

Why the 29th Niwano Peace Prize is being awarded to Ms. Rosalina Tuyuc Velásquez

The Niwano Peace Prize International Selection Committee has decided to award the 29th Niwano Peace Prize to Rosalina Tuyuc Velásquez, a courageous human rights activist and leader. This is the first time that a practitioner of an indigenous religious tradition (Mayan beliefs and spiritual practices) has been awarded this prize. She lives and works in Guatemala, a country that has for many decades suffered extraordinary violence and internal strife. The indigenous population has been systematically excluded from mainstream society, traditional faith wisdom has been ignored, and women are both victims of many forms of violence (sexual and economic among them), racism and discrimination. But at the same time they are a source of strength and resilience. Rosalina Tuyuc Velásquez shows the way towards a more just and inclusive future and a new culture of peace.

Born in San Juan Comalapa, in Guatemala's Chimaltenango department, Rosalina Tuyuc Velásquez grew up as a member of a very poor, religious, agricultural family of manual workers. The spirituality of the Mayans, one of the world's ancient spiritual traditions, has always guided her life and she also has been part of the Christian Movement since she was young. A member of women's groups and handicraft, agriculture, and animal breeding cooperatives, she began her professional life as a teacher of Christian doctrine and an auxiliary nurse.

Guatemala suffered a long and brutal civil war, between 1960 and 1996, and today is still one of the world's most violent countries. Of a population of about 10 million, over 250,000 died during the war, 45,000 people are still missing, over 240,000 orphans and 50,000 widows survived, 1.5 million people were displaced within Guatemala, and 100,000 refugees left the country and sought refuge in other countries such as Mexico, Canada, the United States and Europe. Mayans, long discriminated against although they were Guatemala's original inhabitants, were the principle victims. Rosalina was one of the internally displaced people. In June 1982, her father, Francisco Javier Tuyuc, was kidnapped by the Guatemalan Army and disappeared, and three years later her husband, Rolando Gómez, suffered the same fate. She overcame her despair and has fought since then for justice, both an acknowledgement by the government of what transpired and a deeper social justice for her people and nation.

In 1988, together with other women, Rosalina Tuyuc Velásquez founded the National Coordinating Organization of Widows of Guatemala (CONAVIGUA), now a leading Guatemalan human rights organization that pioneers a new form of active peaceful resistance. CONAVIGUA is a symbol both of the struggle against violence and the Mayan people's resistance to it. Launched as a small group of widows in 1985, they grew into a national organization dedicated to promoting full equity for women, respect for human rights, and a resolution in Guatemala's military ethos and governance. Over 10,000 women, organized in 300 local groups, denounced all acts of sexual violence against women and the impunity of paramilitary structures. They helped locate clandestine cemeteries, initiated exhumations where the most atrocious massacres had occurred, and achieved the release of many young men who had been victims of forced recruitment.

After Guatemala's Peace Agreements were signed in 1996, CONAVIGUA focused on compliance with the agreed terms and their implementation, especially in relation to truth and reparations for victims, pressing for women's dignity, and development of rural communities. Rosalina has served in many posts, in Guatemala and the region, including as a congresswoman in the National Congress, and a magistrate in the first Court of Conscience of the Women of Guatemala. She continues to stand out as an active civil society and political leader, respected in Guatemala and throughout the Latin American region.

Rosalina is an inspiring example of how victims of discrimination, drawing on their faith, are empowered by working together, to defeat human rights violations and reverse the causes that have hurt them so deeply. She works to develop constructive, peaceful ways to bring Guatemala's long internal war to an

end and to bring peace and justice to her country. She shows how a local spirituality that is deeply rooted in indigenous people has global dimensions, and exemplifies values that resonate with the finest elements of other faiths.

Rosalina also serves as an example of the changing nature and growing force of civil society leadership. As she has said: “even though the process to build consensus and proposals from different sectors of civil society have no binding character at the negotiating table, I always believe that the parties to the negotiations must understand the perspectives of the civil population, their demands as well as their proposals, if they are to address different national issues. This is never easy and sometimes we need to go straight to the negotiating table to be heard and taken into account.” She shows how groups considered weak victims change the nature of the dialogue, the process and the outcome.

Rosalina’s work allows us to understand the essence of spirituality within the Mayan vision and its global significance. The Mayan, indigenous vision seeks to harmonize relationships between humans and nature, to reject violence and destruction. This implies reciprocity, that is, gratitude and an attempt to reward Creation for what we receive from her, like the food we eat, the water we drink, the oxygen we breathe, etc. Mayan spiritual practice centers on the common good, on respecting and strengthening and the relationship human beings have with Mother Earth, water, air and fire. The Mayan Cosmivision respects all other beliefs and everything that exists. In the Kaqchikel language “peace” is Utz’ Kaslemal, which means, “living well, in harmony and balance with everything that surrounds us”. Peace results from and in social, cultural, economic and political satisfaction; peace is acquired through work and is nourished with our heart and with sacrifice for the common good of both people and nature. In the Kaqchikel language “conflict”, Oyowal, means “having no respect and attacking”.

Rosalina argues that being a Mayan in Guatemala has meant struggling against incomprehension, intolerance, and persecution against the elderly and spiritual guides, against challenges “to our essence, to our practices, and to our ways of solving problems.” That is why “the most basic purpose that one seeks as a Mayan is the personal commitment to bequeath what one truly is to our descendants.” “To be a Mayan in a situation of conflict means being an active peacemaker in its deepest dimension. It is bringing your entire personal effort to help restore harmony and balance in nature.” In Mayan thinking, conflict resolution takes place through dialogue, respect, and participation. It uses acceptance of responsibility, reparation, and commitment to not attack again. In a family conflict, parents and maternal and paternal grandparents participate in the resolution as witnesses to the commitment to overcome it and not do harm again. Reconciliation cannot take place without knowing how and why the conflict took place, without getting the people who did harm commit to not doing it again.

The Niwano Prize recognizes Rosalina’s extraordinary and dogged work for peace. She exemplifies the great potential that indigenous people and their wisdom have to mark paths towards peace. She highlights the critical role of women working for peace and the strength of their spiritual beliefs in their approach to peace and their determination. Her approach and work highlight the values of the indigenous culture in Latin America as well as in other continents, values that have wide spiritual resonance. The Niwano prize honors Rosalina’s service to humankind in its search for wisdom and paths to peace.