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A church that requires a different kind of bishop

by Tom Roberts

HUEHUETENANGO and COATEPEQUE, GUATEMALA — *Part 2 of 2. Read Part 1.*

Much has been made of Pope Francis' job description for diocesan bishops. They should live simply, divested of royal trappings and unafraid to smell like the sheep. Bishop Álvaro Ramazzini Imeri might well be out of central casting for that role.

The former bishop of the diocese of San Marcos, Guatemala, where he became known internationally for injecting the church into battles over environmental issues, Ramazzini has been bishop of Huehuetenango since May 2012. He is a stocky man with thick arms, a square, open face and a quick smile. In U.S. terms, he might have made a good linebacker at some point along the way. His residence and offices are in a modest diocesan complex where one of the larger notices tells of free legal services.

He is without ceremony or pretense, and he is deeply engaged in issues facing the people of the Western Highlands. The day in June that we met, he was wearing a light blue clerical shirt, sans pectoral cross and open at the top. One end of a white clerical collar stuck out of his breast pocket. He was scheduled that morning to be one of three speakers on a panel addressing the next steps in a community's action against police who had shot and killed six and injured 40 during an Oct. 4, 2012, protest of increases in utility rates.

During the more than two hours of driving from Huehuetenango to Totonicapán (which is actually in the neighboring archdiocese of Los Altos Quetzaltenango-Totonicapán), and back, a trip that involved a climb of more than 4,000 feet, he spoke at length about the conditions in Guatemala and the church's role in raising questions about public policy and walking in solidarity with the poor.

The challenge is immense. Guatemala is the most populous country in Central America and has the highest fertility rate in the region, but "struggles in several areas of health and development, including

infant, child, and maternal mortality, malnutrition, literacy, and contraceptive awareness and use," according to the CIA's World Factbook. "The large indigenous population is disproportionately affected."

According to the Factbook, the richest 20 percent of the population accounts for more than 51 percent of the country's consumption, while more than half the population lives below the poverty line and 13 percent lives in extreme poverty. Among the indigenous population, which makes up 38 percent of the country's total, poverty "averages 73 percent and extreme poverty rises to 28 percent," and the country's children under 5 suffer "one of the highest malnutrition rates in the world."

Government-sponsored violence of the sort perpetrated during the civil war has ended, Ramazzini said, but structural problems persist, "and I do not see that we are developing policy that clearly addresses this problem." He lists poverty as "a very clear category of violence" and criticizes the government for pursuing "neoliberalism," economic policies that have "made the rich richer and the poor poorer," he said.

He sees progress in the fact that groups of peasants have managed to purchase their own plots of land and that their debts to the state have been forgiven. "However, we are waiting to see whether they have access to the technical training they need to make that land productive. And we can't forget that Guatemala has an agro-export model," in which huge tracts are given over to the production of African palm oil and sugar cane. All of that means employment, he concedes, "but we need to independently verify the conditions of those working in the sugar industry and we also need to look at the true levels of income generated by this industry so that we are able to have a more just distribution of that income."

He said the Guatemalan bishops' conference has issued statements on economic and agrarian reform based on speeches by Pope Benedict XVI. Ramazzini said he hopes Francis' emphasis on the poor will influence further conversation about economic reform. He was encouraged by a Francis address to an international food and agriculture organization. "He said we cannot continue to use the global crisis as a pretext for denying billions of people basic access to food. There's plenty of food in the world and for that reason it is scandalous that so many people continue to go hungry. ? These are very important elements of analysis for us here," Ramazzini said, "because one of the most important indicators of poverty for us here in Guatemala is chronic malnutrition of children."

According to Ramazzini, 59 percent of indigenous children ages 1 to 5 are malnourished. "It's incredible that a country like Guatemala, which has dedicated great expanses of land to sugar cane and for growing African palm oil for export, and also for banana production, is not able to feed its own inhabitants. That's shameful."

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Since his ordination as bishop in 1989, Ramazzini has become a well-known human rights advocate and outspoken critic of what he has termed the "looting of Latin America" for its natural resources. The former seminary rector and pastor articulates an agenda from the church in the developing world that remains a largely theoretical matter in the pulpits of the developed world.

He has opposed gold mining and other extractive industries as well as mega-hydroelectric projects because of their effect on the environment and impact on water supplies. The mining operations, he has said, use inordinate amounts of scarce water, depriving indigenous populations of water supplies for drinking and for irrigating crops.

Activism, however, extracts its own price. Ramazzini has received several death threats, two of which he

considered particularly serious. The first came from a witness in the trial of those who murdered Bishop José Gerardi, with whom Ramazzini worked on the Recovery of Historical Memory (REHMI) Project. He's seen the video of the hooded suspect telling a government ombudsman "that he had been offered \$50,000 to assassinate me. He had my photograph and had been given a copy of my daily routine. But he didn't want to accept the contract because he was in a witness protection program."

