

Forming a Church with his Indigenous People: The work of Bishop Samuel Ruiz Garcia

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On 24 January 2011, Mexican bishop and Nobel Peace Prize nominee, Bishop Samuel Ruiz Garcia died at the age of 86. His work with and for the indigenous people of his diocese in the south of Mexico ensured that he became a well-known and much-respected figure in Latin America. Gerald MacCarthy describes the life of a man whose episcopacy spanned four decades of enormous change in Mexico, both within and outside of the Church.

‘But I haven’t evangelised them, they have evangelised me!’ So Bishop Samuel Ruiz Garcia is supposed to have replied to a compliment about his work in his diocese of San Cristobal de Las Casas in Mexico. I have taken it from one of the multitude of moving and sensitive tributes to him on the occasion of his death at 86 years old on 24 January 2011, because it is so typical of his directness and humility. But this quiet, chubby, unassuming little man gave everything that he had of his mind and strength to the people of his diocese over the forty years that he was their bishop, to change the miseries that they had suffered over the five hundred years since the Spanish Conquest, and in many respects they continue to suffer today. To them he was *Tatic* – ‘father’. There is no-one in the state of Chiapas, love or hate Don Samuel as they may (and there are plenty of both), who doesn’t know who *Tatic* is.

Mexico descends south from the United States to Guatemala, where its tail curves east towards the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean. On its Pacific back and just at the curve lies the southernmost state of Chiapas, which has two ranges of the Sierra Madre mountains running through it, north to south: one along the Pacific coast and the other, *Los Altos*, ‘The High-



Bishop Samuel Ruiz Garcia

lands’, further inland. It is here that the Spaniards made an early settlement in the late 1520s soon after the conquest of Mexico, at Ciudad Real, which is now San Cristobal de Las Casas, the ‘Las Casas’ having been added in honour of the Dominican priest, Bartolomé de Las Casas, the ‘Defender of the Indians,’ who became first bishop of Chiapas. Even before Bartolomé arrived, while he was still in what is now Santo Domingo, he was appalled at the treatment of the native

population: ‘Are they not human? Do they not have rational souls? Should you not love them as you love yourselves?’, and subsequently he made it his life’s work to try to protect them. He found this task impossible in Chiapas because the settlers had come over from Spain at their own expense and were not going to allow Las Casas or anyone else to interfere with the profitability of ‘their’ natives. So he left and made repeatedly the hazardous journey to and from Spain to persuade all three kings of his time to abolish slavery and the system of *Encomienda*, a type of serfdom where groups of natives were placed under the protection of settlers in their area. But he failed completely, despite goodwill at home, because the distances were too great for firm control to be established and the economic interests opposing his plans too powerful.

Bishop Samuel Ruiz said clearly and often when he was appointed to the diocese in 1959 that he found little or nothing had changed in the plight of the indigenous people since the time of Las Casas, that is in nearly five hundred years. His own life before becoming bishop had started in poverty: he was the eldest of 5 children, and his parents struggled to survive on a shared smallholding and a little grocery shop in Irapuato, in the central Mexican state of Guanajuato. His schooling was irregular at first, in part because of the stringent laws against Catholics and their schools in the years of persecution of the Mexican Church in the 1930s after the Mexican revolution. At the age of 13, however, things changed when he joined the diocesan minor seminary, even though it was not strictly legal at the time and had no fixed abode. He subsequently had a brilliant early career in the Church, going from the seminary in Mexico to ordination, postgraduate studies and a doctorate in biblical studies in Rome after the Second World War. On his return to Mexico he became firstly a teacher, then rector of the diocesan seminary in León and subsequently a canon of León Cathedral, before being made Bishop of San Cristobal at the early age of 35.

