

June 20, 2016

# **Statement on Puerto Rico Governor/Creditor Debt Dialogue**

**From: Roberto O. González Nieves, OFM, Archbishop of San Juan de Puerto Rico and Reverend Heriberto Martínez, General Secretary of Puerto Rico's Bible Society and Coordinator of the Ecumenical and Interfaith Coalition of Puerto Rico**

Almost a year ago, our Governor publicly stated that Puerto Rico's debt had become unpayable. Already at that time, our island was experiencing self-imposed austerity conditions. More schools continued to close, healthcare budgets slashed, police were laid off and we were taking from our pensions to pay the debt. In less than a year, the situation has become much worse.

This financial crisis has a human cost on our people and, especially, an unacceptable cost on our children.

In our homeland, 56% of children live in poverty.

The irony of Puerto Rico's financial crisis is not lost on us. The vulnerable, the least among us, had nothing to do with causing this crisis and they are the ones most affected by the crisis.

In response to the Governor's announcement that the debt was no longer sustainable, Puerto Rico's Ecumenical and Interfaith Coalition focused on the debt. Aided by Jubilee USA Network in these early moments, before the world was watching, we analyzed the debt and the implications of the growing financial crisis.

As shepherds of our flocks on the island, we called for a solution that would invest in Puerto Rico. As the world started to realize that a humanitarian crisis was unfolding in Puerto Rico, the leaders of our coalition called for debt relief. We called for a solution found in our Bible, the solution of Jubilee.

In a statement last August, we said that any solution to the crisis must achieve the following:

- 1) There should be no more imposed austerity policies affecting our people, especially poor families and young people who are among the most vulnerable.

- 2) Any solution must create an investment in the Puerto Rican people and seek to grow our economy.
- 3) We need enough debt relief to bring our total debt back to sustainable levels.
- 4) We encourage all solutions that enhance Puerto Rico's laws on budget transparency.
- 5) We seek greater participation in resolving this crisis and working with the government on solutions that protect Puerto Rico's people.
- 6) In addition to the participation of the religious sector, we call for a multisectorial participation in which our people are well represented, including the poorest because they are always the most affected.

Since we began our efforts to address the crisis, we have also seen the statistics regarding our children become even more dire. Therefore, any solution to this crisis must reduce child poverty on our island.

With reducing child poverty and our 6 principles in mind, we advocated for every solution that we thought could be possible. Working with US religious groups and Jubilee USA, we called for debt restructuring solutions from the Federal Reserve, the US Treasury, the White House and the US Congress. We left no stone unturned in our advocacy for a solution.

Last year, we started to meet with the Governor to support him in seeking a negotiated solution with the island's creditors. We also began to appeal directly to leaders of the various creditor groups. We began a process that would convene the leadership of various creditor groups to meet with the Governor.

On May 10, with the assistance of Mr. Eric LeCompte and Jubilee USA, we successfully convened a meeting with Puerto Rico's Governor and a representative group of major creditors.

The two of us represented our island's Ecumenical and Interfaith Coalition to host and facilitate this first ever dialogue among principal actors. We held the meeting at the Church of St. Francis of Assisi in New York City. Saint Francis remains one of our greatest peacemakers and it was fitting that we would work for reconciliation in a church named after him.

It had been difficult to convene this first meeting. However, once the first meeting finally happened, we could feel the possibility of reconciliation. We believe that our Governor showed great leadership for our people at this meeting. He powerfully articulated how he felt compelled to provide medicine for hospitalized children before making bond payments.

We also continue to be impressed by many of the creditors that we have met with.

At the meeting, the creditors who came demonstrated a clear willingness to help resolve the crisis. We were moved by how many of the creditors told the Governor that they invested in his leadership and they wish to invest in Puerto Rico for a long time.

After building a great deal of trust in May, we saw the trust begin to dissipate as more adversarial language played out in media interviews and in court rooms between Puerto Rico's government and creditors. Although we were successful in eventually setting another meeting between creditors and the Governor for Tuesday June 21st at the Church of St. Francis of Assisi in New York City, we no longer feel we can have a productive meeting with a comprehensive group of participants.

With heavy hearts we are canceling this June 21st meeting. If parties are interested in reconvening after July 1st with our assistance, we are willing to try again. If current legislation in Congress passes, it could provide incentives for all sides to come back to the table.

However, we believe that all parties must come to the table in true "Good Faith." Every one of us must be willing to come to the table with humility and with a sense of shared responsibility and shared sacrifice. Fundamentally, we are not dealing with a situation of bad people, we are all victims of a bad situation.

We continue to hope and pray we can have a process that protects Puerto Rico's people and respects the rights and dignity of Puerto Rico's government and creditors. We are reminded that Pope Francis, has called us all to reconciliation in this holy year. The Holy Father has called for this year to be a Jubilee Year of Mercy. We pray that we can all unite as partners to answer the invitation of Pope Francis.

**Read the August 31, 2015 statement: "A Call from the Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Coalition and other Religious Leaders for a Jubilee for Puerto Rico: The Fiscal Crisis" in [English](#), [Spanish](#)**

**Read Archbishop González's recent article on pending Puerto Rico debt legislation in [The Hill](#)**

**Read a [timeline](#) of Puerto Rico's debt crisis**

[http://jubileeusa.typepad.com/blog\\_the\\_debt/2016/06/statement-on-puerto-rico-governor-creditor-debt-dialogue.html](http://jubileeusa.typepad.com/blog_the_debt/2016/06/statement-on-puerto-rico-governor-creditor-debt-dialogue.html)