

## **WORDS OF GRATITUDE AND ACCEPTANCE OF THE 19th NIWANO PEACE PRIZE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

I am still bewildered by the news that I was nominated and later selected to receive the 19<sup>th</sup> Niwano Peace Prize. Even more so, when the international horizon has changed and we are once again living on a planet in war. Time passes quickly and distances us from the historical opportunity to make global decisions that could change the economic and political structures that generate violence and death in our society, instead of legitimizing a bellicose response that adds the death of more innocent people to the already long list of victims of this unjust system.

Furthermore, given the context I've just described, I ask myself how one can be grateful for a prize such as this one? How can one feel pleased when the prize is awarded in recognition of the suffering of so many people and of the violation of their human rights?

Any prize awarded for the defense of Human Rights gives recognition to the existence of human rights abuses and the lack of respect for the rights themselves. Unfortunately, receiving this prize signifies that we are still waiting for the time in which human dignity is fully respected in Mexico and particularly, in Chiapas.

Prizes of this nature help us to come closer to situations of death, sorrow, war and violence through a positive channel. In other words, they reveal the reality of pain that originates from injustice and in an ingenious fashion, call greater attention to it.

I accept this recognition on behalf of all those who it truly belongs to and who cannot receive it in person because they have been silenced, because they are in jail or because they are running for their lives.

But they are not the only human beings who are suffering from violence and violations to their rights. Throughout the Americas, there are many more who are excluded, who don't have access to a hot meal or the basic minimum they need to live in dignity.

In the midst of so much suffering and violence, we perceive the good news that comes to us from the poor.

### **THE GOOD NEWS OF THE POOR**

In fact, our hope for the future comes from the poor, from indigenous peoples and from peasants. They are the ones who give meaning to time and reaffirm our hope to see changes in the economic system that exploits them, the political system that excludes them and the social system that denigrates them.

The poor bring into evidence the selfishness and conflicts of human history but they are also the force behind the most significant changes in our history.

They are the historical mediation of our salvation. They are the reference point for real human relations and their dignity and well-being are the foundation for formulating an economic system with legitimacy. They are the reason why we can describe the course of history and without them we would not understand the sense of our existence.

The prize that I am receiving today enables me to once again denounce the suffering of the poor, of indigenous peoples, of mestizo peasants in the rural areas of Chiapas and throughout Mexico. At the same time, this prize gives us the possibility to share with you the message of the unjust needs that the poor have and experience every day.

A memory of Pascuala comes to mind. Pascuala is a young indigenous woman who visited my home from time to time to sell bread for her survival. A young and small woman, she would walk with her head bowed down, focusing on the floor most of the time. I greeted her and asked her where she was headed. She answered, almost in a whisper, that she was going to school to learn how to read and write. I congratulated her for her efforts and encouraged her. The next day I ran into her again as she was returning from her first class. "How was your class, Pascuala?" I asked. She came closer with her head held high, looked me straight in the eye as she showed me her notebook and said, "Look what I did. I'm starting to learn to read and write," and she pointed out her first scribbled words. She had undergone an enormous transformation. She no longer felt inferior and a huge smile lit up her face.

This new situation in Pascuala's life (that for others is a "normal" situation that comes naturally) transformed her life because she discovered herself as a human being. Now Pascuala walks erect, looking straight ahead and no longer staring at the ground.

## THE RIGHT TO BE DIFFERENT FOR BEING EQUAL

It's paradoxical that while the economic and political system considers the poor as good-for-nothings, as expendable beings, history has shown us that without the poor, there would be no changes in our own history. The poor are protagonists of change.

We are perplexed when we realize that the system that created the poor, that exploits them and makes them who they are, is the same system that rejects them and denies their very existence: ignoring, eliminating or excluding them.

The poor become a nuisance for the system and indigenous peoples are ignored as long as they aren't a vital part of the chain of production. This system, and the ideology it subscribes to, does not remotely comprehend the right to be different that should be afforded for being equal.

Thus, the warrantors of "order", these public servants, are really converted into warrantors of uniformity: of that which is non-alternative, of that which is non-other.

