

Archbishop Ramon Arguelles: Outspoken bishop leaves Lipa after 13 years

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“ECCENTRIC” He was ready to sacrifice and be sacrificed, says Arguelles.

Lipa City—Lipa Archbishop Ramon Arguelles, who once called an international pop star “evil” and made public remarks on a Philippine president’s thinning hair, is a man of sound bites, which have earned him both friends and foes.

“I’m willing to admit that I am eccentric. Some people may not be pleased [by it] but I only speak of what is right,” he said.

The Inquirer caught up with Arguelles, 72, as he prepared to leave the Archbishop’s Residence last week after 13 years in office. The Vatican announced on Feb. 2 that Arguelles would be replaced by Bishop Gilbert Garcera of Daet town, Camarines Norte province.

Many were surprised by the announcement, but Arguelles said he had expected the move—he had tendered his resignation in July, three years shy of the retirement age for Catholic bishops.

Resignation

Arguelles’ resignation was prompted by the Vatican’s decision to overrule and nullify his decree. On Sept. 15, 2015, Arguelles issued a decree authenticating the claims of the late Carmelite novice Teresita Lat Castillo that the Blessed Virgin Mary, under the title Mediatrix of All Grace, appeared to her several times in 1948.

“When I first came here [as archbishop] in 2004, people asked me if I could accept their devotion [to the Mediatrix of All Grace]. ‘What’s wrong with that?’ I thought,” Arguelles said. “I believe in it since the very beginning. The people’s devotion never wavered.”

But the Vatican’s Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) last year upheld a 1951 decree of Pope Pius XII that said the Marian apparitions “lack(ed) supernatural origin.” Arguelles received the order through the Apostolic Nuncio in May last year.

The CDF also gave instructions to “immediately disband” all commissions studying the apparitions.

“Sacrifice is good. But obedience is better. By obeying, I am ready to sacrifice and to be sacrificed,” Arguelles said in a statement in June last year. He then wrote Pope Francis saying he was willing to go if he had lost the pontiff’s trust. In one of his last official actions as Archbishop of Lipa, Arguelles declared 2017 as the Archdiocesan Marian Year for the city in commemoration of the 100th year of the Fatima apparition.

“They can condemn me for my convictions (but) I still believe in the power of God and in the Blessed Mother,” he said. “We are a people in love with Mary and that is our strength as Filipinos.”

Forming priests

Born in Batangas City, Arguelles grew up serving the Church as an altar boy. His mother, an orphan, was raised by Catholic nuns in the convent where she would later meet Arguelles’ father, who worked as a mason in the church’s construction.

Arguelles described his family as “troublesome” and that his mother initially discouraged him from entering the priesthood. He was even turned down when he first applied in a seminary here.

But Arguelles was determined to become a priest and eventually entered the San Carlos seminary in Metro Manila.

He was ordained in 1969 and became Auxiliary Bishop of Manila in 1994. He served in the Military Ordinariate of the Philippines, a diocese for military personnel, from 1995 to 2004 before he was assigned to Lipa.

Arguelles’ mother tried to dissuade him from becoming a man of the cloth, expressing fears that his son would have illicit affairs like other priests.

Arguelles said that his second vocation, apart from his devotion to Mary, was to reform other priests who gambled, smoked, drank excessively, or took money from the church.

“Many were angered and said I was too strict. But I told them: petty things evolve into something else. The next thing you know, this priest owns a house and later on, he is bringing someone home,” he said.

Arguelles, who stood against mining and coal-fired power plants, fought the Reproductive Health Law and openly criticized the administration of former President Benigno Aquino III.

He recalled that during the Pope's visit in Tacloban City in 2015, Aquino lashed out at bishops who had been critical of the government. Arguelles said he greeted the then president, but Aquino, apparently, did not hear what he had told him.

A few days later, a Cabinet official called him to ask what he had told the President. "What I said was, 'I am his (Aquino's) favorite bishop,'" Arguelles said. He never heard from the official again.