

Ecuador's Roman Catholic church ready to implement required religion teaching in schools

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Quito, Ecuador--Ecuador's Roman Catholic church is gearing up to implement a new law which requires two hours of religious teaching per week in all schools. The law, which is pending a constitutionality ruling in the country's Supreme Court, was initially proposed by the Catholic Church.

The church is reviewing and preparing its teaching materials in preparation for the new classes.

Quito's Archbishop, Monsignor Antonio Gonzalez, said that no new teachers would be needed to supply the nation's classrooms because "the church has set a period of ten years to fully implement the program." Critics of the program had charged that the government was in arrears for salary increases promised to teachers and could not afford new faculty to teach the religion classes.

But, Mosignor Gonzalez said, he was certain the government would provide funds for new instructors as needed.

The selection and training of teachers is a major concern of the church now, he said. The Episcopal Conference, meeting in Quito the week of November 21, established procedures for recruiting and preparing teachers.

The Archbishop said that each teacher will be approved by the ecclesiastical authority in each diocese, and trained by diocesan officials. The church will ask the School of Religious Sciences of the Faculty of Theology at the Pontifical Catholic University of Ecuador and a Salesian institute to assist in training.

Defending the new law, which has been vigorously opposed by teacher's unions, Protestant churches and other groups, the Archbishop said that the law was not intended to force the teaching of religion in all public institutions, but to "open a way for parents to give their children a religious education in accord with their convictions. The parents that do not want their children to receive classes will not be forced to," he said.

He said he regretted the strong opposition which the law has created throughout the country.

Teachers throughout Ecuador staged a two day strike November 23 and 24 to press several demands, including the annulling of the law by the government. If there demands were not met, the teacher's union threatened an indefinite strike

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