

Coffee beans are seen in an illustration photo. (Unsplash/Jocelyn Morales)

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It's a three-hour trek from San Cristobal de Las Casas up the paved road to San Joaquin.

Winding up the side of the mountain, between 1,500 and 2,500 meters high, one looks out over long tree-lined valleys where corn, beans and coffee grow.

In San Joaquin, which is a part of the municipality of Pantelho, people speak the indigenous language Tzeltal. Only those few who have been to school can speak Spanish.

Manuel Guzman Perez lives here with his wife and three children.

The 30-year-old farmer cultivates coffee on the six hectares that were allocated by the community to his parents and their seven children.

Some have gone to work in San Cristobal. And the youngest one left for the United States two years ago.

'The action to change things had to come from us, the people'

"He got a three-month visa to work in the fields at harvest time, and then he stayed there. Now he works in a restaurant in Michigan," says Manuel as he sips a weak, sweet coffee in the smoky darkness of the log cabin that serves as the kitchen and common dining room of his father's house.

Dressed in hooded jackets, we crowd around the fire on small stools.

Manuel's father, Pedro, remembers the visits of "Tatik Samuel"; that is, Dom Samuel Ruiz Garcia, who was the bishop of Chiapas for 41 years.

He would arrive on horseback or on foot and visit the inhabitants of the municipality's five zones.

"Tatik Samuel helped the poorest and encouraged dialogue," Pedro recalls.

"He would tell us that he was only accompanying us. He made us understand that the action to change things had to come from us, the people," he continues.

Pedro is a deacon, which means that he baptizes, blesses graves when people die and distributes the Eucharist, which he gets from the priest in Pantelho.

He also celebrates weddings.

"For mine, he asked the deacon of another zone to do it," says Manuel with a smile.

The father a deacon, the son a catechist

Tatik Samuel set up this indigenous church.

"Being a deacon is something for a couple," Pedro adds.

"My wife and I are accompanied in our charge by the principal, a wise man of the community, chosen from among the elders," he says.

The majority of seminarians in Chiapas today are indigenous.

"This is positive. But be careful! If they take the position of 'I am the priest', they can be the worst enemy of the people," warns Pedro.

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Manuel took up his father's commitment by training to be a catechist.

"What unites us is the Gospel. But money is changing people's minds. Many young people no longer come to celebrations," he notes.

"There are many people who want to use God and ask God for something. For me, I think it's far better to be a servant of this God," Manuel says.

He provides a two-hour formation to children and adults every Sunday after Mass. And each year he attends a week-long training course.

He has the most formal education of all the members of his family. He would have gone to high school in San Cristobal. But this required money that his father did not have.

A cooperative that produces fair-trade coffee

The community of San Joaquin is made up of 43 families. Together they manage to fill two containers of Arabica coffee beans each year.

The land is owned by all the families, but each one cultivates the piece of land that has been assigned to them.

With the legal help of DESMI — one of the organizations set up by Tatik Samuel, a partner of French Catholic development agency CCFD-Terre Solidaire — the community of San Joaquin decided to organize itself as a fair-trade coffee production cooperative.

"In order to find our market, we have improved the quality of our beans and requested phytosanitary certification that will allow them to be exported," says Manuel.

The farmer takes us across the mountain on a steep and slippery path that leads to his coffee trees.

He knows each of his trees and enjoys this life without the Internet, but with the possibility of having a telephone connection.

Manuel is working with his community to build a *buen vivir* (good life), as advocated by the Zapatista movement that shook the mountains of Chiapas over two decades ago.

"We are part of the National Indigenous Congress," he points out.

"But only one family in the community continues to follow the struggle of the Zapatista organization. The others, including mine, are in the resistance, but not in the fight."

Editor's note: *This article originally appeared on La Croix International.*