

Interview with Bishop Samuel Ruiz, 1994.

MEXICO CITY--Some call him the "red bishop." Others call him "Tatic," which means "Father" in an Indian language. Both names fit Samuel Ruiz, the bishop of San Cristobal de las Casas in Chiapas. But he is far more than that: He's been ambushed, blessed, threatened, revered and criticized for his role in the dialogue for peace in Chiapas. Since the Jan. 1, 1994 uprising, Ruiz has been the chief mediator, trying to establish peace in the southernmost corner of Mexico, where indigenous communities, led by the Zapatista guerrilla group, are fighting to preserve their traditions and gain just treatment from both the federal government and the local oligarchy. They are headed by a native council, which includes Subcomandante Marcos, a skillful communicator who has articulated their cause internationally. Ruiz is president of the National Mediation Commission (the Spanish acronym is CONAI). The Mexican government has launched a ferocious media campaign to remove him from the peace talks, insisting that he is partial to the cause of the Zapatistas.

Ruiz was aware of the impending unrest in Chiapas long before fighting actually broke out. When he arrived in the Mexican state, in 1959, Indians were not allowed to walk on the sidewalks. For almost 40 years, he witnessed the severe oppression of the indigenous people and their gradual mobilization to fight for their rights. At the same time, he realized that local authorities would never peacefully relinquish political power. Then, on the eve of the 1968 Summer Olympics, the army massacred student demonstrators at Tlaltelolco Plaza in Mexico City. After that, opposition groups radicalized in many parts of Mexico.

Shortly before the 1994 uprising, Ruiz began a fast to publicize the explosive situation in Chiapas. Careful not to call it a hunger strike, Ruiz says his was an act of religious penitence, not political protest.

The 73-year-old priest, a short, stocky man, seems in a perpetual hurry. He speaks quickly, regularly lacing sacred scriptures with socialist thoughts. After almost 40 years in the region, he knows several Indian languages. He cannot be called easy-going: He favors impassioned monologues and hates to be interrupted. Ruiz has been a man on a mission since 1968 when, following the second Vatican Council, he and other Latin American bishops created a "theology of liberation," which, essentially, sided the church with the poor. Ruiz sat down to talk in Mexico City recently, at the offices of the CONAI. The walls around him were covered with pictures of the heroes of the revolutionary Latin American church, including Sergio Mendez Arceo of Cuernavaca, an earlier "red bishop," Colombian priest Camilo Torres and Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero, who was killed, in 1980, while celebrating mass. It is here that Don Samuel, as he is known, receives priests, nuns, artists, intellectuals, scientists and others who come to offer him support in this difficult time.

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Question: What is your role in the dialogue for peace in Chiapas?

Answer: Our role is to seek the unity and reconciliation of all the different groups in Chiapas. In other words, to do exactly the opposite of what is being done now, which only creates tension among the different religious groups (Protestant and Catholic). They want to make us believe we are immersed in a religious war. The work toward peace did not start when the conflict began. Peace for a Christian is an ongoing task; but peace goes hand in hand with justice. There can be no peace if there is no justice. Justice means bringing down from their throne those who are privileged and elevating those who are humble to the same heights. We need real unity, not some people overrunning others. We should work toward eliminating social injustice, because that is the only road to peace.

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Q: How can Chiapas be pacified?

A: The road map to peace has been discussed in the peace talks. Peace can only be achieved through a dialogue among the parts. But it should be understood that this is not a Chiapas phenomenon, but a national problem, with episodic outbreaks in Chiapas and in other places in the republic. This is a problem of national scope, even if there are people who want to reduce it to its Chiapas dimension.

The so called "Indian problem" is an international problem. The situation of the indigenous peoples varies across the continent but has many points of contact with the Chiapas situation. A volcano erupts where the layers of earth are thinner, but the volcanic activity remains underneath. In Chiapas, there are not only great social inequities but extreme poverty, harsh political repression against the people and no system of justice whatsoever. The uprising took place in Chiapas but the whole nation understood and agreed that the cause of the indigenous peoples of Chiapas was a fair cause. Right now, perhaps what should be done is to change the current perspective on the problem. There is no need to have so much army presence in the region, especially after hearing them describe the enemy as irrelevant.

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Q: Who put you in the position to be an intermediary between the government and the Zapatistas in the dialogue for peace?

A: When the conflict began, the three bishops of Chiapas, the same bishops who had witnessed how the trouble was developing, offered ourselves as mediators. We asked for an immediate cease-fire and suggested a political, instead of a military, solution to the conflict. We also issued a statement assessing the situation, stating clearly we did not believe violence was the best method to achieve social goals, but, at the same time, and just as clearly, stating we understood that the indigenous peoples had reached their

psychological limit to repression. Thus, we saw our mediation more as a duty.

