

Why Bishop Samuel Ruiz García Was Selected as the Recipient of the 19th Niwano Peace Prize

The Niwano Peace Foundation (Nichiko Niwano, president; Motoyuki Naganuma, chairman) has decided to award the 19th Niwano Peace Prize to Bishop Samuel Ruiz García, president of the Oscar Romero International Solidarity Secretariat, Fray Bartolome de Las Casas Human Rights Center, and Service and Advice for the Peace in Mexico. The 77-year-old Bishop Ruiz has served as a Roman Catholic bishop for over 40 years in the Mexican state of Chiapas. Bishop Ruiz was selected as recipient of the prize following rigorous screening by a committee of seven members, representing such faiths as Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, from among those nominated by 1,000 persons of recognized stature from 125 countries worldwide.

Bishop Ruiz has long been engaged in human rights activities in Mexico and elsewhere in Central and South America. He has devoted himself untiringly especially to raising the social standing of the indigenous communities of Mexico and to the reclamation and preservation of their native cultures. Sincerity and impartiality are hallmarks of his personality and his activities based on his religious faith have brought him the deep trust of ordinary citizens, who lovingly call him “the bishop of the poor.” The path he has followed, which is the unvarying pursuit of an ethic that is universal to all of humanity, instead of placing disproportionate emphasis on political and economic issues has achieved tremendous influence not only in Latin America but all over the world.

Bishop Ruiz was born in Irapuato in the state of Guanajuato, Mexico, in 1924 as the first of five brothers and sisters. After finishing his elementary and secondary education in Irapuato, he enrolled in a theological seminary. In 1947 he went on to pursue further studies at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. He was ordained a priest in 1949, and in 1959, at the young age of 35, he was appointed bishop of the diocese of San Christobal de Las Casas, in the state of Chiapas. Soon after his appointment, Bishop Ruiz began making the rounds of his diocese, leaving no location unvisited. This enabled him to become keenly aware of the social injustices that the country’s indigenous peoples had long been forced to endure.

Mexico’s native people have suffered poverty, oppression, and discrimination for over 500 years, since the time of Christopher Columbus and the subsequent Spanish colonial rule. It is generally known that over the years the governments in power and a handful of influential families usurped all rights to the land and its uses from the indigenous peoples, who instead worked as cheap labor. Influential families called cacique monopolized the wealth and ruled over hundreds and thousands of members of the native peoples. This was the situation that had continued, in which powerful landowners and giant corporations maintained overt ties with the local and national governments. At the time of Bishop Ruiz’s appointment the situation of the indigenous people in Chiapas was especially desperate. Some 60 percent of the laborers in the state received a minimum wage of less than US\$120 per month and the infant mortality rate in the state was the highest in the country. Under the official discriminatory policy, indigenous peoples were not allowed even to use

the raised sidewalks, but were required to walk only in the roadways. The solid, immobile social foundation that existed maintained itself through discrimination and exploitation.

These grave social injustices made Bishop Ruiz's heart ache. This was around the time of the Second Vatican Council, which began in 1962. The bishop participated in all of the sessions. The experience was a turning point for him as a man of religion. Vatican II declared that evangelism does not mean the uniform transmission of the gospel but means to clarify and embody the meaning of the Christian message in the actual history and culture of a region. It was a fact that past evangelism in Central and South America accompanied the introduction of Western culture into the region, which often was used as a factor in suppressing native culture. Based on his reflection on these historical facts, Bishop Ruiz began a new approach to the training of local clergy and missionaries. In his view, those who are to serve as missionaries should begin their careers by learning the language and culture of the place to which they are assigned. A new evangelical vision rooted in the actual conditions gradually took form in the process of applying his new approach.

A variety of reforms then began to take place in Bishop Ruiz's diocese. What many people consider the most important of them was the holding of the National Indigenous Congress in 1974. Instead of limiting this to a series of theoretical discussions, the bishop invited representatives of the indigenous peoples to participate and made it an opportunity for all who took part to share in the real problems and to promote collaboration among them. Through their participation in the Congress, representatives of the indigenous peoples were able to make heard their claims that for their subsistence they needed access to education and to marketing channels for the produce they raise, to benefit from land distribution, and to receive better health and hygiene services.

Facing these demands deeply rooted in the reality of their lives, Bishop Ruiz realized that the evangelical plans for his diocese were still far from meeting the actual needs of the local people. He became firmly convinced that the message of the church must not remain an ideal transcending everyday life, but must provide answers to the problems arising in actual society.

Immediately after the Indigenous Congress, Bishop Ruiz began to energetically develop a social action program for the poverty-stricken people of the region. He constantly stressed the importance of the indigenous peoples becoming "the subject of their history." Instead of allowing others to decide their history and destiny, they should become their own masters. The aspiration of Bishop Ruiz—that the indigenous peoples should reclaim their ethnic and cultural roots and regain their own identities—gradually but steadily became shared by the native peoples themselves and took root in their hearts.

In January 1994, the Chiapas-based Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) declared war against the Mexican Army when the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), of which Mexico was to become a member along with the United States and Canada, came into effect. If free trade became a fact, it was feared that an influx of giant capital from the United States might seriously affect the farming of the native peoples, for whom the mainstays were the growing of coffee and corn, making their dire living conditions even worse. What EZLN demanded more than anything else was the protection of the livelihood of indigenous peoples and the recovery and

preservation of their rights. Eleven days after the declaration of “war,” the government of Mexico proposed a cease-fire, which EZLN agreed to accept. It was Bishop Ruiz who acted as only one mediator between the two sides. He later became the chief representative of a national committee that was organized for consolidating mediation capability.

EZLN’s Sub-commander Marcos described Bishop Ruiz’s mediation efforts this way: “As the chief representative of the national committee that acted as mediator between us to remove every obstacle in the path to peace, Bishop Ruiz has demonstrated genuine and unchanging care. . . . If peace can be brought to our land, it is no doubt thanks to the efforts of the national committee which endeavors to achieve peace. We offer our sincere respect to the sacrificing activities of the members of the national mediation committee, most of all to Bishop Samuel Ruiz.”

Bishop Ruiz was even detained by the government of those days and once became the target of an assassination attempt by a group connected to the ruling political party. Despite such incidents, he continued his dedicated mediation efforts, which have gained him deep respect and acclaim from people not only in Mexico but the world over. He is truly a symbol of peace with justice and dignity.

“We cannot find our own way if we are not searching for the way of the others as well.” Bishop Ruiz quoted this passage from the Christian Bible when he once said it is important for the creation of community sentiment to love others, to observe carefully the developments of history, and to try to understand others. At the same time, he said, these are things that people are able to learn from the community to which they belong.

Regarding international collaboration among the different Church groups involved in mediation and peacemaking to share experiences and engage in common theological reflections, Bishop Ruiz has said, “It is not only a question of making a summary of the work of mediation in various places. It is a matter of performing critical reflection on the method and process of mediation and peace-building so that we can avoid the mistakes of others and learn from each other’s experiences.” Bishop Ruiz is not only a key person of the ecumenical movement as such, but also plays an important role in the activities of international interreligious dialogue and cooperation toward peace.

Most religions preach that every life is equally valuable. This fundamental truth, however, is becoming lost in the present-day world. It is in this respect that the Niwano Peace Foundation wishes here to express its deep appreciation for Bishop Ruiz’s significant contributions to peace which have been permeated by a universal ethic. In commemoration of Bishop Ruiz’s considerable achievements up to this time and with the sincere prayer that countless more people will be inspired to follow in his footsteps, we are pleased and honored to bestow the 19th Niwano Peace Prize on Bishop Samuel Ruiz García.