

Brazilian Bishop's Hunger Strike Gives Church a Black Eye

Contributed by Francesco Neves
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After 11 days of fasting in protest for the planned transposition by the government of the São Francisco river, the bishop of Barra, in the Brazilian northeastern state of Bahia, friar Luiz Flávio Cappio, accepted to end his hunger strike. The bishop, however, doesn't seem very convinced that Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva will keep his end of the bargain. If this happens, the Franciscan friar has already warned, he will restart his strike.

Environmentalists, churches and several Brazilian NGOs seem to agree with the bishops argument that the project will mostly favor contractors and latifundium owners and on the other hand will dry up the northeastern river, harming millions of impoverished farmers who depend on the river for their livelihood.

Before leaving Cabrobó, in the state of Pernambuco, where the bishop was carrying his protest, Brazil's Minister of Institutional Relations, Jaques Wagner, a Lula emissary, said that the agreement reached with the bishop does not include the suspension or paralyzation of the São Francisco river's diversion.

Questioned about the declaration, Dom Cappio answered: "If he said that, he lied, because it wasn't what we agreed upon." And added: "If I don't trust him, and he doesn't trust me, we will never have an understanding.

"My premise is that we can trust each other. He makes a proposal, I present another, we argue the points, there is consensus, my duty is to believe that the points will be taken seriously."

He said he'd rather wait to see how things develop and promised to resume the protest if the agreement is not kept.

Dom Cappio believes that the government decided to negotiate with him because it was afraid of the internal and external repercussion of his protest.

"The Lula government did not want to be known in the history books as the government responsible for the death of a bishop", Dom Cappio said.

Thursday, October 6, Wagner, went to Cabrobó with a proposal to continue the debate on the transposition of the São Francisco in order to convince the bishop to give up his hunger strike. Wagner was accompanied by the pope representative in Brazil, nuncio Lorenzo Baldisseri.

Vatican Reaction

Dom Cappio's gesture exposed divergences among the Brazilian bishops and had repercussions in the Vatican. Nuncio Lorenzo Baldisseri joined Wagner to try to dissuade the bishop from his hunger strike.

Baldisseri's mission was to tell the bishop that the church did not agree with his stand of starving to death. After the meeting with the protesting bishop, the nuncio said that the bishop's act was against the Christian principles:

"In the church, faith, moral and discipline have to be respected, it is the doctrine," he said, after confirming that the church took part in the negotiations, in defense of moral principles. "Not all means are good for achieving an end," he stated.

In a show of dissension within the church's hierarchy, Bishop Tomás Balduino attacked four bishops who published a note backing the river's transposition and criticizing the hunger strike. Dom Balduino called the other prelates 'divisive' and accused them of "collaborating with contractors and big capital, who have their eyes on this gigantic work."

"I sincerely hope that this trend doesn't catch," commented the secretary general of the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops (CNBB), Odilo Scherer. According to Dom Scherer, although the Church does not condemn the hunger strike, it considers unacceptable the extremism of Dom Luiz, since he publicly stated that he would starve to death if President Lula did not back out.

He added, however, that the gesture had a positive result rallying society to demand that the government project be built in a more balanced manner, listening to all sides involved, "in a way that's ethically acceptable and ecologically balanced."