Bishop Samuel Ruiz Garcia  
University of Alberta Visiting Lectureship in Human Rights  

Bishop Ruiz Garcia’s lecture was delivered in Spanish and consecutively translated by Ricardo Acuña, Executive Director, Parkland Institute. Following is a transcription of the translation.

Bishop Ruiz Garcia: Honourable members, ladies and gentlemen. I’d like to express my gratitude to the University of Alberta for having invited me to this, the 6th anniversary of the Lectureship in Human Rights, which annually acknowledges an organization or person who distinguishes themselves in the defense and promotion in the area of human rights. Although I feel undeservedly honoured by this acknowledgment, on the other hand, it saddens me that in fact to denounce the violation of human rights is not enough to prevent them. It only bears witness to them. Or it may be that a situation is passing and will take some time to change. This is the case of the violation of human rights of the indigenous people. It is also saddening that the suffering of the victims be a reason for acknowledgment, which makes it more urgent to combine efforts to continue working for the human rights of individuals and collective rights of the indigenous communities, that they be recognized and acknowledged.

The theme of human rights of indigenous people is one that recently has gained significant importance in Mexico and has had importance for some time now in the rest of the continent. We can say that up until now, we have moved in a dynamic which ignores the reality of who are the indigenous and why they have been destined to be exterminated, dominated, or culturally absorbed. The threat to indigenous people and their cultures, that is, their disappearance, begins when the so-called New Spain was invaded and conquered in what until today we call euphemistically the Discovery of America. Because it is from that instant that the ethnic groups and their diverse cultures become condemned to submission and to their gradual disappearance because either they accepted submission to a powerful king across the sea or they would be considered as enemies of that king. And evangelization itself according to the theological categories of the time imposed on the
indigenous people, western culture, the western culture of the empire, as the only way for them to express their Christian faith. Accepted by them without ever having existed a minimum dialogue which was judged inadmissible between Christianity and the pre-existing religions.

It is important to remember that before the conquest of the New World, Indians did not exist but rather cultural groups, Mayans, Incan, Inuit, and Aztecs. The word "Indian" is a word of domination, derived from what motivated the voyage of Christopher Columbus, that is, to find the shortest passage between Spain and oriental India. This is how they came to be called Indians, the descendents of those which lived on these lands before the arrival of Christopher Columbus in a subsequent conquest. The census in Mexico up until now takes the predominantly linguistical criterion for Indian as anyone who speaks one of the existing languages or one of the languages derived from those used before the conquest. This has the incongruence of the fact that infants, those from one to five years of age do not exist. Or that people who do not speak their language for fear of racial discrimination because they live outside their community or because they have lost their language with time, do not appear in the census as indigenous peoples. In the census of 1921, a criterion of race was included, meaning Mestizo, white, or indigenous. The result was that four million people, 29% called themselves indigenous but more acceptable is deemed a cultural anthropological criterion which considers as indigenous those people which live in communities which can serve aspects of the old ethnicity, norm, social organizations, typical dress, language, values, and who have consciousness of belonging to one of these cultural groups.

According to estimates from the Mexican Indigenous Institute, in 1995 there were 10 million indigenous people in the Republic of Mexico. What is unquestionable is the growth of the indigenous population. It is surprising that, after decades in which it is diminished subtly, and after the various pressures exerted upon it, at the same time, this population grows in absolute numbers, not only as a result of its demographic vitality but also because of the growing consciousness of its cultural identity, that is, because of the acknowledgment of its belonging to an indigenous people within the framework of a movement which reclaims a space within national society. This consciousness of the
indigenous as having to be subjects of their own history begins to manifest itself in the posh celebrations of what pretended to commemorate the discovery of America. We weren't hidden in any case. They said that they could not celebrate a happening which marked the beginning of their looting and of their great suffering. While on the other hand, they spoke of a time that was too short, according to their conception of time, that it wasn't worth celebrating. The social and political situation of the indigenous people has historically been one of marginalization in the face of the composition of a state which is predominantly Mestizo and with the western ideology which has worked hard to impose and dominate the different cultural and cosmological institutions of the indigenous people, even in countries where the indigenous people are a majority. This situation is also the consequence of the prevailing neoliberal system whose domineering structures in concentrating evermore wealth in fewer and fewer hands and concentrating economic power generate a tremendous looting which increases poverty until it reaches levels of intolerable misery.

The national colonial relationship in which they live is derived from the neoliberal system. It causes to appear in the entire continent the poverty of the indigenous people as if it was part of who they are. And what's more, it's taken us to the insensibility before their situation of marginalization and dispossession without us recognizing the existing racial discrimination. In fact, almost justifying the repression to which they are victim for their just demands. As if it was a violation to request the rights to be culturally different. The sum of the abuses, the tricks, the impunity is so high that it appears to us as if it were a normal situation to the degree that the aboriginals themselves come to believe that it is their destiny to occupy the bottom floor of society by divine will. But we currently discover in the Indian peoples a great reserve of humanity. And in encountering them, a proposal of social transformation when they say to us: another society is necessary and possible.