When Ruiz first arrived in Chiapas, although the state itself seemed stuck in its past, the Church in Latin America had begun a process of change which has continued to move forward in the 50 years since, although the new bishop was not at first fully aware of the shape this was taking. The Council of Latin American Bishops (CELAM) had met for the first time in Rio de Janeiro in 1955 and the Catholic Church on the sub-continent was starting to bring together its experiences. Ruiz explained that he initially followed his predecessor in encouraging the work of catechists, who by their service and the example of their own lives inspired the rest of the community. However, in hindsight he criticised this approach for its orientation towards Western attitudes and organisation from the top down rather than from among the people themselves using their own cultural values. This comment, like many others I will be pointing to, comes from what is really his own testament to his work, the pastoral letter he wrote to his diocese on the occasion of the visit of Pope John Paul II to the south of Mexico in August 1993, *En Esta Hora de Gracia* ('In This Hour of Grace').

From this and other sources one can sketch what Don Samuel considered to be his own growth in understanding, his 'conversion' as he himself called it. He was present at the Second Vatican Council and was particularly impressed by the part played by the bishops from Africa in putting together the decree, *Ad Gentes* about the Church's missionary activity. They were lobbying strongly for a new approach to Christian anthropology, he said on a radio programme in his retirement, which would help them more with their missionary work and value the dignity of different cultures. He referred often to the influence that *Ad Gentes* had on him at a time when he says he himself was still thinking of ways to teach his people to substitute Spanish for their own indigenous languages in order to evangelise them and help them economically. He began to see more clearly that the Spanish missionaries had not come just to evangelise but also to impose their culture. And now here was *Ad Gentes*, advising Christians to familiarise themselves with their own national and religious traditions and seek out the seeds of The Word that lay latent within these.

The 'conversion' did not stop there. In 1968, CELAM held its second conference, this time in Medellín, Colombia, to look at ways of making Vatican II more readily applicable to the Latin American context. There was a dramatic shift in focus towards the widespread misery on the sub-continent which was diagnosed as coming from unjust social and economic structures which the poor were powerless to change. This attention to what was described famously as 'institutionalised violence', made a profound impression. So the catechists in Don Samuel's diocese became the spokespeople of their communities, which were considering all aspects – social, political, economic and cultural – of their situation in order to work out where the Spirit of God was leading them.

The next point of departure on Don Samuel's road was the Congress of the Indigenous that he held in San Cristobal in 1974. The communities had elected speakers whom they felt led straight lives and could represent them. The catechists of the diocese now were not just there to help with traditional catechetics, with services and singing, but were genuine representatives of their communities in all the matters most important to them. There followed three days of lament for all the abuses that the indigenous peoples

had suffered, with details, but also concrete suggestions about what to do in each case. By this time, Don Samuel could speak two of the four languages of the indigenous present and had a working knowledge of the others. He said that he learned enough at the meeting to see the inadequacy of his diocesan pastoral plan, which he scrapped there and then and developed another based on what he had heard.

The third conference of CELAM at Puebla in Mexico in 1979 reinforced Don Samuel's thinking through its advice to the Church to pursue a path of preferential option for the poor, which of course would include the 75 per cent of the people of the diocese of San Cristobal who were indigenous as well as many of those who were not. He quoted the Book of Exodus as a starting point in trying to help his people follow this directive: 'I have seen the miserable state of my people in Egypt. I have heard their appeal to be free of their slave drivers. Yes, I am well aware of their sufferings.' He also had something to say to the rest of us, interpreting St Matthew: 'Men are blessed when, moved by the Spirit of God, they show solidarity with the poor.'

But it was the fourth conference of CELAM, at Santo Domingo in 1992 that in many ways gave Don Samuel most satisfaction. You only need to look for a moment at some of the final document's reflections on the indigenous peoples to see why. 'The action of God, through his Spirit, is present within all cultures'. 'One task of evangelization, conducted in terms of the culture, will always be the salvation and comprehensive liberation of a particular people or human group'. Don Samuel's growing belief and commitment of the previous 30 years now had the unequivocal backing of the Church. The Church had answered the question, at least in theory, once posed to him by one of his people: 'If the Church does not make itself Tzeltal with the Tzeltal people, or Ch'ol with the Ch'ol people or Tojolobal with the Tojolobales, how can it call itself Catholic?'

