

Report from Rio by Silvia Palacios

Sarney attacks the Vatican

In the face of a Church mobilization against his policy, the President repudiates his Christian debt moratorium.

On Feb. 1, Brazilian President José Sarney published a singularly irrational accusation of "corruption" against the Vatican and the Catholic Church in general. Sarney lost his temper in the face of a Jan. 29 call by the president of the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops (CNBB) for the Church to mobilize against the government's capitulation to creditor banks and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The CNBB statement, which will be distributed massively to the world's largest body of Roman Catholics, states, "The national mood is one of frustration. Productive investment has fallen while financial speculation has risen. Unemployment has not diminished; real wages are weakened. . . . Corruption continues with impunity, protected by a tolerance bordering on collaboration." The Church indictment notes, "Externally, creditors demand the payment of unilaterally inflated debts."

It concludes by convoking the faithful to stop financial lobbies from purging Brazil's new constitution of provisions guarding the basic rights of workers and landless peasants. If the regime remains fixated on prolonging its petty corruption and cronyism, it warns, "the popular dissatisfaction could explode and assume convulsive proportions, with catastrophic consequences."

Sarney replied in a virulent public letter. "We all know corruption is a poisonous weed we should fight without quarter. Reverend, note how not even the Holy See can escape its cun-

ning invasion. The Banco Ambrosiano case shows how insidious it is."

Sarney's response hit the press the same day that Brazil bowed once again to its bankrupt creditors by paying them, from its meager reserves, \$350 million toward January interest payments.

The same day, railroad workers struck nationwide for wage increases. Two weeks earlier, the government had announced it would engage in even more savage wage-gouging as part of the austerity policy it is executing to please U.S. Treasury Secretary James Baker III and obtain agreements with the IMF and the banks. "The government is willing to face any strike," Finance Minister Mailson da Nóbrega blustered. "We are going to resist wage demands bravely, with determination and vigor."

The strong-man amidst the shards of the Sarney government, Communications Minister Antonio Carlos Magalhães, called Feb. 5 for "bitter medicine" in the streets.

At press time, the railroad strike had gone on for a week, and in some parts of the country, fuel and industrial inputs were running short. Hundreds of thousands of workers depend on trains to get from the belts of misery surrounding Rio and Sao Paulo to their low-paying jobs. No work, no pay.

It seems that the intention of the patronage brokers who have usurped control of the presidential palace is to let political and religious groups aligned with Moscow go wild riding on the social discontent. When the chaos crosses a certain threshold, their

scenario goes, the radical faction of the armed forces would promptly crush it and entrench the Magalhães clique in power.

It is true that Sarney's tirade against the Vatican was encouraged by the evangelicals, gnostics, and cultists who surround him. It astounded conservative Catholics here, since the Vatican has been trying hard to limit the strong influence of gnostic-Marxist "liberation theologians" in the Brazilian Church. Father Leonardo Boff, the mouthpiece of the Theolibbers, and defrocked priest Frei Betto share Antonio Carlos Magalhães's desire that Brazil move closer to Castro and Gorbachov.

But, on a higher level, it proves the Church's point that "moral sense and civic responsibility are alarmingly eroded." In his Feb. 20, 1987 moratorium declaration, Sarney himself said, "Pope John Paul II was very clear. . . . He said that the problem of the foreign debt is also an ethical problem. . . . Indebtedness must not harm the basic living needs of a people." Sarney reportedly repudiated that position Feb. 1, asserting, "The foreign debt moratorium was the biggest mistake we ever made."

Finance Minister da Nóbrega and ex-Minister Mario Simonsen (now a Citibank vice president) are campaigning through the daily *Jornal do Brasil* (owned since January by the central bank), using fake statistics to "demonstrate" that Brazil lost \$700 million because of the moratorium.

CNBB President Bishop Luciano Mendes de Almeida was not amiss, when, in presenting the Church document Jan. 30, he stated, "A feeling is growing in the population similar to the Holy wrath when Christ drove the money-changers from the temple."

The question arises: Will they be driven out of the presidential palace?