



Translated by Puneet Dhaliwal

On January 24, Don Samuel Ruiz Garcia died aged 86. Thousands of people, especially indigenous people from the communities from the most forgotten corner of the country, as the Zapatistas defined it in 1994, have filed past the coffin of the man who was the bishop of San Cristóbal de las Casas for forty years (1959-2000).

“We want bishops on the side of the poor!” shouted the faithful in the plaza in front of the city cathedral during three days of ceremonies. Bishops on the side of the poor like Tatic Samuel (Father Samuel in the Mayan language tzotzil), a politically progressive religious figure, but who, it must be said, always followed the position of the Vatican on moral questions like abortion and homosexuality.

Ordained a bishop of the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas in 1959, during his first years of his episcopate Don Samuel saw the world through the conservative and paternalist lens of the Roman Catholic Church.

“The indigenous converted me”, the Father has stated many times, who in the course of the ‘60s and ‘70s crossed by foot, horse, jeep or by donkey, the immense territory of his Diocese, which stretches from the mountains of the Highlands of Chiapas to the communities of the Lacandon Jungle. To see with his own eyes the reality of the Chiapan indigenous peoples, the exploitation that they suffer on the part of ranchers and their misery and hunger, profoundly changed the conscience of the young bishop.

In Samuel Ruiz, *The Walker*, Carlos Fazio tells of when Don Sam arrived, after days on the road by horse, near San Pablo Chalchihuitán, where he found a desperate community: all the children had died from measles and smallpox. The parents went to the city four times to ask for medical help, which never arrived.

“Don Samuel told us that it touched him to see the farm-workers carrying the farmer on their backs. Here the victories of the Mexican Revolution had not arrived”, I was told by a member of the Centre for Human Rights Fray Bartolome de las Casas (Frayba), founded in 1989 by Ruiz himself.

It was these types of experiences that converted Don Samuel, pushing him into that current of the Catholic Church known as Liberation Theology. In 1962, Don Ruiz participated in the Second Vatican Council and, six years later, in the Medellín Conference of CELAM (Latin American Episcopal Conference). Here the new Latin American Episcopal conscience was crystallized, “the liberator path of the continent”, in the words of Samuel himself. The bishop passed to the indigenous communities the social and revolutionary message of the word and life of Jesus, seeking justification in the Bible for his faithful to become conscious of their social reality and to organize themselves. He did not affirm before his faithful, like his predecessors, that justice would arrive after death, but that it is necessary to seek it on earth.

Later, in the 80s when his faithful, once conscious, decided to form the EZLN, Don Samuel disassociated himself from the choice of armed struggle: although, in light of the experiences of Central American guerillas, the Diocese of San Cristóbal did not reject the idea of radical change in Chiapas by means of an armed insurgency, they considered it a dangerous “path towards death”.

Antonio Gutiérrez of the Civil Society Las Abejas (The Bees) from Acteal, underlined, during his intervention in the cathedral of San Cristóbal, the importance of Don Samuel’s work in Chiapan communities assuming a political consciousness: “You have done that which you needed to do. Father Samuel, here we still remain your sons, your daughters. We will continue walking, we will continue fighting for our rights, for peace and justice. Of course, if you had not taught us, if you had not lived with us we would not know how to defend ourselves. If you had not come to Chiapas, we would have continued living like slaves, blind and subordinated by bad government”.

To consider the work of Don Samuel as the cause of the Zapatista uprising, as many do, is without a doubt excessive, but one cannot deny the difficulty of this happening without his passing through the Lacandon Jungle.

According to the National Centre of Social Communication, when Manuel Camacho Solís, commissioned by the president Carlos Salinas, asked Don Samuel if he was responsible for the Zapatista rebellion, he answered thus: “What I have done is bring a light, the light of faith to the indigenous people of the Diocese and I’m going to explain it in graphic form: if in this room there were no light, we would trip over each other and hit each other through our walking in darkness. But if someone illuminated us (and took out a torch that he brought with him) we can see the obstacles and alternative paths so that we don’t trip over each other. What I have done is illuminate with the light of faith. The paths that they travel, which now have new light, are not marked by me but chosen by my followers in accordance with their own and previous experiences. I am sure that before rebelling, they tried to resolve their problems through peaceful means. But nobody heard them nor did they pay attention to them. If after trying to create consciousness for more than 30 years my catechists did not seek paths to recuperate their dignity, ancestrally offended, I would feel the most frustrated bishop in my pastoral area.”

The light that Father Samuel has brought to the indigenous communities of Chiapas has threatened the interests of many, the same who today express profound regret for his death. “I admired Samuel Ruiz – commented the President of the Republic Felipe Calderon – for having

## Mexico - Don Samuel Ruiz García: From the People, Below and to the Left

Written by Emma Volonté

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been a great Mexican, committed to the poorest people of the country, with the indigenous. A man faithful to his ideas, to his beliefs, to his values, until the final day. The country will miss him.” The governor of Chiapas Juan Sabines Guerrero, the very same who supports paramilitary groups like the Ejército de Dios (Army of God), which marched through the streets of San Cristóbal de las Casas demanding the arrest of Samuel Ruiz and of members of Frayba, has accompanied the coffin of the ex-bishop until his burial.

“The grotesque line of big names from local and national political life in front of the coffin of Don Samuel is not to honor him, but to check, with relief, that he has died.” Writes the Comandancia of the EZLN in the communiqué that has followed the death of Ruiz. “Including since much before our uprising in 1994 – continues the communiqué – the Diocese of San Cristobal suffered harassment, attacks and defamation of the Federal Army and of the successive state governments. [...] The governors of Chiapas harassed those within the Diocese of San Cristóbal who opposed their killings and the managing of the State as if it were a ranch of a supporter of Porfirio Díaz.

The Comandancia is not mistaken: the persecution against Don Samuel began much earlier than 1 January 1994, also through explicit death threats. There were many who worked towards getting rid of the liberationist bishop, supported by the means of communication that orchestrated an intense media campaign of defamation: “tool of Marcos” and “red bishop” were some of Ruiz’s nicknames. At any rate, his principal opponents were inside the Catholic Church: in the ‘90s, Samuel Ruiz García had to face harsh criticism of his work and repeated attempts on the part of the leaders of the Mexican Episcopate and the papal messenger Girolamo Prigione Pozzi to remove him from Chiapas.

In January 2004, Samuel Ruiz wrote a pastoral letter in which he said: “The question that God puts to us at the end of our existence will be: What side were we on? Whom did we defend? Who did we choose? Questions that nobody, not even the powerful, can escape at the end of their life”.

The side Don Samuel was on was that of the people, below and to the left. Like Hélder Câmara in Brazil, Juan Landázuri in Peru, Jesús Silva Enríquez in Chile and Óscar Arnulfo Romero in El Salvador. “When I die, I will be resurrected in my people”, Don Romero once said.