

"The Death of Bishop Ruiz"  
 Week of February 28, 2011  
 ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY  
 By Rev. Richard P. McBrien

Bishop Samuel Ruiz Garcia died on January 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, Bishop 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'" (see the Catholic News Service report by David Agren, published in the on-line edition of *The National Catholic Reporter* for January 25, "Bishop Garcia, champion of indigenous, dies in Mexico").

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, c.s.c., 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 75<sup>th</sup> 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.

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"Pope Benedict XVI and Ecumenism"  
 Week of March 7, 2011  
 ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY  
 By Rev. Richard P. McBrien

Speaking at an audience with a delegation from the Lutheran Church in Germany, upon the conclusion of the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (January 18-25), Pope Benedict XVI warned that hard political choices over the family, marriage, and human sexuality cannot be played down for the sake of preserving good relations among the various Christian denominations.

(This week's column relies in part on senior correspondent John Allen's on-line report to *The National Catholic Reporter*, "Ecumenical manners can't blunt pro-life message, pope says," January 24, 2011.)

The pope called for a united front among Christians on these sexual debates, "which cannot be minimized or avoided simply to avoid endangering the agreement we've already achieved."

He noted that new fault lines have developed in Christianity, especially within the Anglican Communion, over gay rights and gender roles.

In his remarks to the German Lutherans, Benedict XVI stressed that efforts toward Christian unity are a "basic obligation of the Church," while noting that sometimes "the conversation partners bring completely different conceptions of church unity."

Noting that 2017 will mark the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Martin Luther's posting of his famous 95 theses, commonly held to mark the beginning of the Reformation, the pope called upon Lutherans and Catholics alike to foster a "common ecumenical commemoration," which must be rooted in "common obedience to our Lord and his Word."

The difficulty is that our Lord said nothing at all about homosexuality, contraception, abortion, in vitro fertilization, embryonic stem cell research, or any of the other highly charged issues connected with human sexuality and reproduction.

This doesn't mean that these are issues of no moral consequence, but only that they do not involve "obedience" to Jesus and his Word.

Moreover, if popes more like John XXIII and Paul VI had been on the Chair of St. Peter rather than John Paul II or Benedict XVI, the Catholic Church would likely have had a different kind of hierarchy and a far less rigid approach to issues of human sexuality and reproduction.

Such popes would have invited separated Christians, such as the German Lutherans, to dialogue with Catholic pastoral leaders and theologians in order to seek common ground on these difficult, debatable issues.

As Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et spes*) put it, "In fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of men and women in the search for truth, and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems which arise in the life of individuals and from social relationships" (n.16).

However, because of the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, the Catholic Church is a far more conservative Church—in theology, spirituality, worship, and especially its episcopal leadership--than it has to be if it is to be rooted in "obedience to our Lord and his Word."

All that one has to do is compare and contrast the Catholic Church as it was under Popes John XXIII and Paul VI before and during the Second Vatican Council with its recent and current situation under Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

Younger Catholics who were not alive immediately before and during Vatican II have not personally experienced the difference, but they remain in, or are alienated from, the Church for their own reasons.

On the other hand, Catholics over the age of 60 do remember from varied personal experiences the pre-Vatican II Church, Pope John XXIII, and the Council.

That is why some of these older Catholics have joined lay organizations like Call to Action and Voice of the Faithful, and that is also why these organizations attract so few younger Catholics, not because the mission of these organizations is irrelevant to their concerns, but because they have no basis for comparing and contrasting the current Church with the Church of John XXIII, Paul VI, and Vatican II.

As far as younger Catholics are concerned, the Catholic Church has always been the way it is under John Paul II and Benedict XVI—unyielding on sexual and reproductive issues, even to the point of judging Catholic orthodoxy almost exclusively on the basis of fidelity to current and recent official Catholic teachings on these subjects.

But those with a sense of history, whether over 60 or not, know that this is but a phase in the long history of the Catholic Church. And John Paul II and Benedict XVI are but two of the more than 260 men who have occupied the Chair of St. Peter.

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