

Nuremberg International Human Rights Award 2001

Laudator Adolfo Pérez Esquivel

Monsignore Samuel Ruiz,

Sehr geehrte Damen und Herren.....sehr geehrte Amtsträger.....

I would like to thank you for the invitation and the honour to introduce Monsignore Samuel Ruiz during this festive award ceremony in recognition of his many years of committed struggle for individual and collective human rights.

A month ago Don Samuel travelled to Argentina where he took part in various activities. Amongst others he made speeches and met with various people from social and religious circles. It is always a joy to meet up with friends.

When he heard that I was the one to introduce him here today, he said to me: "Fine, fine, but don't tell lies!" So I promise to say the truth and nothing but the truth before he give me penitence to do.

I have known Monsignore Samuel Ruiz for many years, and I have been following his committed fight alongside many peoples, mainly the poorest and most needy. His is a very special way of dealing with his indigenous brothers and sisters.

His work as priest and Catholic bishop is well known, not only in Mexico and Latin America, it is also recognised in other parts of the world. This is why I will not concentrate on the more general and well-known aspects of the work of Monsignore Samuel Ruiz, on his many years of pastoral and social work as bishop of the diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas, on the responsibility he took upon himself in the face of the conflicts growing in Mexico, especially in the Chiapas region in the context of the revolt of the indigenous movement.

I would rather talk about a friend, a Christian, a man who tries to live his faith and the preaching of the Gospel, in a very concrete commitment to fight alongside the poorest and most needy, our indigenous brothers and sisters who are victims of injustice, discrimination and exploitation.

Don Samuel always knew how to implement the challenge of the preaching and the struggle for individual and collective human rights, for the dignity and the respect we all owe to each other, and he did this by finding space for dialogue and solutions to problems, space which made it possible to find paths towards peace as a result of truth and justice. He found this space and was an attentive listener and opened and accompanied these dialogues.

I have known Don Samuel for decades, and on this path we have experienced many a station together. And I would like to recall some of these stations which not only reflect our personal situation, us playing the main part, but also mirror the life and path of the church on the Latin American continent as a whole.

Under pope John XXIII, within the framework of the Second Vatican Council and the conference of Latin American bishops in Medellín, Columbia, the church threw open wide its doors and windows to let in light and dispel the dust of many centuries. This attitude and the decision to achieve a new deepening of faith, starting with the preaching of the gospel by Christians and the heeding of their opinions, led to a thorough transformation as far as the building up of paths for a struggle and by creating hope because of the "option for the poor", on the basis of faith and social commitment.

On the continent this led to various prophetic voices making public and condemning the situation of violence and injustice to which the majority of Latin American peoples are subjected to.

These were the voices of the impoverished, of those who did not have any voices but who now started slowly to take on their main role in history again, to discover a meaning



NÜRNBERG
STADT DES FRIEDENS
UND DER
MENSCHENRECHTE

NUREMBERG
CITY OF PEACE
AND HUMAN RIGHTS



to their lives, rediscovering their dignity and hope a hope which would make possible the building of a more just and humane world for all.

As a counterpoint to the peoples and their leading role where they cease to be just spectators, but take an active part in building their own lives and their own history, in this context the mechanisms of suppression were violently brought to life on the entire continent, upon which was imposed the doctrine of "National Security". In the military academy "Escuela de las Américas" in Panama as well as in military academies in the USA more than 80.000 Latin American military were trained for establishing dictatorships all over the entire continent with grave consequences for the lives of the people who in the following years had to suffer terror in the form of torture, prison, murders and disappearing persons. It is a systematic plan of destruction and subjugation in the wake of which people experience genocide we're trying to cope with up to this day. May justice prevail so that those grave violations of human rights will never be repeated again.

Guatemala is one of the countries with the highest incidence of human rights violations in all of Latin America. Thousands of people became victims of violence. Many of them tried to leave the country and after long walks looked for refuge at the Mexican border, others tried to reach other countries such as the USA or Europe in order to save their lives and the live of their families and communities.

In these dramatic circumstances, groups from parishes, survivors of the massacres, mostly women and children, tried to get through to the refugee camps in the native forest of Peten in Mexico, amongst others to the camps Emiliano Zapata, Cuatro Pueblos.

During one of my journeys to this region I had the opportunity, together with Don Samuel, the High Commissioner of the United Nations for Refugee Issues ACNUR, the pastoral teams from the diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas and other international groups to join in the humanitarian work done by those groupings by giving support to thousands of Gualtemaltese citizens who had fled to the camps in Peten. Among all the pain and all the fear there was still a space for hope and life. I remember how Don Samuel during this journey celebrated a marriage which brought joy and hope to the indigenous communities.