The right to be different for being equal, expressed in so many ways in our recent times, is fighting to be recognized as one of the rights of the poor. Today this is expressed in many different manners and most clearly by indigenous peoples.

The first Catholic Bishop in the state of Chiapas, Bartolome de Las Casas, fought vehemently against those who argued that indigenous people were incapable of self-governance, denying them

their liberty, their history and their recent past. Thus, they considered colonial conquest and its “order”, as well as the colonial presence and its “laws”, as indispensable. Because “the Indians don’t know what they want”, “they can’t distinguish between good and evil”, affirmed the courts. The kindness of the colonizers’ charge resulted in one of the crudest systems of exploitation that the colonizers defended as necessary for the native people’s own protection.

To recognize another being as different, to recognize a native person and his/her rights, is a task that has yet to be undertaken. We were witnesses to this fact just recently in Mexico where the passage of a law failed which would have created respect for the accords known as the San Andres agreements, the results of a dialogue signed by government officials and the indigenous people.

The lack of recognition of the voice of indigenous peoples, the lack of respect for their rights, the lack of acceptance of their different forms of existence reveal racial discrimination that we deny despite its existence. Nevertheless, they want to continue being and living as they are.

We are horrified by the fact that Power does not recognize indigenous peoples as peoples and as individuals because Power lives by the logic of the victor.

But this is the logic of Power: it’s exclusive. It does not join the conqueror and the conquered in the celebration of victory; it seeks the destruction of the loser at all cost; it denies the loser his/her voice, any possibility of dialogue and even his/her very existence. That is to say, it seeks humiliation and death, instead of recognizing the discovery of difference for mutual enrichment.

Therefore, I believe that today native peoples and the poor offer both Mexico and the Americas the historical opportunity to change, to grow and to meet one another. A historical opportunity to come together and dialogue, to rectify the path of ignorance and the cycles of poverty.

As the San Andres agreements state:

“The treatment of peoples and cultures that form a part of Mexican society must be founded in respect for their differences, based on the assumption of their fundamental equality. Consequently, the State must enact policies with standards for its own action and encourage a pluralist society, that actively confronts all forms of discrimination and amends social and economic inequalities.”

## THE DRAGON HURRICANE AND THE RIGHTS OF THE DISADVANTAGED

It would be nonsensical to deny that the current economic option that we are using has not had beneficial results for the greater part of the Mexican population. Those who have made this choice most certainly are not a part of this majority and clearly recognize that the economy is extremely fragile but that the current option is necessary in order to become a part of the global system of production and the global market.

The experts speak to us of capital in flight, called “sparrow” capital in Spanish, the money that migrates when faced with insecurity and the impossibility to reproduce itself in abundance. They warn us that for the time being, the suffering of the poor will not be extinguished, that they will have to resist some more, that we must wait.

The poor are asked to revere and observe the letter of the current laws while the huge capitals do not revere the minimum of their ethic duty. The frivolity with which they use our country's natural resources, migrating to the powerful countries, is a serious offense to the more than half of Mexico's population that live in situations of extreme misery.

Once again, the poor help us to see that this abuse leads to madness and the unhinging of relations between peoples and individuals. They teach us that excessive consumption dehumanizes us and that massive destruction of forests and jungles puts an end to life.

So the poor not only confront us with the dignity of others and the recognition of their being as different, they also urge us to rebuild our world and ourselves as people.

## HISTORY WITH ALL WOMEN AND MEN - THE RIGHT TO OUR FUTURE

The poor are not only factors that serve to stir our conscience when faced with indignity, they are also active protagonists and creators of history.

The good news of the poor is their emergence in midst of history seeking to recreate it and define its future course. This is the news that draws us in and pulls us together. The poor refuse to continue to live subject to other people's decisions and become protagonists that define their own paths for living as humanity.

The poor give in-depth meaning and significance to time and to life for all of humanity.

As I thank you for this prize that I receive today, I not only find within it the suffering that the poor carry as a burden but I also discover the recognition that you wish to give to indigenous peoples and to the poor.

Thank you very much.