

Praise the Lord and Pass a Budget

By MAYRA MONTERO
May 20, 2006, The New York Times

San Juan, Puerto Rico

THE budget crisis that has shaken Puerto Rico this month has brought moments that were critical, less critical and positively deranged. On May 1, the government shut most public agencies, furloughing 95,000 employees. The police, firefighters and medical personnel kept working, but schools were closed; Gov. Anibal Acevedo-Vila laid off the staff at the executive mansion, including the chef, which led to the announcement of the transcendently important fact that the governor was sustaining himself with pizzas.

The shutdown resulted from a stalemate between the governor and the Legislature, which is controlled by his political opponents. The Government Development Bank said it would lend money to help cover the island's budget deficit only if a sales tax was enacted, but the two sides couldn't agree on the amount of the tax. When payday arrived, there was no money.

It's logical that at some point the 95,000 laid-off workers, American citizens after all, would expect something from the mainland, if only a gesture of solidarity. An offer to mediate, for example. But the mother country kept its distance, and we don't know if this indifference was spontaneous or planned. As a well-known Puerto Rican analyst said, it was clear that for the United States, "Puerto Rico is not on the radar screen."

Perhaps, then, the unions would take up the workers' cause? But the labor movement's response was slow and disjointed, dissipated in marches and announcements of marches.

Instead, religious groups stepped in. At their urging, a commission was created last week to develop a plan to resolve the deficit, and the governor and leaders of both legislative houses agreed to abide by its recommendations.

Serious debates over taxes, public spending and government bonds were held amid prayers and hymns. Although San Juan's Roman Catholic archbishop took part in the negotiations, the messianic tone of evangelical and Pentecostalist churches

predominated. Each session began and ended with a "prayer circle." The speaker of the House told reporters that he was consulting with God about the budget. San Juan's mayor led a mystic march accompanied by a woman with a title like "director of spiritual affairs."

At the Capitol, legislators surrounded a singer of religious music, a "holy man" with miracle-working pretensions who walked around laying on hands. The governor himself joined his opponents to murmur praises, and he was "anointed" by the leaders of evangelical churches who wandered through the Capitol and the executive mansion, La Fortaleza, advising, instructing and eating snacks. If anyone complained about their presence, they threatened to put "100,000 Christians" inside the Capitol to apply pressure.

It worked: on Monday, public employees returned to work after a resolution was reached, though not without a mini-crisis last weekend that was once again resolved thanks to mediation by religious leaders, who declared their work a "great victory of Jehovah, king of kings." The crisis, however, has left behind a bad taste that this country will not forget for a long time.

Although Puerto Rico has always been thought of as Catholic, evangelical churches have flourished recently to the point that there seems to be one on every corner. The evangelical pastors enjoy tax-free church-provided mansions and expensive cars and have received unimaginable privileges from successive administrations. In this crisis, they took advantage of the ineffectiveness of other forces in society and made off with the prize.

This is not to say that evangelicals, Catholics and other religious groups shouldn't help out when there's a crisis — though it is a shame that the governor and the Legislature needed an intercessor to come to an agreement.

But at what price? There is little doubt that one day these religious groups will send an invoice: when Puerto Rico has to decide on matters like gay rights and abortion, they will surely seek restrictions. And then we will find ourselves asking if divine intervention was really worth the cost.

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