

CHILEAN BISHOP: ENVIRONMENTAL DESTRUCTION IS A "SIN"

Contributed by Benjamin Witte
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Luis Infanti Says Chile Is "Practically Owned By Foreign Companies"

(Ed. Note: Last week Aysén Bishop Luis Infanti de la Mora went public with a 90-page Pastoral Letter in which he criticizes plans by HidroAysén to build five massive dams in far southern Chile's Region XI. HidroAysén is a joint entity created in 2006 by Spanish-Italian electricity giant Endesa and Chilean utility Colbún. On Monday Infanti presented the letter directly to company executives (PT, Sept. 1).

Entitled "Danos Hoy El Agua De Cada Dia" (Give Us Now Our Daily Water), the letter warns that the environmental, social and economic costs of the planned US\$3 billion project far outweigh their supposed benefits. The dams and reservoirs, Infanti wrote, threaten to alter local ecosystems, harm endangered species, hurt tourism and other local industries and displace residents.

In the interview below, the bishop offers a brief synopsis of the letter — which took him three years to complete — and questions Chile's decision to privatize its fresh water. Infanti also calls on political and economic leaders to take an ethical approach in their various decisions.)

Patagonia Times: What are the major points you tried to raise in your letter?

Luis Infanti: The first part looks at our current reality, in which the ecological crisis shows us that we're in a new stage of humanity — a new era in which the problems I mention are deeply affecting humans and their environment. From there I look closely at the issue of water and its importance in terms of how it's used and its value as a key to human life. It also has a significant spiritual, artistic and economic value. From there I go into the issue of the "hydro-business" and how water is being used to make money, even at a time when its scarcity is becoming a problem for a major part of the world population.

In Chile the hydro-business is favored by a national law that privatized water in a way that's more extreme than in other places. In Aysén, for example, 96 percent of fresh water rights are now in the hands of a single company (Endesa). This creates serious problems: not just because it's a monopoly, but because controlling the water — which is a scarce resource that's so vital to humans — can become a form of colonialism, the domination of certain peoples.

PT: You mention in the letter that it would help to change the Constitution. What kinds of changes do you envision?

LI: First off, we should nationalize the water. But the real problem behind all this is the neoliberal model, which has been followed here for years and was institutionalized within the Constitution. Chile's current Constitution dates back to 1980. It was drafted under the military regime and was forced through. It was not a democratic regime. So one thing to look at is the legitimacy of the Constitution. Another is to examine whether after 30 years with this Constitution people are happy with it.

The Constitution put in place a neoliberal political model whose result has been that Chile is now practically owned by powerful foreign companies. In fact, I say in the letter that Aysén, as a region, has been sold — sold to foreign capital that has bought up the water, the electricity, the land and the sea. It's not just about the water. This is about a social and political structure and I'm not sure whether the people are satisfied with this.

PT: What are some of the specific problems associated with the HidroAysén Project?

LI: There's a problem first off with how Chile, as a State — not just the government — but as a State, doesn't have a national energy policy. There is none. And so the energy policy is left in the hands of private companies, which apparently look to earn as much as possible while spending as little as possible. Their interests don't always reflect the common good.

Then there's the issue of water. As I said before, controlling the water is a new type of colonialism. This is especially true of water, because I'm not talking about oil. One can live without oil. But one cannot live without water, because life depends on it. Not just human life, but life in general. So the fact that the water is in private hands is a real problem.

On top of that, there are the damages that (the dams) would provoke; They would alter the ecosystems in the five

places where they plan to build. Families will also be displaced. In addition to ruining the ecosystems and harming their biodiversity, they could cause major problems for the glaciers, because wherever you have large quantities of water (reservoirs), there will be a rise in the temperature, which could accelerate the already rapid rate the glaciers are receding.

PT: What do you see as the relationship between the Church and the environment?

LI: What I wrote was a Pastoral Letter, meaning it is a letter written by a pastor, a person – a bishop in this case – whose role is to lead, to stimulate, to accompany his diocese in faith. We believe that God embodied himself in the person of Jesus Christ. In that respect, everything that relates to humans is therefore divine. The issue of the environment cannot be separated from humanity, from the human essence. I am who I am only in terms of how I live within the environment, in the cosmos, in our common home.

Years ago, the Church was concerned with human rights, where especially in Chile they were being violated. Today it’s the environment that’s being violated. Our concern for the environment has the same intensity and depth as our concern over human rights violations. Just like with human rights, we talk about how violations affect both the created and the Creator – they’re an offence against God. It’s the same with the environment. An offense against the environment in which we live is an offence against the Creator. In this sense, morally speaking, we are talking about a social sin.

PT: What do you think of the job the state’s done in terms of conservation and environmental protection?

LI: There have been some important efforts made, with the native forest law, for example. There have been studies done on glaciers and efforts to set up rules regarding the nation’s river valleys. Important steps have been taken. But in general, there are many more necessary steps that must be followed.

PT: What can be done at this point to stop the HidroAysén Project?

LI: In my Pastoral Letter I talk about how in Chile, the economic, political and judicial powers are closely linked. This power structure benefits from the Constitution and from the silence of the people. And so legally, HidroAysén isn’t doing anything wrong. I’m not blaming HidroAysén for pursuing these projects, because within the context of our current system, they’re following the rules. However, just because something’s legal doesn’t make it necessarily ethical. And so in this case, even though (HidroAysén) has submitted the project for environmental evaluation, I think the reaction of people who are aware what (the project) really means is indispensable.

It makes me happy to think my letter might contribute to greater reflection. That’s why I’ve always said that my letter isn’t against anyone. Instead it’s meant to encourage reflection. It’s important that both the people with power – the people with economic, political and judicial power – and the public as a whole, take the time to reflect.

The letter isn’t above reproach. No doubt it contains things that should be questioned. But I do want to spur reflection and to encourage people to seek the truth. I’m not afraid of the truth because I know that through truth, we can move forward in a dignified way. If someone fears the truth it’s because they want to lie. So if this letter bothers some people – companies or authority figures – it means they don’t have the basic human and ethical willingness to seek the truth.

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