



MISSIONARIES IN ACTION

DOMINICAN MISSION FOUNDATION

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Reversing the Cycle



Dear Mission Friends:

“There was sin, there was plenty of sin,” acknowledged Pope Francis in a 2015 speech in Bolivia, apologizing to the world for the role the Church played in the “many grave sins...committed against the native people of America” during the period of colonization.

When Spain embarked upon its conquest of the New World nearly 500 years ago, the first land to fall was Mexico. The surviving natives—those who hadn’t succumbed to the bloody fighting or the dreaded imported diseases—were now prisoners in their own land, displaced, enslaved, starved, forcibly converted, and generally dehumanized.

After 300 years of being dominated by and dependent upon another country, Mexico won its independence and formed a republic, which sounds like a happy ending to the story.



Pope Francis, wearing a mitre, meticulously embroidered by a local seamstress, during the presentation of the gifts, also locally handmade, during the offertory at Mass in Chiapas, Feb. 2016.

But Mexico’s subsequent political history has been erratic and volatile, consumed with uprisings, revolutions, corruption, assassinations, and counter-revolutions. **The effects of three centuries of oppression are not easily dispelled.** As a rebel from Chiapas was heard to say twenty years after the famous Zapatista rebellion, *“There hasn’t been much change. We’re still poor.”*

During his apology speech, the Pope did pay respect to the era’s courageous priests: “There was ... an abundant grace increased by the men who defended indigenous peoples.” But his primary message was clear: The sin “far outweighed the grace.” He knew too that his responsibility didn’t stop there, that deeply embedded racism

cannot be dismissed with an apology, and that his apology would have been rendered empty and meaningless anyway if he didn’t speak to the enduring conditions of exploitation and social exclusion.

So the next year, during his 2016 trip to Latin America, the Pope chose to revisit the subject of colonialism, and he chose to do so in Chiapas, which has one of the highest concentrations of indigenous people in Mexico.

Due to a combination of other, often dubious, distinctions unique to Chiapas, it has always stood apart from the crowd. Its high number of indigenous carries with it a high degree of discrimination, which in turn perpetuates its high rate of poverty—the highest in Mexico.



Far left, women embroidering vestments for the Pope to wear at Mass; left, youth group providing traditional music at the recessional.

Being the poorest state in a country where 46% of its citizens live in poverty [2014 figures] is troubling enough, but in Chiapas itself, that number jumps to a shocking 76%.

As Mexico's southernmost state, its distance and isolation from the bulk of the country have served to limit its exposure to outside influences. Its geographical position has also made it easier for the Mexican government to neglect, or at best, postpone, its needs. Its infrastructure, for one, is the most underdeveloped in the country.

The state's diverse interior geography is also distinctive. It's a land of extreme contrasts, from cold mountainous regions to hot, dense jungles. Many of the indigenous, who make up the majority of the population, rarely leave their remote villages in the often-inaccessible highland areas. The few roads in and out, mostly winding and unpaved, discourage routine or non-essential travel.

All of these factors create and reinforce the impenetrable cycle of poverty, which not only stems from racism, but also sustains and fortifies it.

Customs reflecting the colonial attitudes of racism continue to be observed long after the Mexican government has deemed them to be human rights violations. As recently as the 1950s, laws forbidding Indians from being in the city after dark, and from walking on city sidewalks in general, were still being enforced.

Such laws can be overturned—Indians have been allowed to walk on city sidewalks for some time now—but changes in attitudes cannot be legislated; ingrained racism is not so easily extinguished. **Not until education for all includes an honest and thorough study of the root causes of the country's systematic discrimination will any efforts to improve the plight of the indigenous in Chiapas be truly effective rather than merely cosmetic.**

Even within the Church in Chiapas, a tradition of exclusion long persisted. Soon after being appointed bishop of the Chiapas Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas in 1959, Samuel Ruiz García saw that the Indians—who did not speak Spanish, the official language of Mexico and the Church—were largely ignored once they had been secured by baptism.

The Mexican government at that time was developing programs to “civilize” and assimilate the indigenous with the goal of helping them economically. Don Samuel himself adopted that philosophy for a time and searched for ways to teach Spanish to his people, not only to help them get jobs but also to more expeditiously evangelize them.

But having studied colonialism extensively, drawing inspiration and wisdom from the ministry of Bartolomé de Las Casas, O.P., bishop of Chiapas in the 1500s and great defender of the Indians, Don Samuel saw that attitudes toward the indigenous had changed little since Spanish colonial rule, and he realized that requiring them to learn the dominant language would be another step backward.

Instead he embraced the traditions of the indigenous, incorporating them in liturgies and inviting active participation. Striving to bring the Church closer to their heart, he trained them to be catechists and ordained married men to be deacons. Over the forty years he served the beloved people of his diocese, he learned four Mayan languages, and he himself

tirelessly traveled, often by mule, to the countless remote villages, visiting, counseling, and bringing the sacraments. Fr. Gonzalo Ituarte, O.P., currently serving in Chiapas, credits Don Samuel with building a Church that is “alive with a people who have rediscovered their dignity; a church that values their identity; and a church that gives its support to those in the majority, the indigenous peoples.” Yet, *“There hasn’t been much change. We’re still poor.”*

It was in Ocosingo, Chiapas in 1963, shortly after Don Samuel became bishop, that our Western Dominican Province established its first mission. But it wasn’t until 2013, fifty years later, that the Vatican gave official approval to use Mayan languages in the liturgies. We had been enlisting indigenous catechists and encouraging active participation in Mass and the sacraments since the time of Don Samuel, but the official sanction brought renewed enthusiasm to us as well as the parishioners.

