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## Paraguay. Msgr. Martínez Flores (bishops): “We witnessed the pain and grief of many families caused by COVID-19”

Overcoming the pandemic. Against the backdrop of severe drought that prevents river navigation, coupled by the burden of endemic poverty, inequality and corruption, Paraguay - probably the least developed country in South America - is still in the throes of a crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Paraguay has seldom hit the news in recent months, despite having been severely impacted by the so-called 'Brazilian variant' in the first half of the year. Total deaths so far stand at over 16,000, marking the fifth highest death-to-inhabitant ratio on the subcontinent, although the average is not far behind Brazil, Argentina and Colombia. Moreover, COVID-19 vaccinations only started two months ago. Given the country's poor institutional presence and lack of governmental stability, *the role of the Church is of fundamental importance, in terms of information and education, providing help for disadvantaged groups and voicing their concerns*. SIR addressed the issue with the president of the Paraguayan Bishops' Conference, Msgr. **Adalberto Martínez Flores**, bishop of Villarica.



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COVID-19 vaccination rollout in Paraguay started late and progressed at a slow pace. But since vaccinations started - extending to different age groups - we have seen a sharp decrease in infection and death rates. A significant portion of the population has already received at least one dose, while the most vulnerable, as well as other groups, have already completed the full vaccination programme. Infection rates have dropped since mid-August, especially since September. On September 25 the Ministry of Health reported zero deaths from COVID-19, for the first time since March 2020. This shows that if the vaccines had been procured in good time, it would have prevented the death of thousands of Paraguayans. Paraguay is seldom spoken of, yet it has been severely hit by COVID-19. Are you worried about a resurgence of the pandemic? Paraguay was hit hard by Covid-19, over 16,000 lives were lost. We witnessed the grief and bereavement of countless families, relatives, friends, co-workers who died from this disease, and whose loved ones were not allowed to pay their last respects. The state of isolation imposed by the pandemic has affected people's emotional and economic conditions. Numerous businesses, companies and factories had to close down their activities or lay off their employees. Businesses are slowly

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recovering, but it will take time. *The lesson we must learn from all this is that ultimately, getting vaccinated is important.* If we are responsible individuals, abiding by healthcare recommendations, we will most certainly manage to sustain the positive trend, and healthcare centres and professionals will be able to redirect their efforts towards other diseases. **Are there any situations that could potentially trigger contagion or are the measures appropriate?** *Now is a good time to reflect on what we have done right and what we have done wrong, and draw conclusions that can help us rectify our weaknesses and improve our strengths.* Weak points include the need for public health officials to evaluate their performance in the procurement of vaccines and other essential medicines for timely treatment of the population affected by the disease. Vaccine and medicine shortages have caused the death of many of our fellow citizens. A string of unfortunate decisions by public authorities hampered disease control efforts and its devastating consequences of pain and grief. In the first months of the pandemic the population complied with the stringent measures and restrictions imposed by the government. But when it became apparent that there was negligence, the population, also worn out from confinement, was no longer willing to follow the regulations. *Confidence in public authorities is key to ensuring that the population continues to contribute to mitigating the spread of the disease,* at a time when the Delta variant is circulating throughout the community. **How is ecclesial activity being carried out - especially in the help of those most in need?** As in all countries, pastoral and liturgical activities were restricted by the pandemic. *However, the same situation that limited the usual liturgical and pastoral activities highlighted the dimension of religious witness through parish and diocesan social ministry throughout the country.* Soup kitchens were set up, with the participation of parish priests, catechists, parishioners, institutions and private businesses. From March to June 2020, some 30 million meals were prepared and distributed to the most indigent inhabitants thanks to social ministry. Had it not been for these activities providing for the people's primary food needs, enduring Paraguay's socio-political situation would have been far more problematic. In addition, social pastoral ministry in some dioceses encouraged initiatives aimed at the establishment of social pharmacies. **Are you worried or optimistic about the state of the economy and society?** *The indicators of Paraguay's macroeconomy are positive, and we hope that this will result in increased well-being for the population in the medium and short term.* As mentioned above, the pandemic adversely affected the performance of various economic sectors, notably trade and micro and medium-sized enterprises. This has exacerbated poverty and extreme poverty levels, with higher unemployment rates and a drop in private investment. Ultimately, basic household items became more expensive. This has affected the general population while further aggravating the needs of the poorest segments. The impact of climate change has played a role in creating this situation, reflected in the decreasing water levels in Paraná and Paraguay rivers, making navigation difficult and, consequently, increasing the cost of transport of many basic commodities. Also education has been direly impacted, with high levels of school drop-outs and virtual classrooms. This situation is also a reflection of the socio-economic conditions of large population segments, aggravated by poor internet access, whose social and economic consequences in terms of learning outcomes have yet to be assessed. *Government policies that prioritise social welfare with increased spending are needed to mitigate the social and economic consequences of the pandemic.* Likewise, corruption should not be tolerated. Honest management of public resources by the persons responsible for the economic and political governance of the country is a moral imperative, with the common good as its goal, thereby ensuring improved living conditions for the population.

*\*Journalist, "La vita del popolo"*

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