

## A Moral and Spiritual Imperative

Dear Mission Friends:

We are hearing a lot about divisiveness, particularly in this U.S. election year. **But the most glaring global division—perhaps the one from which most others stem—is that between the haves and the have-nots.** One billion people today are living in extreme poverty, defined as having to live on less than \$1.25 a day. The good news is that since 1990 that number has been cut in half from two billion, and according to a report facilitated and endorsed by the World Bank Group in 2015, “We have ample evidence...showing that we can now end extreme poverty [by 2030].”

**In denying basic economic rights, extreme poverty is the most dangerous threat to human rights and dignity today.** The goal to end it throughout the world by 2030 is indeed ambitious but the progress made since 1990 shows that we have both the resources and the ability.

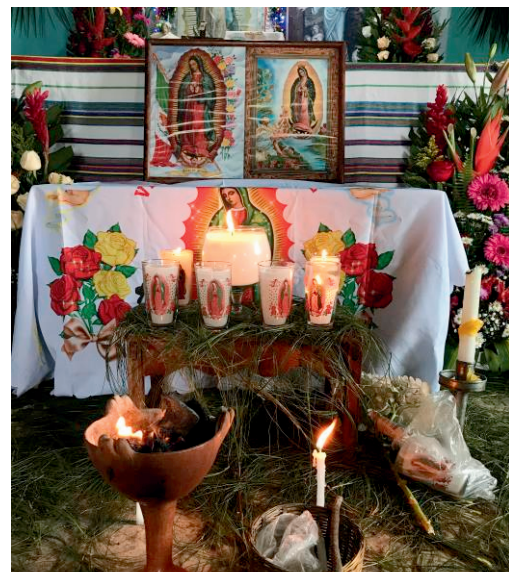


*Fr. Pedro Barrera Silva, O.P., right, newly ordained pastor of San Juan Diego parish in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, leading his parishioners. Below, offerings to Our Lady of Guadalupe in a chapel in the highlands.*

The primary—and perpetual—obstacles of corruption and greed persist, but the global community has the *responsibility to protect* people from grave violations of their human rights when the people’s own government fails to do so.

The World Bank Group is a partnership of 189 countries charged with fighting the worldwide “scandal of extreme poverty” through sustainable solutions. While secular, the group recognizes that helping the poor is a central tenet of most religions and that it is often faith-based organizations who are in the trenches doing the crucial work of protecting the vulnerable, alleviating suffering, and delivering essential services.

The group is mindful that most religions uphold respect for the dignity and equality of all humankind and that faith, a constant source of strength for many, serves to preserve and advance one’s human dignity.



And so the group hosted a roundtable of thirty religious leaders from around the world who drafted the report, entitled “Ending Extreme Poverty: A Moral and Spiritual Imperative.” Declaring that the moral test of our society is “how the weakest and most vulnerable are faring,” the report affirmed that faith can and indeed does help communities stand strong in their struggle for justice and equality.

**The Church in particular has come to know that a foundation of genuine respect for others and their authentic culture can have an impact on material well-being and lead to a better quality of life.** Their experience of serving across the borders of countries and cultures has given them “practical insight into where the needs are deepest and which... approaches are most effective,” according to an enlightening article by David Hollenbach, “An Advocate for All: How the Catholic Church Promotes Human Dignity.”

One of the poorest regions in the world, certainly the poorest in Mexico, is the country’s southernmost state of Chiapas. The largest indigenous group in the highlands of Chiapas is from Chamula, a remote region on the outskirts of the colonial town of San Cristóbal from which, because of religious and political persecution over the last several decades, there have been several waves of expulsion. During the 90s in particular, a half million people in the state were displaced, including countless Zapatistas



and Catholics in Chamula who were killed, kidnapped, or forced into exile. Severe repression ensued, and to this day most live in extremely precarious conditions, receiving no aid or assistance from the Mexican government. In fact it was as recent as a 2004 visit to Chiapas that Fr. Michael Hurley, O.P. wrote, “Municipal leaders are denying Catholic families access to the local schools and even the local water supply.”

The beloved Don Samuel Ruiz (*above*), bishop of the Chiapas diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas from 1959-2000, took on the struggle to help the native people recover their dignity and demand that their rights be respected by laying the foundation for an indigenous Church. **He recognized that while the word of God is important, it must be combined with a people’s culture, traditions, and beliefs in order to protect their rights.** And he understood how, in a state torn apart by political, religious, and cultural conflicts, priests from the indigenous population and speaking the native languages were essential models for spreading Christ’s teachings, providing a structure for faith expression, and improving living conditions.