Some women religious conveyed the second threat to him. During his tenure in San Marcos, a man stopped the nuns on the street and showed them that he had a pistol. He had a message for the bishop: "This pistol is for him if he doesn't change his ways."

Asked what the man was referring to, Ramazzini said he didn't know. At the time, he said, he was involved in land reform issues; struggles against drug traffickers; efforts to expose coyotes who exploit people attempting to migrate; and fighting international gold mining companies. Any of those issues -- and he is still involved in all of them -- could have been the cause.

He also realizes, he said in answer to a question, that his involvement in the indigenous case against the police who opened fire during the October protest could also bring reprisals. The June meeting was in a parish hall. About 120 people, mostly indigenous, attended. The audience included several uniformed national police.

With Ramazzini on stage were a government human rights liaison and the lawyer handling the case for the community. Much of the meeting was taken up with nuts-and-bolts issues, questions about money, the cost of pursuing the case, delays in the legal process, with flashes of conversation about the underlying issue involving electric utility rates.

Outwardly, it could have been a community meeting anywhere, except that this one involves police, dead and wounded protesters, and a bishop who was asked to essentially wrap up the discussion. Ramazzini was also aware he would be speaking to a group seeking justice against the backdrop of a recent report of an assassination of eight police officers inside the police station just outside the nearby city of Quetzaltenango. That massacre was believed related to drug traffickers seeking revenge against other drug traffickers who had infiltrated the police force. There have also been incidents of vigilante justice carried out in rural areas.

In some respects, Ramazzini walked a thin line in a talk that began with a general plea for respect for human life and laws "designed and enforced with a special preference for the poor and marginalized."

He warned against vigilantism and asserted "the principle that neither this massacre nor lynchings are acceptable or justified." He spoke of the responsibility to forgive, but added that the community has the twin responsibility to hold officials and those responsible for the crime accountable.

He said he believes the morning's meeting is evidence that indigenous communities have a deep desire to defend their interests and rights. "We have a younger generation today that is beginning to get interested in politics, and it is good that they are indigenous people. That is something very important to highlight. That today indigenous peoples are organizing and pressing their claims, and I would hope they'd give us the political and social leaders of the future."

That might seem like so much boilerplate in another context. But Ramazzini himself puts it in context. "You must remember that I am a Latino. I grew up in Guatemala City."

But he has had long contact with indigenous communities in his nearly 25 years as a bishop. "All of these years have been an experience of learning, gathering additional knowledge, of dialogue, because for me

an important part of being a bishop is knowing how to listen, to pay attention to what people are saying. ... I think a bishop truly needs to be an expert at listening," he said.

Historically, he said, the church's error was "to come with the presumption that we have the truth and that the only truth is the truth of the Catholic church. Because sometimes that's not even the truth of the Gospel; it's the truth of the church. It's the truth of the institutional church."

The day spent with Ramazzini provided a look not only into a different kind of episcopacy, but it also provided a peek into the church that almost requires it, one in which parish numbers can be overwhelming and whose members can have deep attachments to Mayan culture and spirituality.

Hung on the walls of the large parish hall were depictions of what I was told were scenes from the Mayan creation story. Ramazzini hopes there is a preservation of more than images and symbols. "It's exactly because I notice there's a loss of culture and language among the indigenous that I insist upon it so much in my public interventions. Because to me, to maintain culture, to develop culture, is a great source of wealth that we have here in Guatemala, and I would not want that to be lost."

In addition to language, he said, he would like to see Mayans pass on "their way of understanding life, their way of understanding their relationship with God."

That sense of God, in these circumstances, is significant, said Ramazzini. He said he has discovered in indigenous communities "a vital, existential religious experience that helps them to understand that the divine is present in every moment of their lives." It is not animism, but "rather the presence of someone different, of something absolutely other," a concept he said that "allows us to promote the Christian faith, the faith in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and the same idea of expiation, which is very strong in the indigenous community."

Whatever boundary crossing is occurring, it apparently has had significant implications for the Catholic community. St. Michael Archangel Parish, where the meeting was conducted, has a membership of 100,000 people in 53 distinct communities in the area, according to the pastor, Augustinian Fr. Max Ozuna. He has two associates working with him. Perhaps in a sign of what the future holds, the parish also has more than 3,000 trained lay ministers -- everything from musicians and readers to catechists who go into the communities to teach and prepare people for sacraments. It's a necessity, the pastor said, because last year, 1,300 parishioners were confirmed.

As I attempted to double-check the numbers, Ramazzini assured me I was hearing correctly and added that in his diocese of Huehuetenango, there were more than 10,000 lay ministers working in parishes.

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Four hours and many microclimates down and out of the mountains, other realities of the new Guatemala -- the form of violence that Ramazzini referred to -- come into sharp focus at Proyecto Vida, a ministry to those who have HIV. It was developed by Maryknoll Sr. Delia Marie Smith. But, please, Sister Dee will do.

