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Bishop Samuel Ruiz Remembered for His Defense of Indigenous Communities, His Far-reaching Peace Mediation in Chiapas

by Carlos Navarro

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The death of Bishop Samuel Ruiz García marked the symbolic end of an era in Mexico. The 86-year-old Ruiz, who died at a hospital in Mexico City on Jan. 24, will be remembered as a champion of the rights of indigenous peoples in Chiapas and other impoverished states in Mexico. He was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize three times because of his role as a mediator in the peace talks between the government and the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN). The guerilla group led an uprising against the government on Jan. 1, 1994 ([SourceMex, Jan. 5, 1994](#)) and ([Jan. 12, 1994](#)).

Ruiz was an outspoken advocate of the Roman Catholic Church's principles of liberation theology and the preferential option for the poor. In 1989, he created the Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolomé de las Casas (Frayba) in the community of San Cristóbal de las Casas to consolidate advocacy efforts for the indigenous communities in Chiapas.

The Zapatista uprising, along with Ruiz's advocacy, led dozens of civil organizations to become involved in the fight for human rights in Chiapas, Oaxaca, Guerrero, and other states with high rates of poverty, especially among indigenous communities. Among these were the Centro de Derechos Humanos Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez (PRODH), which, in the aftermath of Ruiz's death, honored the bishop for his role in bringing attention to protecting human rights and promoting the needs of the poor in Mexico. "Don Samuel inspires us and encourages us to continue the fight for human rights," said PRODH director Luis Arriaga.

"We lose an individual who raised our national conscience to pay attention to the historic claim of the marginalized," said Edgar Cortez, a former PRODH director who now heads the Instituto Mexicano de Derechos Humanos y Democracia (INSYDE).

Ruiz locked horns with church hierarchy

The bishop, who became known among the various indigenous communities as "tatic" (or father), locked horns with both the political establishment and the Catholic Church hierarchy in Mexico and at the Vatican ([SourceMex, April 27, 2005](#)).

"For many years Samuel had shared the official teachings of the Catholic Church and the government that the best way to help Indians is to make them less Indian," said syndicated columnist Miguel Ángel Granados Chapa. "But Don Samuel quickly learned the limits of that cruel paradox. He quickly became a promoter of the rights of indigenous peoples, whether or not they were affiliated with Catholicism, and that caused him to lose favor with the church authorities."

In the aftermath of the Zapatista uprising, Ruiz's role in the insurrection was questioned. "Several conservative bishops have called for investigations by both civil authorities and the Vatican into Bishop Ruiz's role in the uprising," wrote journalist John Ross, who covered Chiapas for SourceMex

(SourceMex, Feb. 15, 1995). "In addition, the Attorney General's Office (PGR) released testimony taken from an alleged captured Zapatista commander that Bishop Ruiz had been forewarned of the impending rebellion months before the Zapatistas' surprise Jan. 1, 1994 debut."

One conflict with church authorities was evident in 1999, when Bishop Ruiz reached the mandatory retirement age of 75. He had lobbied for auxiliary Bishop Raúl Vera, who shared his values and his passion for helping the local indigenous communities, to succeed him. Instead, church authorities reassigned Vera to the Diocese of Saltillo in Coahuila state and named Tapachula Bishop Felipe Arizmendi Esquivel to head San Cristóbal de las Casas (SourceMex, Jan. 19, 2000).

"The resignation of Bishop Samuel Ruiz upon reaching the age of 75 in November 1999 was well-received not only by the Mexican federal government but also by some bishops of the so-called 'Club of Rome' who were anxiously awaiting his departure," said the Mexico City daily newspaper .

Despite his conflicts with the Catholic hierarchy, Ruiz was a beloved figure among the faithful in Chiapas. "In his tireless fight to defend human rights, he inspired several civil organizations and social movements in the pursuit of justice," Frayba said in a statement shortly after his death.

As evidence of Bishop Ruiz's popularity among the Chiapas faithful, mourners streamed continuously into the cathedral in San Cristóbal de las Casas to pay their last respects to the bishop, whose remains were placed in a crypt in the church.

"Many people traveled at least 10 hours from all corners of Chiapas to attend the burial of ," said the official news agency Notimex.

