

Finding the 'seeds of the word' with Bishop Ruiz

Gary MacEoin | Feb. 18, 2000



Mourners stand near the coffin of Bishop Samuel Ruiz Garcia Jan. 25 at the cathedral in San Cristobal de Las Casas, Mexico. (CNS photo/Jorge Luis Plata, Reuters)

To remember the life of Bishop Samuel Ruiz García, who passed away Monday at 86, we present another special feature from the *NCR* archives.

Yesterday we posted an article written by the late *NCR* writer Gary MacEoin on Ruiz. Today we present an interview between the two. Originally published in the Feb 18, 2000 issue of *NCR*, the Q&A touches upon an extraordinary amount of Ruiz's thoughts on his ministry.

Below you'll find an edited version of MacEoin's description of the interview, followed by the Q&A in full.

For more information on Ruiz's life, see: yesterday's article from the archives, [Bishop Ruiz sought 'priesthood of the culture'](#) [1], and the CNS obituary [Bishop Ruiz, champion of indigenous, dies](#) [2].

When Bishop Samuel Ruiz Garcia came to Chiapas learned the languages. He spun off more than half the state into two new dioceses, keeping for himself the most deprived area with 1.5 million inhabitants, most of them indigenous people who speak several Mayan languages. These people, hitherto despised, responded enthusiastically to his invitation to tell him what they expected of the church.

A thousand communities representing 400,000 people prepared the agenda for a Congress of the Indigenous held in 1974. The objective, as defined by Ruiz, was to let the people speak. In three days of discussion in four Mayan languages, with simultaneous translation organized by themselves, 1,250 delegates told the church what they expected from it: a catechesis that would encourage the recovery of and respect for the people's historical memory, its ministries, symbols and values, and specifically the development of an indigenous clergy.

The Congress proclaimed the right of the indigenous to land, education and health, the right to organize their own cooperatives, to secure adequate transport from farm to market and to process and commercialize their

products. They were the same demands the Zapatista rebels would formulate 20 years later.

Ruiz's liberation theology and preferential option for the poor were shaking the foundations of an unjust society and a colonial church. The power brokers of Chiapas, who saw the church as protector of their privileged status, were outraged. It was not long until a papal nuncio, Bishop Girolamo Prigione, teamed up with government officials to get rid of Ruiz. The Zapatista rebellion in 1994 saved Ruiz when he became the only person the Zapatistas would accept as negotiator. Eventually, Ruiz was given a coadjutor with right of succession, Bishop Raúl Vera López. Far from curbing Ruiz, however, Vera López within a year had become a solid supporter of Ruiz's views. So Vera López apparently had to be sacrificed. He was removed from Chiapas to a diocese to the north.

Few in Mexico accept the official Vatican explanation that Vera López was removed "for purely ecclesiastical reasons." Carlos Fazio, author of a biography of Ruiz, wrote in the Mexico City daily *La Jornada* that the motives were "political and ideological," an authoritarian decision of Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Angelo Sodano who rejected the judgment of Papal Nuncio Justo Mullor.

How Ruiz has implemented his discovery that the "seeds of the word" were already present in the mountains of the Mayan people before the Europeans arrived is the subject of the following interview given to Gary MacEoin, Ruiz biographer and Latin America expert, in November 1999. The interview was minimally edited for space considerations.

***MacEoin:* The center of gravity of the church has moved from the so-called Western World (European civilization) to the so-called Third World, the world of poverty, in which European dress appears alien, even hostile in the light of historical experience. In this context I'd like to ask three questions. To what extent have you been able to inculturate the church in the Mayan culture? How much further do you think it is possible to go within our present canonical structures? How much further do you think it is desirable to go, assuming the appropriate canonical changes?**

Ruiz: Let me start with a very general reflection. The church has an official position on this issue, so that we don't have to seek justifications or undertake investigations to find the answer. The gospel must be incarnated in every culture. The African bishops -- and also the Canadian bishops -- raised this issue at the Second Vatican Council. The Latin American bishops touched on it at Medellín, [Colombia, 1968], went deeper into it at Puebla, [Mexico, 1979] and still deeper at Santo Domingo, [Dominican Republic, 1992], where there is an official mention. The bishops of Africa, Asia, Canada and the United States have also raised it on various occasions. Pope John Paul has also referred to it more than once -- at Oaxaca, [Mexico], Yucatan and Mexico City -- as something already in progress. The Department of Missions of CELAM [the Federation of Latin American Bishops' Conferences], has held reunions, as have other church entities, seeking to determine specific approaches. In this way, reflection and practice are coming closer together. We must conclude, accordingly, that an evangelical content exists that is not identified with any given culture. The gospel was not born in the West. It was born in the East, and with a specific dress.

