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Bishop Samuel Ruiz Retires, Marking the End of an Era in Chiapas Diocese

by Guest

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Piping wood flutes, pounding drums, and strumming harps, Mayan catechists from a rebel Zapatista "autonomous" village led thousands of Indians through cobbled streets. The brilliant colors of their garments and their measured step weaved a warm "huipil" (embroidered Mayan dress) of humanity through the colonial city of San Cristobal de las Casas. The joyful procession was the culmination of a year-long farewell in the 42 jungle and highland parishes of the San Cristobal Diocese to beloved and beleaguered Bishop Samuel Ruiz, one of the last beacons of liberation theology in Latin America.

Bishop Ruiz reached mandatory church retirement age when he turned 75 Nov. 3. Conspicuous at the celebration was the absence of most members of the Mexican Bishops' Conference (Conferencia del Episcopado de Mexico, CEM), representatives of the government, and the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN). Bishop Ruiz arrived in San Cristobal de las Casas in 1960 as an orthodox priest fresh from Rome. "I was like a fish that slept with its eyes open and never saw anything," said Ruiz, describing his early years in San Cristobal de las Casas, a city where racist protocols forced Indians to step into the gutter whenever a white burgher passed on the sidewalk.

Ruiz's watershed transformation came with a 1974 congress celebrating the 500th anniversary of the birth of Bartolome de las Casas, first bishop of Chiapas and the first defender of the region's Mayan peoples. Thousands of Indian delegates descended upon San Cristobal for the congress demanding land and dignity and even their own church. In the decades that followed, Bishop Ruiz created an army of 10,000 indigenous catechists and deacons who form the bedrock of the "autoctona" or native church. During his last visit to Mexico in January 1999, Pope John Paul II told reporters that he suspected the "autoctona" church of being a Marxist front.

Philosophy earned him many enemies

Ruiz's celebrated option for the poor has drawn the ire (and sometimes admiration) of the Chiapas ranching oligarchy and political class. In his four decades at the head of the diocese, Ruiz outlasted seven presidents and 13 governors. At least one governor, Gen. Absalon Castellanos Dominguez, swore to destroy him. Ruiz's familiarity with the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) has been at the root of persistent attacks by the government and conservative members of the church hierarchy. In the wake of the EZLN uprising in January 1994, opponents accused the bishop of having prior knowledge of the action and perhaps helping to organize the rebellion.

During the years, Ruiz survived at least four assassination attempts, the latest in November 1997 in the chaotic northern region of Chiapas when local paramilitaries associated with the governing

Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) pumped ten bullets into a van they thought carried Ruiz and his coadjutor, Bishop Raul Vera. The diocese's combative Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolome de las Casas has reported 251 acts of violence against Catholic Church personnel and property between 1994 and 1997.

Some priests in the San Cristobal Diocese have landed in jail, while several foreign clergy have been expelled. In 1993, the Vatican came within a breath of removing Bishop Ruiz, but the Zapatistas rose up Jan. 1, 1994. The bishop, who shares a constituency with the rebels but reproves their use of violence, became key to initiating negotiations. His ultimately foiled mediation efforts resulted in a Nobel Peace Prize nomination.

An anti-Zapatista sweep in February 1995 reportedly included orders for the bishop's detention, but those orders were later suppressed. Bishop Ruiz dissolved his mediating body, the Comision Nacional de Intermediacion (CONAI), in June 1998 after President Ernesto Zedillo repeatedly attacked him in speeches that made thinly-veiled reference to "hypocritical pastors who preach the theology of violence" (see SourceMex, 1998-06-17).

Stepping down as spiritual head of the diocese, Ruiz is the last Mexican bishop appointed by the progressive Pope John XXIII, and his departure nearly extinguishes the light of liberation theology in Mexico. The only other remaining liberationist in the CEM, Arturo Lona, is 74 and saddled with a conservative coadjutor who is poised to reverse Lona's longstanding option for the poor in the Tehuantepec Diocese in Oaxaca state. Liberation theology, which promoted "the church of the poor," flourished in Mexico in the 1960s and 1970s.

Bishop Ruiz participated directly or indirectly in key events that helped promote liberation theology in Mexico, including Vatican Council II, and the summits of Latin American bishops in Medellin, Colombia, in 1968 and in Puebla, Mexico, in 1979. However, the seminary that oriented a generation of priests to the option for the poor has been stifled by Cardinal Norberto Rivera of Mexico City. And many bishops of the generation that developed liberation theology, including Sergio Mendez Arceo, Bernabe Carrasco, Samuel Ruiz, and Arturo Lona, have either died, retired, or are about to retire.

Raul Vera unlikely to gain appointment

Coadjutor Raul Vera shares Samuel Ruiz's convictions but is a generation removed from the bonanza days of liberation theology. Even though Vera is 20 years younger than Ruiz, he is unlikely to be appointed to head the San Cristobal Diocese because of opposition from influential cardinals Rivera and Juan Sandoval Iniguez and four other bishops. One of these bishops, Onesimo Zepeda, has been one of the most vocal supporters of the PRI in the CEM.

Church leaders are not the only authorities out to thwart Raul Vera's ascension. Vera angered the Zedillo administration when he made a speech in Spain accusing the Mexican government of organizing paramilitary units in Chiapas soon after one such group massacred 46 church and EZLN supporters at Acteal in the highlands above San Cristobal (see SourceMex, 1998-01-07).

In July of this year, Foreign Relations Secretary Rosario Green spent three hours at the Vatican, where she is reported to have lobbied against Vera's succession. The government's Chiapas peace coordinator Emilio Rabasa has also reportedly visited Rome to complain about the bias of the San Cristobal Diocese toward the EZLN. Vera's appointment to the San Cristobal Diocese in 1995 was initially viewed with suspicion. "We thought we had received a bishop who favored the rich, but we got a bishop on the side of the poor," said Heriberto Cruz, a priest in the tough northern Chiapas state town of Tila.

Since his arrival in the diocese, Vera has spent considerable time in Indian villages, including several communities in northern Chiapas that have been victimized by PRI-affiliated paramilitaries. "Going into the villages helped me to see what my work was here," Vera said in a recent interview with the weekly news magazine Proceso. "The Pope has sent me to work in a persecuted church." But when asked if the Vatican will allow him to become bishop of San Cristobal de las Casas, Vera only shrugs and displays the letter of appointment as coadjutor he received from John Paul II four years ago. "I have been sent here to keep the door open," he said.

Even if the government-hierarchy plot to exorcise Vera from San Cristobal succeeds, liberation theology may very well survive here. In 1995, soon after Vera was named, Ruiz and his new coadjutor initiated only the third synod in the long history of the diocese, to chart the course of the San Cristobal church into the next century. "A new bishop will have a difficult time undoing the synod," said Miguel Alvarez, Ruiz's private secretary. "Anyone they bring in here to change the direction of this diocese is going to have to fire hundreds of priests and nuns, 300 deacons, and 10,000 Indian catechists plus close down our human rights center."

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