The churches, the educational institutions, civil society organizations, and the means of communication, all of us citizens have a historical challenge to carry out a self-criticism which allows us to discover to which point we are dehumanized by racism and intolerance. As such we will be in a better condition to support the change and we will have legitimacy in our demand in public instances that they meet their own duties. In Mexico, we were at an important point of making a significant step in recognizing indigenous cultural groups
when we presented to the congress of the union the accords of the first dialogue between the federal government and the indigenous peoples of the EZLN. I believe that the commandant of the EZLN when she expressed clearly before the congress of the union the situation of the Mexican indigenous people, also signaled the expectations of all the indigenous peoples of the continent. They know that they existed before the conquest and that they are as such predating the arrival of the various countries, that they consider themselves citizens of a concrete country but they are conscious that they are and wish to continue being culturally different. In asking that they be recognized as ethnic groups and to feel at the same time as citizens, it should be left clear that there does not exist in these countries a western majority that determines, permits, or tolerates the existence of the indigenous peoples but rather that the majority of our countries have in reality pluriculturalism. It’s relevant that the constitutional acknowledgment of the situation is one of the factors which has taken us to think that transculturation should be the path and the condition so that indigenous peoples be full citizens. As a result of the marginalization and racial discrimination to which they have been subjected, their cultural value has been impeded from contributing to the enrichment of our pluriethnic make-up. But we know that unfortunately, in our congress of the union, the cultural groups were not recognized, nor were the indigenous communities. Nor were they considered as valid their norms, customs and uses. Nor did they have recognized their right to use their natural resources of the habitat in which they reside. In summary, the accord signed by the government and EZLN were not recognized at all.

If it’s true that we move by convictions that are later ratified and recognized in law, the pools that exist within them and their perfection should not justify our inability to act independently, then, of the practical mechanisms and legal mechanisms which should be developed. We have a duty to move with what we must do and act without discrimination, respect the cultural differences and eliminate the colonial relationship, even though it does not exist as an imperative which forces us to do so. Never again, then, a continent without our indigenous peoples. But also never again a church on the continent without its indigenous peoples. We as a Catholic Church also have a debt to pay. The theological propositions which existed at the time of the conquest led to a practical non-recognition of the cultures and a devaluing of their worth and relevance. Western culture was imposed
as the only way that the indigenous, converted to Christianity, could manifest his or her faith. The reductionary interpretation of the words of St. Ilanao - outside the church there is no salvation - led us to consider only that there were no non-Christian religions, that they were all full of mistakes and shadows of death. Not one dialogue with the pre-Columbian religion was deemed necessary nor much less convenient the use of some religious manifestations of the culture which were similar to the Christian religious expressions because they were considered as diabolical and evil. We forgot the experience of the primitive church which is borne oriental when the Pagans did not submit to the law of Moses and manifested itself in the Roman Empire, giving a space to western culture that was soon considered as part of its constitution to the degree that when we speak of the church evangelizing, we speak of the church westernizing.

The situation I’ve described worsens in the society in which we live where the supreme value is economic, where the poor are the result of the social system, and the indigenous people are the bottom floor of society. That is why it's of supreme importance what is holding us when John XXIII said a few days before the opening of the council as a third object of the same. “There is a third luminous point. The church before the peoples on the course of development discovers what it is and what it should be, the church of the poor; that is to say, the church of everybody.” These brief words encapsulate very profoundly, it is about not the poor as individuals but rather peoples, nations in the course of development. That is to say, of structural poverty that has resulted in our dominant social systems. The relationship with the poor is part of the church because the church depends on it for what it is and what it should be. Also, it is understood that it is a reviewable relationship and part of a process. The expression church of the poor is not an exclusive formulation but rather inclusive and which causes us all to come together with the poor to whom belongs the kingdom to form a Church of Christ. It is not, then, a church which comes imposed from above but rather a church which brings together and revolves around the poor and because of that, is universal.