Obviously all this sustained work to make his people aware of the sources of their problems and then encouraging them to discover and apply solutions, was sooner or later going to lead to conflict with those causing the problem: the large landowners and ranch owners and their political backers in the state of Chiapas as well as in the federal government. And

there could not be a clearer example than Chiapas of the unjust society referred to in Church documents from Medellín in 1968. Since the departure of the Spaniards after 300 years, Mexico has become independent and has had a revolution; but little or nothing has changed in Chiapas. Upon the achievement of independence in 1821, the Mexicans of Spanish descent, the Criollos, simply took over where the Spaniards had left off. After the revolution early last century, although it was in part precisely to correct the land loss grievances like those the indigenous communities in Chiapas were suffering from, traditional power prevailed in Chiapas and has prevailed since. In the aftermath of the revolution, a Mexican president unusually sensitive to their needs, Lázaro Cárdenas enacted laws establishing collective land ownership in order to help, but again to no avail; the landowners found ways around them.

When the frustration of the people finally broke out into the rebellion of the EZLN (*Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*) on the first day of 1994, the first person to be blamed was Don Samuel. Supposedly, it was his scheming, his orchestration of the theology of violence etc., that had driven the indigenous to join the rebel army and invade several towns. But this phase of blame passed when it became clear that he was the only mediator that the rebels would accept to deal with the government, and the parties met under his mediation in the cathedral in San Cristobal. A truce was agreed and eventually an agreement on greater autonomy for the indigenous was made between the representatives of the government and the EZLN; however, it has not yet been formally promulgated, so their subjugation continues.

What was more surprising was the contretemps that Bishop Ruiz had with the Church. At a diplomatic reception at the Apostolic Nunciature in the autumn of 1993, the rumour was floated that Bishop Ruiz had been removed from his post in San Cristobal. Don Samuel was out of the country at the time but when he saw the nuncio he was shown a letter from Cardinal Bernardin Gantin, Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of Bishops, in which he was accused of 'excluding' people from his pastoral work and of using an interpretation of the gospel which was not that of the gospel of Christ. He was asked to resign and replied that if asked to by the pope, of course he would do so. This did not happen and his later

prestigious role as mediator further protected him. But subsequently he was obliged to take a coadjutor bishop imposed on him, a normal tactic to keep recalcitrant bishops under firmer control. The coadjutor was the Dominican Raúl Vera OP, regarded by Church authorities as a suitably conservative restraint on Don Samuel. However, he was completely converted to Bishop Ruiz's mission to such an extent that when the time came for the bishop to retire and for Vera to take over, the Vatican decided that he was not the right man and he was summoned to Rome to be told so by Pope John Paul II himself. He has since been appointed to a diocese in the north of the country, where among other works he and his pastoral agents have to try to be of some help to those trying to make the hazardous journey into the United States looking for the work they cannot find in Mexico.

None of Don Samuel's pastoral work has borne as yet the fruit he hoped for. In his final years, he trained and added hundreds of permanent deacons to his thousands of trained catechists, all of them indigenous, following the advice of Santo Domingo but

worrying Church authorities. His successor, Bishop Felipe Arizmendi has not followed his example in this regard and admits that he has been given contradictory advice on how to proceed: he is told by some to commit completely to the ideals of Bishop Ruiz and by others to distance himself from them. Don Samuel has left important and tangible example of his work, the Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas Human Rights Centre (www.frayba.org.mx) that he set up in 1989, independent from the diocese, and happily Bishop Raúl Vera OP has just succeeded him as director. The site, which is available in many languages including English, shows just how terribly his people in Chiapas still routinely suffer. We can only hope that Don Samuel's commitment to the people of his diocese lives on through his prophetic legacy and those who continue his work.

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