Though she lived 13 years in Africa as a lay missionary, and then four years in the United States and the past 18 years or so in Guatemala with Maryknoll, the lilt of her northern England home is quite evident. Here in Coatepeque, near the Pacific coast and just miles from the border with southern Mexico, Proyecto Vida is in one of the prime corridors for both drug and human trafficking. It is a corridor of broken lives, poverty and violence.

As director of the agency for nearly two decades, the 59-year-old Smith has developed a staff of about 20, almost all of whom have lost a relative or friend to HIV and several of whom are currently living with the infection.

Smith said studies have calculated there are about 85,000 people in Guatemala with HIV out of a population of 14 million or "just below the rate of epidemic." Dealing with HIV in these circumstances often means dealing also with the effects of poverty and societal taboos.

The staff has worked to educate local populations, going into nearby coffee and sugar plantations to talk to seasonal workers, mostly men, about HIV and prevention. They care for sex workers and for a significant population of men who have sex with other men but who would never refer to themselves as homosexual. Many of the same men are married and pass on the infection to their wives.

Not far from Proyecto Vida's office, and next to the home where Smith and another sister live, the agency opened a residential hospice that can care for up to 18 patients. Unlike the strictly controlled hospices in the United States, this one sometimes serves as a way station for people who are just beginning treatment and find that with nutrition training and proper medication they can return to normal lives.

It is also a place where people from the wider community -- groups and individuals -- volunteer. "Once they have one-on-one contact with the people, they see them as their own brothers and sisters. Nothing sensitizes a person as much as coming into contact with someone with HIV," Smith said.

Since her childhood, she said, her connection to the sacred was tied intimately to a connection to the land and to nature. As an adult, she inclines strongly toward creation spirituality, evident in her language when she speaks of how this work on the margins of society sustains her. "There is some kind of energy protecting us, divine and sacred energy, that motivates us to keep doing this work," even in those moments "when you just want to run away and say, 'Oh hell, I've done it for so long, I'll just go off and have a glass of wine under a tree and nobody bother me.' "

It is in the HIV patients, in the sex workers, in the transvestites looking desperately for acceptance that she sees Jesus. "The life of Jesus was one of challenging to accept differences." In reflections they've done at Proyecto Vida, she said she and others have discovered "a sense of sacred in the work. They make you stand naked before God with all your vulnerability, I think, people with HIV, because it strips away all the crap. It really does."

And when this self-professed extrovert reaches the end of an exhausting day, she unwinds with a walk through the kitchen garden they've developed next to the hospice, she and the three hospice dogs. "I walk in the garden, throw stones for the dogs, say hi to the bees, and go home and relax."

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Julia Esquivel, in her four-page poem of more than 30 years ago, "The Lord's Prayer From Guatemala," prays to the Father of murdered and abducted campesinos, of widows and orphans, of the abandoned and jailed, tortured and disappeared. She beseeches the Father "who is among the millions of hungry people of the nations of the Third World" and "who lives in all who seek justice because they love their brothers and serve you, serving and struggling with those who have no roof or food or clothes or medicine."

She argues that God's name "is taken in vain when they make you out to be a little god and then invent National Security Laws, a security which the poor ... do not know."

It is taken in vain, she writes, "when they go around saying you are a little 'anticommunist' god, that you need planes and tanks to crush people who are trying to forge their own history, because they long for the coming of your Kingdom."

She asks for the daily bread of freedom and rights, of the press, to organize and associate, for housing for "all those in the encampments of Guatemala City," for milk for children, for medical assistance.

And she asks forgiveness "for separating ourselves from our brothers," for remaining silent out of fear. "Forgive and destroy our tiny kingdoms and our useless struggles which delay and obstruct our victorious march toward the New Dawn ..."

When asked what she would write today in such a prayer, Esquivel speaks of the transformation of some communities and of gang members who wanted to get out of gang life and have formed performance groups that do theater and dance and collaborate with other organizations. She mentions the determination of indigenous communities and particularly the solidarity among women who have suffered.

"There are signs," she says, "that there is a surge, a desire for justice, for healing" most of which goes unnoticed in popular media.

"In the morning when I pray the words of the Our Father, may your will be done on Earth as in heaven, may your kingdom come, I believe that God's reign is coming," she said. "Though we can't see it clearly, it is coming in these signs. In spite of everything, sooner or later, we will see that that God's will will be done, despite everything."

Asked if she means that God's will is not just for the afterlife, she responds, it seems, with as much force as her 82-year-old frame can muster:

"No, it's here, it's here. Where people defend life. Where people defend Mother Earth. Where people unite in solidarity. That is to do God's will. And that is making God's reign present."

[Tom Roberts is *NCR* editor at large. His email is troberts@ncronline.org.]

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