Vatican Council II comes to give us many answers to questions which were arising at the time. The Council reminded us that even in the present state of humanity, God can be known in an expeditious manner. This made us pass beyond an attitude that judged the
religious practices of the indigenous as superstition or adulterous to a new attitude in which we suppose that some of their practices with certainty were coming closer to God and to His plan for salvation. It becomes very clear to us that it is perfectly possible and it is within the will of God the fact that the indigenous people can preserve their cultural and religious tradition, elements that lead them to God and to accept His plan for salvation. That God can reveal Himself in events and people of history, culture, and religion of the indigenous people, as with Israel, also with other peoples, there are not two histories, one that is profane, national and human on one side and the other that is the history of salvation. The fathers of the Vatican Council said: “Discover with joy and respect the seeds of the verb, hidden in the cultures and traditions of the peoples.” Because if God wishes to effective salvation of all the peoples, then “...the Holy Spirit worked already without doubt in the world before Christ was glorified... Sometimes even it is visibly present before the apostolic actions.” The proper end of missionary activity is evangelization. “In this way, that seed must be allowed to grow into the word of God in all of the world and in all the world must grow private autonomous churches sufficiently founded and endowed of their own energies in maturity and endowed with their own hierarchy, united to the faithful, and with the appropriate means to carry forward their life in a Christian way and contribute their corresponding part to the good of the entire church.” This pronouncement is proclaimed by the bishops of Latin America including the condemnation of the unjust structures of the social system of the time and having a perspective of liberation that in which the poor and by extension, the indigenous peoples should be subjects of their own history. The church itself must revise its structures and the life of its members, especially those pastoral agents with an eye towards a collective. In that way it will present an image that is authentically poor where the poor have the real capacity for participation and to be recognized in all their value. Santa Domingo signals how the new evangelization will continue in the line of the verb "made flesh" and it is in part of an emphatic conclusion states all evangelization must be in such an inculturation of the Gospel.

The only sure hope for a better future for our church resides in an evangelization for our peoples that is new, serious, profound, inculturated, missionary, programmed and committed. It is about listening with our hearts to the spirit of the fundamental questions
that the peoples of America are asking in a multitude of languages. It urges us to respond
to these questions that are borne from the land and from the traditional religions knowing
that they were ignored by the church in its first evangelization. This is not possible as long
as there's considered to exist models of a church of centuries past. The private church is
the primary subject of inculturation. There cannot be inculturation without an autonomous
church. Missionary activity makes Christ present as the author of salvation. How much
truth and grace was found already in the nations as almost through a secret presence of
God which liberates and eliminates evil through Christ who defeats the empire of the devil
and distances from sin. In this way, how good it is that in the hearts and minds of men,
there be seated the glory of God, freeing it from confusion of the demons and bringing it
to the happiness of men.

Today in America as in other parts of the world we see a model of a society in which the
powerful dominate. They marginalize and they go as far as to eliminate the weakest before
the homogenization caused by this system of globalization. Through providence we have
the taking of conscious cultural identity. As such the church has a special mission to be the
defender and promoter of a culture of life. This culture of life assumes a preferential option
for the poor, opposes or puts the globalization of solidarity in opposition to the
globalization of the markets. It makes itself a voice for those who have no voice;
denounces all violence, all racial discrimination; walks beside those condemned to the land,
those that are displaced; is a promoter of integral development in the construction of peace
in the search for justice and liberation. This culture of life is what is expressed as a service
of hope. This urgency exists in this precise moment in which the indigenous person,
conscious of being a subject to their own history, will not opt for a church that submerges
them in a conflict where they have to live their faith being aware of expressing it within a
dominant culture.

The inculturation of the gospel is a process which supposes acknowledgment of the
evangelical values which has been maintained more or less pure in the current culture.
And the acknowledgment of new values which coincide with the message of Christ. In the
midst of this inculturation, we look that society discover the Christian character of these
values, value them, and maintain them as they are. In addition to this, it pretends of the
incorporation of evangelical values which are absent in culture, either because they have
been darkened or because they have come to disappear. These values and convictions are fruit of the seeds of the verb which were already present in acting in our history so that all creatures would come to discover the presence of the Creator. We are calling to a new form of evangelization, to promote among the indigenous people their own autonomous cultural values in the midst of inculturation of the church to reach a greater accomplishment of the kingdom. Never again, then, a church on this continent without its indigenous peoples.

May the virgin of Guadeloupe, Empress of America who asked that the church be constructed not in the place of the victors but in the place of the defeated and in their message is a model of evangelization. May she continually guide our steps. Thank you. Thank you for your patience. And translator, nice work.

[ Applause ]

Question and Answer Session

Question 1: Thank you for really giving us a new insight into the word "evangelization". When we hear that word here in Canada and probably in America as well, we think of evangelists like Jerry Falwell or we think about people like Tim LaHaye, who's written a series of books called “Left Behind” where God's purpose in creating the earth was actually to destroy it and transport believers into a heaven that's completely other worldly and too bad for those poor suckers who are left behind - hence the title of the series. I'm just wondering where you're from, you know, there must be people who also promote this kind of understanding, a gospel, which is other worldly, which doesn't seem to touch on how we address our humanity. And I wonder what kind of response you make to those, for example, who say to the poor, well, you know, there's a heaven awaiting you, just wait until that comes. What would your response be?

