



Parroquia Inmaculada Concepción
Calle Lebrún #442
Vieques, Puerto Rico 00765
Tel.741-2241

May 4, 2009

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

I write to you in the spirit of the ties that bind us to one another and to all God's children, asking you to join me in speaking out for fellow American citizens who are suffering and dying on the island of Vieques, Puerto Rico. The book of Jeremiah states, "For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?" (Jer. 8:21-22). Separated from Jeremiah by thousands of years and just as many miles, the same question echoes from Vieques' shores.

The people of Vieques, a small island 8 miles from the main island of Puerto Rico, are U.S. citizens who have been exposed to deadly heavy metal toxins left behind by the Navy after more than six decades of weapons testing on the island. As a result of this contamination, children on Vieques are 25% more likely to die in infancy than those on Puerto Rico's main island. With every breath of air, drink of water, and bite of food the people of Vieques are exposed to harmful toxins directly linked to the diseases plaguing the island. The people of Vieques have a 30% higher rate of cancer, a 381% higher rate of hypertension, a 95% higher rate of cirrhosis of the liver and a 41% higher rate of diabetes than those on the main island of Puerto Rico. And recent hair-sample tests showed that 34% of the population has toxic levels of mercury, 55% are contaminated with lead, 69% with arsenic, and 93% with antimony. Nursing mothers pass on this poison to their babies, and parents watch helplessly as their children fall sick.

I came to the island of Vieques to minister to the people here. As I visited their homes and sick-beds, entered into their joys and sorrows, shared the Gospel and prayed with them, I came face to face with the suffering caused by the poisoning of the island. Part of Jesus' ministry was to heal the sick and the infirm. As the body of Christ on earth, the Christian Church is called to continue in his work. And so I came to understand that part of my ministry to the people of Vieques was to speak out on their behalf and raise awareness about the toxins that are killing them.

The Gospel of St. Luke tells the parable of a widow repeatedly denied justice. Day after day she came to the town square demanding a favorable judgment from the governing official. Day after day she was rebuked, but she persisted in her demands until the cause of justice prevailed. So too, Jesus tells us, will justice be granted to those who persist in its pursuit. For more than 200 days per year, for over 60 years, the people of Vieques endured the Navy's bombing. They are faithful citizens whose sacrifice for their country continues to be paid with their very lives as children, mothers, fathers,



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sisters, and brothers die one by one from illnesses caused by toxic exposure. The Psalmist writes, "I cry out by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest" (Ps. 22:2).

The people of Vieques have persisted long enough; the time for justice is now. I entreat you to write your representatives, asking that Congress finally provide the people of Vieques with the medical assistance they need and the minimal resources required for a family to get food from the mainland. The people of Vieques need your prayers, but they also need your voice. Tell your representatives to support them as they seek medical treatment for themselves and their families. For more information on the health crisis in Vieques and the Navy's history there, please visit www.americanvaluesnetwork.org.

In God's Peace

Padre Nelson López