Then I got a call from a former governor of Chiapas asking me if I would mediate in the talks for peace. I said "yes." Five minutes later, I got another call telling me the president had named [former Mexico City Mayor] Manuel Camacho [Solis] to be the representative of the government to the peace talks and wanted me to mediate. Then the cease-fire began and, from that moment on, the negotiations have been going on and off.

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Q: Did you tell the local authorities that an armed conflict would come about?

A: The local authorities knew what was going on and the army also knew quite well what was going on. Everybody knew in advance that violence could be unleashed and where it would happen. They knew the location of the people who were preparing for war. As a matter of fact, the army began destroying camps and training grounds of the guerrillas in 1993, and suffering many casualties that were listed in their military reports.

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Q: Why did they stop before finishing off the guerrillas?

A: Right then, the cardinal of Guadalajara was murdered and the world turned its eyes on Mexico. Simultaneously, there was a coup d'etat in Guatemala and the Mexican army stopped its maneuvers along the southern border. As I was returning from the cardinal's funeral, I saw the [Mexican] army returning from the forest. Suddenly, the army was [pretending to change] its role in the region, becoming involved in an intense program of social work. They went into the communities and helped pull teeth of those who needed a dentist.

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Q: So everybody knew it was coming?

A: Yes, but what nobody knew then was that on Jan. 1, 1994, the armed conflict would explode. Nobody was able to foresee the real magnitude of the event. We all failed in our predictions. Many of us also thought the conflict would go on for a long period, perhaps similar to the eight to 10 years of war in El Salvador or the 35 years in Guatemala, and we were surprised when it lasted 11 days--actually eight days.

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Q: Why was it so short?

A: Nobody had understood the qualitative basis of the movement and thought of it in quantitative terms. The Zapatistas never tried to gain power as the other guerrilla movements did. What they were trying to do was to shake up the sociopolitical conscience of the citizens of this country and ask them to participate in creating a transitional government until a more democratic government was in place. Their

strength did not come from military might but from the power they had to organize the people of Mexico, not only Chiapas, into a more democratic society. They had the social and political power to be heard by Mexican and international public opinion.

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Q: What was [Subcomandante] Marcos' role in the insurrection?

A: There is a myth that says the communities needed Marcos to feel, think, get organized and act [for them]. That is a myth as old as the [Spanish] conquest that, unfortunately, is still alive.

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Q: Did Marcos work with the catechists [indigenous people trained as lay ministers who became politically active] of your diocese?

A: No, he did not. Before Marcos, there was a group made up of leaders of small political parties who came to Chiapas and to the whole South Pacific region some 20 or 25 years ago, hoping to recruit people to fulfill the necessary quota of membership to keep their registration as a political party alive.

One party in particular, the PST or Socialist Party of the Workers, brought a message to the communities that, essentially, stated that the only way to enforce the law in Mexico is through political action, not through the judiciary. The PST taught them that every time the authorities delayed their petitions for lands they had paid for, claiming they were studying the issue, the people should move to occupy the land and wait for the resolution there. And so they did.

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Q: Wasn't there another group from the left that moved into Chiapas after the 1968 massacre?

A: There was another group that believed they owned the catechists' network. They would show up at the meetings of the catechists. It was the so-called mass movement that came from the north of the republic. And before them, there had been two guerrilla movements in Chiapas, but they did not find a response from the people and ended up isolated.

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Q: Did you find any substantial difference between the poverty you saw in the mid-section of Mexico and the poverty you found in the south, in Chiapas?

A: It would be vain to speak of substantial differences in the world of the poor Poverty happens when society allows some people to be poorer and poorer, while others, fewer and fewer, get richer and richer. This is happening in Mexico and everywhere else in the world--in the Third and the First World.

Clearly, there is a difference when you compare regions with large segments of indigenous peoples to regions with marginalized, poor, urban and peasant population. Besides, when I was living in Guanajuato, the state did not have the serious problems it now has.

You cannot compare poverty then to poverty now, because the situation has deteriorated enormously. It is true, however, that the new means of communication can provide faster relief for needy people in the center of the republic than in the more isolated regions of the south.

There is another factor to consider when describing the world of poverty among indigenous peoples that makes it different. Indigenous peoples have a sense of community and their communal behavior makes them more resistant to the aggressive actions of society. They help each other spontaneously and this attitude happens more often in places where the people have faith The social base gets strengthened by their faith and their harvest belongs to everyone in the community.

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Q: Is peace in Chiapas now closer than in 1994?

A: You can never measure how close or how far peace is. I sense that the situation has deteriorated. Violent acts keep on happening and those who commit violent acts go unpunished. It seems we are farther away from a real dialogue, while one of the parts keeps on trying to minimize the size and importance of the other part.

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Samuel Ruiz Mediating for Peace and Social Justice in Chiapas, Mexico

By SERGIO MUNOZ