Bishop Garcia: That assertion was in some ways true for me as well 40 years ago. But what we're talking about in Latin America is what happens when we have a convergence of the Vatican Council II and of the emergence of the peoples of Latin America? What we are
talking about here is a position that comes about from Vatican Council II and in the subsequent meetings of the Latin American Conference of Bishops and becomes an official position of the church. Although there are many still out there who refuse to believe it or don't want to believe it, it is the official position of the church. What happens coming out of Vatican Council II is the realization that there's not a juxtaposition between rich and poor but rather an imposition that there are rich because there are poor. And as such, the church cannot take a position of saying to the rich, we're going to counsel you in helping the poor. They have to accept a preferential option of not poor and there comes the word of Jesus in saying that what you do to the poor you do unto yourselves. So, this is saying that to those that say to the poor, just wait, your kingdom will come, the final judgment will come, what Vatican Council II is saying that those in most exists because of unjust structures that exist in societies, and it's our role as a society to condemn and challenge those unjust structures.

[ Applause ]

Question 2: Interpreter: Do you want to translate your own question? The question is essentially how in this time of great conflict, both personal, international and international conflict as has been lived in Chiapas, how we go about building spaces of dialogue between so-called indigenous communities, so-called Mestizo communities and so-called white or communities of the colonizers.

Bishop Garcia: There are three different levels of dialogue. The first is as in Chiapas, the level of dialogue between indigenous peoples and the authorities. The second level is between indigenous peoples and the economic and political systems that dominate over them or the dominant, economic, and political systems. The third level is a dialogue between and among individuals and organizations of society. Unfortunately as I alluded to in the talk, in Chiapas, this dialogue between the indigenous peoples and the authorities did not bear fruit. The indigenous people were seeking this dialogue for purposes of peace. They did not want to rise up for the sake of taking power but rather for the sake of challenging the existing sociopolitical structures and as such creating a transition face to a more just and egalitarian society. Those dialogues resulted in an accord which was then
presented to the National Congress of Mexico. Unfortunately those accords did not result in them being passed into law or being accepted by the Congress but rather resulted in four objections being raised which was a great disillusionment to the indigenous peoples and in and of itself did not result in renewed violence but rather in efforts to continue dialoguing. There are two positive results of this process. The first is that throughout the entire continent, indigenous peoples now acknowledge and see themselves as subjects of their own history which is a very positive step. The second positive result is in Mexican society and in many cases in the continent, is that people are aware that their countries are not underdeveloped or backwards because they have indigenous people but that the indigenous people themselves are victims of the structures that have been set in place and that those values of indigenous peoples have a role to play in the moving forward of these societies. One of the positive results is that the consciousness generated as a result of this process has meant that we do now have a transition government in place. Certainly it's a government that is not meeting all of its expectations and all of its results. Perhaps we're too big but the consciousness has resulted in the beginning to move forward. And we also now have consciousness that poverty is not a result of a lack of education or of drunkenness or of non-participation by indigenous people but rather that it is the social structures that cause that lack of education and that lack of participation and the poverty of indigenous people. So instead of asking what's changed in Mexico, what has changed internationally? Who sets the price of coffee in the world markets? Is it the producers? No. It's the consumers and the business people in the first world. So we cannot ask what's changing in Mexico without expecting to be called upon to make some changes in terms of justice internationally.

[ Applause ]

Bishop Garcia: What we see happening internationally, a positive thing is even before this deal with the towers - and you know what I'm referring to - even before this, we begin to see solidarity between the first world and the third world in the understanding that this world can be changed, that we can build a better society if we work together and that another world is possible and necessary. Two very positive points of the moment we're living in. The first is that despite the homogenization that globalization tries to impose on
us, we are seeing a rise, an increased awareness of cultural identity. That despite what's happening externally and what's being imposed, we are becoming more in touch with our cultural identity around the world. The second positive is this growth, this unprecedented growth of international solidarity working for a better world. These two things mean that we're working for change now, not in the very long term but in the near term future and we'll begin to see those changes. And on the third level, the final level, we're all becoming aware that we have a role to play in the two other levels, whether it be through political involvement, political engagement, participation and community group participation in fair trade initiatives. We have a role to play in those levels, but more importantly, we need to realize that we have a role to play in overcoming our own discrimination which is sometimes very subtly held but that we do need to overcome it and see our indigenous peoples as brothers and sisters, not because we are legally mandated to do so, but because we genuinely see them as our brothers and sisters in the struggle for a better world.

[ Applause ]

Bishop Garcia: I just noticed here something because I had impediments of being able to see that there is yet another translator. So I want to extend my thanks to the translator with the acknowledgment that that language that is being translated is one that is far superior to the ones that we're speaking because that language exists independent of whether we're speaking in English or French or Spanish or German, it's a language that can communicate internationally without being bound by cultures.