For the primitive church the challenge of evangelization was to decide whether Romans or pagans who became Christians had to undergo the circumcision mandated by the Mosaic Law. Peter and Paul were agreed that, since the Mosaic Law had ended, this was not necessary. Peter, however, out of deference for converts from Judaism, did not eat pork, washed his hands and observed all the other ceremonies laid down by the Mosaic Law when he ate with [Jews]. But when he ate with pagans from the Roman Empire who had become Christians, he ignored the prescriptions of the Mosaic Law. So Paul told him that this inconsistent conduct could easily give scandal and needed to be clarified.

Before long the conflicting practices created pressures that required the first ecumenical council, the Council of Jerusalem, to provide a solution. The problem we are now dealing with is accordingly not a new one but rather

an old problem that recurs. What happened then was that the Christianity that started in the East passed to the West and became incarnated in Western culture. Because of the form it assumed during a long period of insertion, incubation and presentation in the Roman Empire, it ended up by producing what was called the Western Christian culture.

When Christianity later sent missionaries to China or other parts of the world, they brought with them not only the gospel but the Western way of life. They offered the "Christian culture" as the only dress in which Christianity could be clothed.

Even church architecture.

Of course. It was natural. When missionaries came to this continent, they took it for granted that they had to present Christianity through the forms of Western culture. This meant that no opportunity for interreligious dialogue arose 500 years ago. Christianity did not dialogue with the pre-Columbian religions. Its theology rejected the possibility that there was anything good in them.

All the works of the devil.

Exactly. Shadows of error and darkness of death was how the missionaries described them, using the words of a psalm. Now, however, with the Vatican Council we have a new situation and are questioning the attitudes of the past. Both here and on other continents there is the same concern to distinguish the gospel from its cultural dress. Of course, the cultural dress is not irrelevant for the individual, because we all seek and express our personality through our culture. But because cultures are different in different parts of the world, the gospel message must be incarnated in each.

However -- and this is the third point as regards your first question -- we have to recognize with the council that there is not a presence of Jesus Christ until an evangelization occurs. What all world cultures have is a revealing presence of God, what the Greek and Latin Fathers called the seeds of the word -- *semina verbi* -- hidden in those cultures. In consequence, evangelization (and inculturation) is not -- forgive the expression -- an attempt to determine how many goals from your culture you can score in the indigenous culture, how much of Western culture the indigenous culture can tolerate. The objective is rather to recognize the presence of a salvific process, an Old Testament like that of the Jewish people, an Old Testament of this cultural group, through which God has revealed himself. Recognition of this presence of God means that this is a salvific process that continues forward to the explicit encounter with Jesus Christ announced and testified to by the church.

A cardinal prefect of the Congregation of the Evangelization of Peoples put it this way: "The theological reflection, the thinking of the people of a given culture, is not simply a trampoline on which Christianity can bounce. It is part of the content of the gospel mission." In other words, we must start from the position that a salvific line of progression -- *una trayectoria salvifica* -- exists. As Paul says in the Acts of the Apostles, God has allowed himself to be revealed salvifically to the different peoples until the time comes when all these peoples are called to form a people of peoples, which is the new people of God.

The theory is accordingly clear. Practice depends on a variety of circumstances, not just on the disciplinary aspect. To take the case of the Mayan people of Chiapas, this is a people that continue to exist as such but has lost many elements pertinent to its self-identification. So we are now engaged in a process that may appear regressive, namely, a search for the foundations of its identity, because when a people is conquered, it loses its own history and is left with only that of its conqueror. This historic situation has also caused it to lose many characteristic notes of its culture. I recall a recent tragic experience. Some friends were talking to an indigenous young woman about Jesus Christ. "I don't want to hear another word about Jesus Christ," she screamed, pressing her hands hard against her ears. "What I want is to be allowed to find out who I am." So that she could then determine for herself her path to the future.

What this means is that the indigenous peoples did not have time to engage from within their cultural identity in a dialogue with a religion from outside. They lost not their identity, but the right to have an identity. They had to accommodate. In order to be Christians they had to live schizophrenically, with a deeply hidden ethnic identification while identifying in public with a Western culture. That moment of schizophrenia is disappearing on the continent. The indigenous peoples are emerging with an awareness of their identity.