In other Latin American countries, people went into exile on their own, and then tried to reunite with their families. The Gualtemaltese people went into exile in parish groups, since their villages were raised to the ground by the army and great numbers had been massacred, particularly boys, youths and young adult men.

To help the victims and give them humanitarian aid, was one of the constant concerns of bishop Samuel Ruiz and the pastoral team of his diocese. They tried to make sure that those people found the necessary protection and solidarity in Mexico.

In the context of his continuous commitment to the defence of individual and collective human rights, he, together with other bishops, priest and lay people tried to begin intensive action via the solidarity committee for the peoples of Latin America, by travelling to various countries visiting groups as well as Christian and non-Christian social movements, talking about his ideas and sharing their prayers and the path of the church of the people of God with them.

On August 12, 1976, there was an event which left deep marks and which perhaps was not given the importance which indeed it had for the church and the peoples, that is the Bishops' Conference of Latin American bishops in Riobamba, Ecuador, in the "Casa de la Santa Cruz", where bishops shared their pastoral experiences and talked about the options and the ways forward for the Latin American church. The meeting was hosted by the bishop of the diocese of Riobamba, Monsignore Leonidas Proaño.

Together with priests, theologians and advisors I took part in this conference, side by side with 17 Latin American and 4 Spanish-speaking bishops from the USA.

The conference was overshadowed by an event which had deeply moved all of us, the murder of the bishop of La Rioja in Argentina, Monsignore Enrique Angelelli, by the Argentinian military dictators on August 5. At the time the entire continent experiences very hard and violent times,

and it was important to find out how to help the peoples.

At the beginning of the conference we remembered Monsignore Angelelli. We knew that the meeting of bishops was being watched by the authorities of the Ecuador military dictatorship. Monsignore Leonidas Proaño, the bishop of Riobamba, was very critical of the current situation and a great champion of human rights, especially for the Indians, the victims of suppression by the land owners and the authorities who had had several peasants killed.

We were working in groups when a heavily armed military unit burst into the remote "Casa de la Santa Cruz". We were arrested and taken to the barracks in the city of Quito. Among the bishops was Monsignore Samuel Ruiz. Those were moments of close community feeling and prayer. Many asked themselves: "If this happens to bishops, that they are suppressed and taken to prison, what would happen to the poor, to those who have nothing and are victims of violence?" This reflection on the situation of the continent, on the suppression waged against its peoples and against the church, was just one step in the escalating spiral of violence and of genocide which was started by the dictatorships in all of Latin America.

Working together with the poor, the indigenous brothers and sisters was characteristic of the path taken by the church in San Cristóbal de las Casas. Don Samuel in word and action stood up for the preaching of human rights and denounced human rights violations, in very concrete actions of solidarity and support, in his entire pastoral work.

When there was the revolt of the indigenous population in Chiapas, who no longer wanted to tolerate the violence, humiliation and social exclusion in Mexico which has lasted for centuries, the government's first reaction was to suppress this revolt with violence. But thanks to the determined action of civil society, to the solidarity of groups and movements as well as the unerring stance of Monsignore Samuel Ruiz, who in his endeavours to avoid the conflict ending in violence became an authorised partner in the dialogue between and Indians and the regional and national authorities, this conflict gained national as well as international.

One symbolic figure arose from the indigenous movement as its spokesperson and leader of their demands, sub-commander Marcos. The difficult task taken on by Don Samuel was that of starting negotiations, which might enable a solution to this conflict to be found while respecting the rights of the Indians, so that via truth and justice, peace might be achieved.

His words, his determination and his resistance contributed to the fact that the situation did not lead to violent actions; it was his balanced and very calm attitude which has stood him in good stead up until today when he tries to find a solution for the rights of the indigenous populations.

Don Samuel suffered slander and the attacks, such as a physical attack on his sister who was a victim of the violence of those who wanted to keep up the suppression of indigenous peoples, but still he never gave up.

In recognition of his untiring work for the defence of human life and the individual and collective dignity of human beings I have suggested him as a candidate for the Peace Nobel Prize and for the UNESCO Award for Peace Education. Independent of whether or not he will be honoured with these awards, his most valuable achievement in my opinion is his devotion as a priest to a faith lived in commitment and in prayer side by side which his people and all other peoples.

Today Don Samuel as bishop emeritus of the diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas continues his unerring commitment to his profound task.

I would like to join the City of Nuremberg in honouring him for his achievements today him, a man whose life has been bearing witness for his committed struggle for human rights and who is a pastor who shows us the path of life and dignity on the basis of his faith.

Dear brother, may the Lord in His infinite mercy continue to give you strength and hope. All of us, who are accompanying you, thank you for testimony for life. Please accept this brotherly embrace as a peace of peace and goodwill.

Adolfo Pérez Esquivel

Nuremberg, September 16, 2001

