo de Aparici, and the non-payment of wages, held a huge public meeting which forced him out of office shortly thereafter, chanting the slogan, "The people want to know what's going on." In Chubut, in southern Argentina, Peronist governor Nestor Perl was also forced out of office by angry citizens.

In Tucumán, people are rallying behind the gubernatorial candidacy of retired Army Gen. Antonio Bussi. Bussi served as governor under the hated 1976-83 military junta and gained notoriety when he gathered up all the beggars in the capital city and deported them to neighboring Jujuy. One local analyst referred to him as a local version of Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori. He is getting support now, because people see him as untainted, and independent of the existing political establishment. Bussi has also indicated that he has ambitions for the 1995 presidential race.

For two months, thousands of citizens in the northern province of Catamarca have joined in silent marches to protest the rape and slaying of a 17-year-old student, Marí Soledad Morales, apparently by members of the provincial security forces. From an initial demonstration of 2,000 people, the marches have now grown to over 30,000—one-quarter of the inhabitants of the provincial capital—and are held every Thursday. Sister Marta Pelloni, principal at Marí Soledad's school, explained that, as brutal as the young girl's slaying was, people are thinking beyond this issue: "The crime against Marí Soledad was a drop of water. . . . Catamarca is tired of abuses, of corruption, and of the nepotism of the Earth's powerful." The latter is a reference to the Saadi clan which has ruled the Catamarca province for years, and whose members hold most of the top posts in the provincial government.