What is going to happen now ... is that if the Christian churches or Christianity do not quickly recognize this process of revelation in the cultures and present a Christ in whom the seeds of the word become explicit, the indigenous are not going to find an identity in Christianity but will instead seek their identity in pre-Colombian religions. And their unity will not flow from their Christian identity but from a cultural identity, even if understood very differently. And this is what is uniting the indigenous peoples.

I think that this kind of evolution is occurring throughout the continent. People are identifying themselves as indigenous, not as Christians or non-Christians. It follows that if Christianity succeeds in taking this step of recognition of the salvific process and honors the encounter with an announcement of a Christ already present in some way in every culture, then we will have taken a step forward in what we hope for the continent. The church will have been enriched by the cultural experience of all these peoples. Having recognized the presence of God in these cultures, it will begin to make this presence of God a critical element of its own culture and move forward toward the elimination of present anti-values so that it can live more fully its own cultural identity.

We are still dealing with a preliminary aspect of your first question. Let us move on to the final part, which asks, How far has this intra-ecclesial process already gone? I think it is advancing in fundamental ways. First of all, the indigenous peoples understand that they have to recover their cultural identity, or to live it if they have already recovered it. They also understand that this is not a favor or a concession, but simply their natural right to be recognized as belonging to a culture that is distinct from the Western culture, a culture in which they have to live their own faith.

Many different groups are working in this direction. Some are Christians evangelized a long time ago who have forgotten the forms in which they expressed their beliefs. They are trying to recover their identity by means of their ways of thinking and the language they still retain, to see how they can live their Christian values with the elements of their culture that they still retain. They are changing rapidly as they recover their religious books, et cetera. There is here the risk of taking a step backward. The majority, however, understand that they have to look at their past and their identity, but as now read from their new historic situation. That is to say, from Christianity, so that they do not seek an identity that remains a hostage of the past without recognizing the present in which they are living.

There are other religious groups that have not fully advanced to Christianity, surviving as hidden individuals who continued to live their pre-Colombian religious beliefs. These are on the path of the so-called Indian theology, which reflects not Christian theology but that of their own religion. They are preparing for the interreligious dialog that did not take place 500 years ago.

Expressed in Christian concepts?

That depends. Some were never evangelized, never had contact with the settlements, for example, in the forests or in the Andes. Others were in contact with the settlements and for long periods were unable to profess their faith openly. They found ways to use Christian symbols. They are now reformulating their pre-Colombian faith to enable themselves to engage in dialog with Christianity.

As is happening in Brazil, for example.

Yes, and in other places. We are making progress. I think we are making serious progress. ? In Chiapas, we have some 8,000 catechists, most of whom are conscious of this situation. They are engaged in specific studies to determine how the values of their culture can be expressed in Christian faith, how they can live this faith. For example, the value of marriage, what are the cultural attitudes to marriage, in order to find out how best to express the values of the sacrament through their own cultural signs. That?s moving ahead.

Other issues arise. Something that didn?t happen before, something that is a result of the presence of the gospel, is the movement of indigenous women. This has resulted from serious reflection, not a rejection -- as in some feminist movements -- of the opposite sex, a reflection on how the female sex was rejected. So now the woman is saying: ?OK, this is my territory. Don?t invade it.? In the San Cristóbal diocese at least we have a movement that includes men. To enable the women to come together for discussions and reflections, the men have to stay home and take care of the children. This means that husband and wife go forward together on this road. Here we have a new fruit of an evangelizing program.

We also have 311 indigenous catechists who have been ordained deacons. But the road to the priesthood remains a problem. What we have come to understand is that in all indigenous communities in the continent, from Alaska to Patagonia, human maturity is measured not by years but by the experience the person has in the smallest social structure, the family. They ask, ?How can an individual who does not have the experience of managing a family and living in a family have the qualities needed to speak to an entire community??

I think of a young man, a catechist, 28 or 29 years old. We were at a meeting of catechists, some of them older people. They were discussing an image. Should they take it to San Cristóbal to be painted or should they bring the artist to the community to have the work done here. This young catechist began to sum up the various viewpoints as if about to make his contribution. An older man sat looking at him intently, then interrupted him: ?You child, how dare you open your mouth?? He was devastated. He never opened his mouth for the rest of the meeting. He was a talented young man, the head catechist in the community. But he was not married.

