

Samuel Ruíz: the Bishop of the Indians

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Far from aiding Mexico's Zapatista uprising, Ruíz used his understanding of indigenous communities to help bring peace

Thousands of Indians in southeastern Mexico [declared war on the government](#) in January 1994. With weapons in hand, members of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) occupied several cities and towns in the state of Chiapas. Immediately, many politicians, intellectuals and media commentators accused [Samuel Ruíz](#), the Catholic bishop of the diocese of San Cristobal, of being responsible for the uprising.

Complaints against Ruíz were never proven, and indeed, he played a key role as mediator in the [peace process](#) between the Zapatistas and the Mexican government. The false accusations did contain a grain of truth: although the EZLN was made up of people with different faiths and with none, many of the indigenous rebels had acquired social consciousness thanks to the evangelising work of Ruíz. During the nearly 40 years Ruíz spent as head of the diocese, the number of indigenous catechists and deacons grew to about 8,000 and 400 respectively, and some of the rebel leaders came from these ranks.

The attacks against Ruíz throughout his life were common both within the Catholic church and beyond. Few people have influenced the formation of the modern indigenous movement in [Mexico](#) as he did. And few people's lives and beliefs have been so changed by the action of indigenous peoples as his was. Aboriginal peoples transformed him; and in return, he helped them reconstruct themselves as subjects of their own history.

Ruíz, who died in Mexico City on Monday, aged 86, was appointed bishop of San Cristobal, a largely poor and indigenous diocese, in 1959. There he found a colonial Catholic church dedicated to the destruction of indigenous ways of life and indigenous communities mired in poverty, the victims of exploitation, oppression and racism.

During the early years of his administration, Ruíz travelled in very precarious conditions throughout diocese. In the course of this journey, and his life with the Indians, he experienced a profound religious conversion. From being a politically conservative religious man, he became a man committed to the poor.

In the 70s, he formed his ideas about how to create a popular church. He started up or supported collective organisations to respond to the reality of life in the area and transform it. Most modern peasant and indigenous organisations in Chiapas that are now fighting for land, health, education and self-management were born in those years.

In the late 70s and early 80s, with its Central American revolutions, the [assassination of Bishop Oscar Romero in El Salvador](#) at the hands of death squads and the [displacement of Guatemalans in Chiapas](#), Ruíz founded various organisations to defend human rights and

advocacy groups to enable grassroots development, reconciling faith and the struggle for justice.

Ruíz had an important role in the renewal of the church in Mexico and Latin America. He was part of a group of clerics committed to the liberation struggles, the formation of an indigenous church, the development of Indian theology and the primacy of the poor. "The only way to be universal in Latin America is to be with the poor," he said.

He promoted workshops of Indian theology, drawing on the conceptual heritage of indigenous languages and ancient Mayan thought. He prompted a rethink of the catechism, liturgy, church institutions and spirituality. However, the Vatican hierarchy was not sympathetic to his project, and he never fulfilled his dream of ordaining in his diocese the first indigenous priests in Chiapas.

Many in the communities of the San Cristobal diocese took up arms and joined the EZLN in the early 90s. They were tired of seeking legal redress and tired of suffering the violation of their human rights. Ruíz tried to stop the uprising but could not do it. The indigenous dignity that he had helped to blossom had begun to express itself in ways he had not wanted.

When the storm broke in 1994, Ruíz took his commitment to the pursuit of peace with justice and dignity. His moral authority in the Zapatista communities, and his understanding of their demands, were crucial to finding a negotiated solution to the conflict. The fact that today there is still a declaration of war, and the army functions as an occupation force in Chiapas, was despite his efforts, not because of them.

Ruíz was a bridge between the Indian world and the Catholic church. A disciplined man of his church, he never renounced the struggle to defend the autonomy of indigenous peoples. He was indeed the Bishop of the Indians.

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