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Bishop Ruiz taught us to evolve

Richard McBrien | Mar. 7, 2011 Essays in Theology

Bishop Samuel Ruiz Garcia died Jan. 24. Unlike the much better-known and widely celebrated Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero, who was martyred at age 62 while presiding and preaching at Mass on March 24, 1980, Ruiz died at age 86 of complications from arterial hypertension and diabetes, both of which led eventually to a difficult final illness.

But he and Archbishop Romero had much in common. Both were champions of indigenous populations and both spent most of their ministries in defense of the poor and the powerless, for which they received many death threats.

Romero was a great and saintly man, but so was Bishop Ruiz. One was Salvadoran, the other was Mexican. Both were Spanish-speaking.

Ruiz had been bishop of San Cristobal de Las Casas for 40 years, from 1960 to 2000.

In 2002 he received the Niwano Peace Prize for his work ?raising the social standing of the indigenous communities of Mexico? and for his efforts toward ?the reclamation and preservation of their native cultures.?

Bishop Raul Vera Lopez of Saltino presided and preached at Ruiz?s funeral in Mexico City. Vera had been Bishop Ruiz?s coadjutor from 1995 to 1999.

?Don Samuel,? he said, ?was like the prophet Jeremiah, a man who lived and experienced contradiction.?

He was ?condemned by a section of society, but for the poor and for those who worked with him, Don Samuel was a bright light, who fulfilled what God told the prophet: ?This day I set you over nations and over kingdoms, to root up and to destroy and tear down...to build and to plant.??

For more on Bishop Ruiz, see David Agren's obituary:
Bishop Ruiz, champion of indigenous, dies [1],
or *NCR* special features from our archives:
Bishop Ruiz sought 'priesthood of the culture' [2], and
Finding the 'seeds of the word' with Bishop Ruiz [3]

The funeral Mass in Mexico City was attended by politicians, prominent journalists, and a group of campesinos (peasant farmers) wielding machetes emblazoned with Bishop Ruiz?s name. Another funeral Mass was celebrated on January 26 in Textla Gutierrez by the papal nuncio, Archbishop Christophe Pierre.

News of Bishop Ruiz?s death made national headlines because of his human rights advocacy and his mediation work in the state of Chiapas from 1994 to 1998 between the Mexican government and the indigenous Zapatista National Liberation Army.

Even the President of Mexico, Felipe Calderon, made a statement on the occasion of Ruiz?s death. He called it ?a great loss for Mexico.?

?Samuel Ruiz,? he said, ?strove to build a more just Mexico -- egalitarian, dignified and without discrimination in it -- so that indigenous communities have a voice and their rights and freedoms are respected by all.?

Bishop Ruiz had attended all four sessions of the Second Vatican Council, but he became better known internationally through his active participation in 1968 at the second general conference of Latin American bishops in Medellin, Bolivia.

?He was a bishop from a nowhere place,? Tom Quigley, former adviser to the U.S. bishops on Latin America, said, ?but it became known...and became the center of an awful lot of what was happening in Latin America.?

In his funeral homily, Bishop Vera noted that Ruiz ?arrived in a Chiapas plagued by injustices and abuses against indigenous peoples and the poor.?

?He saw with his own eyes the backs of indigenous men marked by the whips of plantation owners? who paid ?three cents a day? and forced workers to purchase from company stores with inflated prices.

?He also knew female indigenous subjected to the ?law of the first night,?? in which the bosses take the virginity of young women in their employ.

Ruiz?s condemnations of the powerful landlords were construed by some in the Vatican as originating in Marxist class theory rather than the Gospel. Archbishop Mark McGrath of Panama met the same fate, for which he was denied a cardinal?s hat.

When Archbishop Romero showed Pope John Paul II a photograph of one of his martyred priests, his face beaten to a pulp, the pope asked Romero if the priest was a Marxist, so pervasive was this mentality in the Vatican, even at the very top.

On his 75th birthday, Bishop Ruiz told nearly 2,000 people who packed the diocesan cathedral that he was grateful to God for being allowed to serve the diocese for nearly 40 years and that he learned much from the indigenous people.

?I can tell you,? he said, that I am not the same person who arrived here 40 years ago. ?The bishop that arrived here has been left behind, has evolved.?

And so should we all.t

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