So what do they really think about the priests?

There is a Western priesthood and a Western Christianity that they continue to accept. They accept it the way it came and they similarly accept the priest. That?s where we are. I have the crucial experience of two indigenous seminarians. Conscious as I was of this situation, I said to them: ?You have to work your way here locked into two cultures, and I?d like to help you to take that step.? They understood what I was saying. One of them, who had a good grasp of theology, said, ?Excuse me, my bishop, but I can?t continue here. I want to be a priest, but not a priest from the outside. I have come to understand my culture. Before I did not understand it. Now I feel and am an indigenous person. And I feel that I will be accepted by my indigenous brothers and sisters -- but tolerated rather than accepted. They will accept me because I come from the Western culture as a mestizo priest. But that?s not what I want. I want to be a priest of my culture, of my own culture.? And so he left. He is working now as a member of our team.

And the other seminarian?

He left, too. One of them is now involved in social work, and the other works for the diocese. There are other situations where they swallow their pride and go on to ordination. But the pull of their culture is strong. I remember the trauma of one. ?I came to the seminary,? he told me. ?In a matter of three or four days, the rector asked me: ?Do you have a spade somewhere ?round here?? Then he took a spade and began to dig as if about to plant a tree. I took the spade, and with my soutane hitched up to my belt, I asked if I should continue to dig. ?That?s enough,? he said. ?We?re not going to plant a tree. Just toss your Indian complexes into that hole, cover them up, and be the same as the rest of us.?

?I felt like a fish that had to live out of the water. And I learned to live out of the water. But after I was ordained, my bishop sent me to my place of origin. My parents were still there, and I had forgotten the language they spoke. And the people rejected me because I was a traitor to the community. I had abandoned my culture for a different one. Then I forced myself to relearn the language and made every effort to assimilate the culture again. So one day they said to me: ?Father, we can now see that this brother really wants to be with us.? Then, about a week later, I hear the music of the community band coming toward the parish house. That?s strange, I say to myself. There is no saint?s day, no festival. What?s up? It?s not my saint?s day. Where are they off to? Next I see the community president approaching, followed by the band and the entire community.

?They stop at the door. ?Brothers,? I ask, ?what?s the celebration??

? ?Nothing special, *padrecito*. We just want to tell you how happy we are because you are now indeed an Indian, and you are telling us and we understand that you want to live with us.?

?Then the municipal president steps forward. ?As a recognition of this fact,? he said, ?here is my daughter for you to marry.?

?I thought the house was shaking. It was like an earthquake.? Then he laughed: ?And, you know, she wasn?t too ugly. So I said to them: ?Let me see what the bishop says.? The bishop didn?t help me much. ?Look,? he said, ?do you want me to change the whole law of the church just for your case?? ?

You can see that this priest had come to understand the psychological *corrida* [journey] of his people, and the level of confidence they had reached. And that is the tremendous problem we have in this continent. We can continue to have Indians who are ordained priests after having passed through a mechanism of transculturation that we call seminaries. We already have these kinds of priests, mestizo priests of indigenous origin, but they are not indigenous priests. For that they would have to undergo a formation within their own cultural situation. There is some progress in this direction, but high-up people are afraid. We need theological reflection and a strong and serious anthropological revolution before this step can be taken.

There is still, however, an even more interesting issue here than any of these, an issue not yet considered. Some points have been touched on, but we have ahead of us here a bigger earthquake. Jesus Christ was not a priest according to the Law of Moses. He was a layperson. He did not belong to the tribe of Levi. Instead, he was a priest according to the order of Melchizedek. This was a pagan priesthood, not a Jewish one, and it may have anteceded the Jewish priesthood, because the Jewish people did not exist until after their liberation from Egypt. In its beginnings the Christian church operated with a certain level of autonomy, because Jesus ordained his disciples after the supper. At the Last Supper -- it is noted that it was after the supper, that is to say, after the Jewish supper was ended -- he instituted the sacrament of the Eucharist and also established those who were to continue this celebration. For some time they continued on the margins of Judaism. They went to the Temple to pray while celebrating the Eucharist in people?s homes. As Christianity gradually grew, it moved to differentiate itself from the Jewish priesthood. Later on, however, the Catholic church returned to the model of the Jewish people. My bishop?s miter comes from that old priesthood.