After his death, the Mexican Catholic bishops conference (Conferencia del Episcopado Mexicano, CEM) and the Vatican both recognized Ruiz's positive role in Mexico. The CEM described him as a "tireless advocate for peace and a clear voice for justice." The Vatican was just as effusive in its praise of Ruiz. "He will be remembered as one of the most influential figures in the history of Mexico because of his condemnation of violations of the rights indigenous peoples, his fight against discrimination, and his role in achieving peace between the government and the [EZLN]," said the Vatican Web site.

The Consejo de Analistas Católicos de México (CACM), a secular Catholic organization in Mexico, lauded Bishop Ruiz's positive stance despite confronting very difficult situations. "Far from dwelling in pessimism, the bishop spoke of a genuine hope for all men and women who were awaiting the arrival of the day after the darkness that precedes the dawn," said CACM secretary Guillermo Gazanini Espinoza. "Don Samuel urged us incessantly to promote justice so we could consolidate a peace that could not be altered."

Dialogue was at center of peace efforts

Ruiz is remembered for his efforts to achieve peace in Chiapas just as much as his passionate advocacy for indigenous communities. He was able to bridge the wide ideological gap between the EZLN and the conservative government of President Ernesto Zedillo. "The name of Samuel Ruiz should be etched in any accounts of contemporary history," wrote columnist Yurira Sierra in the Mexico City daily newspaper .

Ruiz formed the Comisión Nacional de Intermediación (CONAI) to help in the mediation process between the government and the EZLN and was a key figure in the signing of the San Andrés

accords, which provided limited rights for indigenous communities. The agreements were named after San Andrés Larráinzar, where the negotiations took place ([SourceMex, May 17, 2005](#)) ID).

Ruiz's efforts won him numerous accolades, including the Pacem in Terris (Peace on Earth) award and the Simón Bolívar International Prize awarded by the UN Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). He was also nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1994, 1995, and 1996.

Despite his strong role as an intermediary, Ruiz had a tense relationship with President Zedillo, who was intent on crushing the Zapatistas ([SourceMex, Feb. 15, 1995](#)).

The Zedillo government failed to implement the agreements ([SourceMex, May 13, 1998](#)) and ([May 24, 2000](#)), which complicated the government's relationship with Ruiz. Furthermore, the Zedillo government made every effort to discredit CONAI while favoring the Comisión de Concordia y Pacificación (COCOPA), a mediation commission comprising primarily representatives of the executive branch and the Congress ([SourceMex, April 1, 1998](#)).

Unable to work with the Zedillo administration, Ruiz abandoned his mediation efforts on behalf of the federal government. At a June 7 mass, the bishop said CONAI could no longer function because the government had "abandoned the path of dialogue ([SourceMex, June 17, 1998](#))."

But Ruiz faced political opposition closer to home. Many powerful local politicians and landowners associated with the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) had also taken matters into their own hands in efforts to retain control in Chiapas. They employed paramilitary groups to attack communities sympathetic to the EZLN. Paramilitary groups were responsible for the massacre of 45 Tzotzil Indians in the community of Acteal in December 1997 ([SourceMex, Jan. 14, 1998](#)) and ([Jan 28, 1998](#)).

In November 1997, a PRI-affiliated paramilitary group known as Desarrollo, Paz y Justicia fired on a caravan that included Bishops Ruiz and Vera. The two prelates were unharmed but three Chol Indians who were accompanying the bishops were injured in the attack ([SourceMex, Nov. 12, 1997](#)).

While Mexico wrestles with a different kind of violent conflict—a war among drug traffickers—politicians of all stripes took the time to laud Bishop Ruiz in the aftermath of his death. "Using his position as a bishop, Samuel Ruiz strove to construct a country that was more just and egalitarian, with dignity and without discrimination, in which indigenous communities had a voice, rights, and liberties that are respected by all," President Felipe Calderón said in a communiqué.

"Without a doubt, this is one of the greatest losses for our country, from a political and social standpoint," said Deputy Alejandro Encinas, the floor leader for the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD). "He will be irreplaceable, especially because he was always on the side of the poor and the destitute, especially indigenous people."

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