But there was a dire shortage of priests, and so, due to the sheer numbers of the poor and dispossessed, Don Samuel ordained 400 permanent indigenous deacons, most of them married. In 1963, shortly after he became bishop, our Western Dominican Province established its first mission in Chiapas, and we joined him in his efforts toward building an indigenous Church. And in 2013 and 2014 respectively, the Vatican gave official permission to use Mayan languages in the liturgies and to ordain deacons who were married.

To be ordained a permanent deacon, one must not only have a record of active church service but also receive vigorous training in theology. Deacons (*below*) cannot celebrate Mass but can perform baptisms and marriages, preside over liturgies in which they offer blessings and laying on of hands, give homilies, and distribute Communion (with hosts consecrated by priests.) They are reimbursed for bus fare and meals but receive no fixed salary.







Today, the seeds planted by Don Samuel are finally bearing fruit. The Bible and liturgies have been translated into the native Tzeltal and Tzotzil and, while there is still a long, challenging road to hoe— In a diocese of two million, there are 329 permanent deacons and only eight indigenous priests! — the number of indigenous choosing to serve the Church has started to grow. And Catholics who were expelled from their villages as victims of religious intolerance have actually founded and built their own parishes closer to where they now live.

The first one established by its own people was the Dominican parish of San Juan Diego, serving thousands in and around San Cristóbal, including 50 remote villages from which many journeyed the winding, rugged mountain trails last December 9<sup>th</sup> to celebrate the feast day of their parish's namesake.

The celebration began with the formal appointment of the new pastor, Fr. Pedro Barrera Silva, O.P., who had recently been ordained but had long been serving the area as a brother.



*Top, the congregation saying the Our Father during the Mass in honor of San Juan Diego; left, the archbishop presiding, assisted by Fr. Pedro and a deacon.*

Fr. Pedro assisted the current bishop of the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Archbishop Rodrigo Aguilar Martínez, who presided over the Mass which included naming new deacons and Eucharistic ministers as well as conferring sacraments of Confirmation and First Communion to hundreds of eager recipients.

The Sunday after Christmas, Fr. Pedro embarked on what would become his more routine schedule when he made the trek to a remote village, Molino de los Arcos, to celebrate Mass, the first ever for that community, and in their native Tzotzil too!

The village's chapel, typical of most in the rugged highlands which can top 7,000 feet, is located in a ravine surrounded by trees. Father writes that the air inside was heavy with incense and myrrh and the scene was illuminated by hundreds of colorful candles. There were no pews but dozens of faithful were sitting on a carpet of pine needles, praying aloud or silently, looking up with delight and pride when they glimpsed a priest entering their sacred space for the first time. Father's plan is to establish regular, rotating visits to as many of these chapels as he is able.





*Above, welcoming banners outside the chapel in Molino de los Arcos, typical of many; left, women selling weavings and vegetables in the church square; and right, a boy enjoying a welcome snack after Mass.*



Can extreme poverty actually be alleviated by 2030? It is indeed a boldly ambitious goal, but one which the Dominican Mission Foundation, by way of the generosity and selflessness of you, our Mission Friends, has, for 57 years, played a humble role toward attaining. Through not only our support of the Dominican friars in the Chiapas diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas, but also our own friars in Mexicali, Mexico; our Fr. Timothy Conlan, O.P. in Rabinal, Guatemala; the Dominican sisters of the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine in Ayene, Equatorial Guinea; and the Dominican sisters of St. Catherine of Siena in Mosul, Iraq; as well as those missions for which we were able to achieve our goals, working ourselves “out of a job,”

including the Tala Leper Colony in the Philippines and the Communist-demoralized capital of Vilnius, Lithuania—through all of these ministries around the world, we have always aspired toward obeying what the World Bank Group’s religious roundtable has now declared a moral and spiritual imperative. And with your continued sacrifices, we will persevere in doing our part to ensure that our society eventually passes its moral test by way of how its weakest and most vulnerable are faring.

In Christ’s peace and love,  
Lesley Warnshuis

#### **A Reading for Lent from Isaiah 58:6-7**

*This is the fasting that I wish:  
to release those bound unjustly,  
untying the thongs of the yoke;  
to set free the oppressed,  
breaking every yoke;  
to share your bread with the hungry,  
sheltering the oppressed and the homeless;  
to clothe the naked when you see them,  
and not to turn your back on your own.*