I first visited Ocosingo in 1968 as a young missionary, returning several times over the years, particularly since being appointed Mission Office director in 2003, in order to observe the various ministries we support in the region.

I’ve witnessed the inception of numerous programs and projects and can attest that their implementation has always been met with impossible obstacles and resistance, and any resulting progress has been too often slow and hard-fought.



Chores in Chiapas: Young boys from the highlands returning home with firewood.

But the generosity of you, our donors, has enabled us to persevere in our humble efforts with lasting benefits, from building the first hospital in the area and keeping its facilities and equipment updated, to training nursing candidates, doctor assistants, patient/staff interpreters, catechists, and language students who can reliably translate the Bible and readings from Spanish to Tzeltal.

And continuing with your support provides us with the means and the confidence to more quickly and effectively work with, or around, outdated bureaucratic regulations outside of the Church, regulations that discourage opportunities for the indigenous and threaten to reverse our steps forward. Even though they comprise the majority of the state’s population, and most speak only their native dialect, Spanish remains the official language. And so they are largely excluded from exercising such rights as attending public schools, being hired for non-agrarian, decent paying jobs, and voting. In our attempts to instill the **democratic values of justice and equality for all, or as Jesus would say, loving**

thy neighbor as thyself, we have long been supporting wider use of Tzeltal in schools, job offerings, voter ballots, etc. But even with such changes, the people are *“still poor.”*

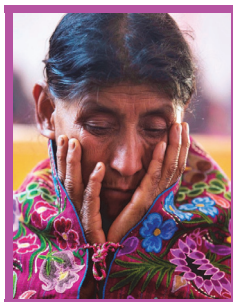
So in 2016, a year after his apology, the Pope went to Chiapas. He chose to say Mass in the colonial town of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, the latter part of the city’s name being added in 1848 in honor of Las Casas, “Protector of the Indians,” who was undoubtedly foremost in the Pope’s mind when he cited the courageous priests in his earlier speech.



All of the rich elements of the Maya culture, such as incense and corn, have been incorporated in liturgies in Ocosingo for some time.



*The distinctive
faces—and phases*



*—of generations
in Chiapas.*



But this was a year later, and Francis was there to explain that the apology he'd offered was not meant to obscure the centuries of fallout that persists in Chiapas to this day.

This time, after once again stating his regret for the Church's role in that shameful time in history, he cut to the chase: **"On many occasions, in a systematic and organized way, your people have been misunderstood and excluded from society. Some have considered your values, culture and traditions to be inferior. Others, intoxicated by power, money and market trends, have stolen your lands or contaminated them."**

Along with his condemnation of those who have long excluded, exploited, and abused, the Pope offered the natives hope and good news. He demonstrated genuine and joyful appreciation of their heritage and traditions by donning colorful and locally hand-woven vestments and incorporating in the Mass readings, prayers, and songs in three of the area's many indigenous languages. He even quoted from the *Popol Vuh*, a sacred ancient Mayan text, suggesting the importance of preserving traditions which hearken back to their illustrious ancient Mayan roots.

He urged them to celebrate and preserve all of their unique identities and cultures so as to ensure that they will be passed on to new generations.

When each language is represented by several distinct communities, and each of those is a unit in itself, with its own dialect, customs, and religious rituals, that is no easy task. But as he explained, it is an essential one: **"Exposed to a culture that seeks to suppress all cultural heritage and features in pursuit of a homogenized world, the youth of today, these youth, need to cling to the wisdom of their elders."**

Then he went home. And reality set in again. *"There hasn't been much change. We're still poor."* Their cultural and physical distinctions have so long been used by others as markers for maintaining exclusion that they not only expect such behavior but often accept it as inevitable. But the Pope left the indigenous people of Chiapas a tool by which they can reverse that cycle so that instead of perpetuating marginalization, their distinctions can empower them. He revealed their extraordinariness to the world and themselves, proclaiming, **"Today's world, ravaged as it is by a throwaway culture, needs you."**

And the world had better step aside as these native people assume their rightful place in the political and economic mainstream. Indeed, Chiapas has always moved to its own beat—not necessarily by design, and perhaps not always in its best interest. But it can never be accused of contributing to the homogenization of the world. It's just too interesting. Thank you for supporting us in helping Chiapas to remain so.

In Christ's peace,
Fr. Martin de Porres Walsh, O.P.

Upcoming Mission Appeals

If you are in the area, please come and say hello to our preacher.

- July 29-30: St. Bernard, Oakland
Fr. Peter Rogers (English Masses)
Fr. Tim Conlan (Spanish Masses)
- Aug. 5-6: Old Mission, San Luis Obispo
Fr. Dismas Sayre
- Aug. 12-13: St. Matthew Korean Center, Tujunga
Fr. Martin Walsh
- Aug. 19-20: St. Patrick, Kerman
Fr. Martin Walsh
- Aug. 26-27: St. Paul, Tranquility
Fr. Martin Walsh
- Sept. 2-3: Our Lady of the Rosary, Union City
Fr. Martin Walsh
- Sept. 9-10: St. James the Greater, Vernal, UT
Fr. James Moore
- Sept. 16-17: St. Helen, Roosevelt, UT
Fr. Martin Walsh
- Sept. 23-24: St. Mary of the Assumption, Park City, UT
Fr. Martin Walsh