The expectation now is that -- if we are talking about the incarnation of the church in the cultures -- when the indigenous peoples of this continent enter as autochthonous [indigenous] churches, their priesthood will be able to merge with the priesthood of Christ according to the order of Melchizedek, and not according to the Jewish priesthood. This calls for a profound study, but from the viewpoint of theology it is an extremely rich situation. I do not mean that the Jewish priesthood has not served up till now, but it is not the cultural model. It is not according to the order of Melchizedek. ? In the priesthood according to the indigenous cultures, it is clear that we are not engaged in just a cultural discussion, but also in a transcendental and novel theological one. That means that it is not in the same line as the discussions in Europe and elsewhere on whether or not priests can be

married, as they are in the Eastern Catholic churches. It is not a discussion of theological schools, but of the concrete application of what the council said. That means that it is not simply an abstract theological discussion but a call to apply what the council said. It is true that the road may be hard, but the theory is clear. We have no problem about justifying our position. What we have to do is to promote a practice that is already fully justified by pastoral theological positions.

We are simply talking of applications?

Correct, absolutely correct.

In Chiapas, what about the sacrament of matrimony. Are people looking for cultural forms?

What happened, when we began to talk about incarnating the church in the cultures and to explain what this meant to the people, almost immediately all the sacraments began to acquire a community dimension that they previously lacked. Previously, people said: "I want to arrange first Communion for my child," [and] "I want to have my child baptized on such a day." All that stopped. Baptisms are arranged by the community. And, as the communities are small, everyone is involved in the preparation and celebration. They look into the practices of the parents and godparents to ensure that they are living a Christian life. The entire community witnesses the ceremony and testifies that this child should be baptized because the parents and godparents understand what baptism means.

How long does all this take?

It varies. Three months in some places, up to a year in others. They all know each other. When there are families that have not been practicing the faith regularly, they take more time to ensure that they understand clearly what is the commitment.

The same happens with marriages. When the individual approach ended, interesting things happened. I remember a women's meeting I attended. One of the women was saying: "In the past my mother and father would sell me. They waited until they had a certain quantity of wood or beef or whatever, so that they could offer my hand to the family that asked for me. And it never occurred to them to ask me whether I liked the boy or not." I was watching a process of liberation in a very concrete context. And they are looking for external signs. They have not yet found them, because their culture was crushed so totally. Marriage in their tradition was destroyed.

Although so many customs were lost, some are being recovered in one way or another. For example, we are trying to reach the point -- I think we are almost there -- of not distinguishing between a customary marriage and a church marriage so that they would no longer be separate events, and also that the marriage would be recognized civilly without any additional ceremony. This is a process that is moving forward gradually in the whole continent. And already they have regained a community aspect. I have a concrete instance. A Marist brother who left his congregation but continued to work in the diocese decided to marry.

His name?

Vargas, Javier Vargas. He tells the community in which he is living. "Brothers, I am about to marry, but I want to tell you that I want to continue to accompany you. Tell me, what do you think?"

They say: "Well, we have to see what is the woman like and to find out if she also wants to stay here." When she came, they asked: "Sister, are you ready to serve wherever needed?" She agreed to undertake the normal preparation. It lasted three months, with the indigenous who had themselves been instructed by Javier conducting her instruction. They married and they continued to work in that community for several years, fully

accepted by the community, until they had to leave for the education of their children.

As regards the Eucharist?

Without the Eucharist, without a priesthood that gives them the Eucharist, there will be an imported priesthood. A distribution of the Eucharist by deacons has strengthened the power of the community greatly. But for this it is still necessary to have a eucharistic celebration. That is what it means to be autochthonous. The council says that to be autochthonous is to be able to reflect the faith in all your cultural forms, to express it with your own values and also to have your own ministers within your own culture. It speaks even of autochthonous bishops, autochthonous priests and bishops. In this way a church comes into being with its own means. The word *autochthonous* does not mean autonomous and it does not mean independent. What it means is to be able to express your own culture, which has suffered down the centuries.

I think that in this way I have answered your other questions.

Have you reached this point or are you in a process that can move a distance farther but has a final goal that it is not possible to reach?

We cannot get to that point at the present time, but we are moving. ?

Is a situation possible in which the married couple would be the priest?

That's what we are talking about. That is what is on the table. A priesthood according to the culture. It would still be within the church, because in the church we have married priests. It is accordingly something that is indisputable.

For us it's a rather novel concept.

In the Western church. But not in the Catholic church. It's normal in the Eastern church. That's the way it is in the Eastern church.

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