



Dear Mission Friends:

A few years ago our missionary in Chiapas, Mexico, Fr. Michael Rolland, O.P., left to begin studies in anthropology at Arizona State University. He has now returned to Chiapas and resumed ministering to the Chamula people. He will also be carrying out research which will lead to a doctorate in anthropology. The following is excerpted from his first report to us since his return.

Yours in Christ,  
*Fr. Martin de Porres Walsh, O.P.*

### *Modern Day Martyrdom*

In the Divine Providence, there are particular people who live their historical moment in such a way as to manifest the sufferings of Christ. They live this moment in the frailty of their flesh as well as the hope, freedom, and light of the Good News of the Risen Lord. So powerful is this embodied News that it can penetrate hearts too hard to feel, open ears that will not hear, and finally illuminate the darkness of blind eyes. The inconvenient truths of God's unconditional love are still brought to us through martyrs, or, as in Greek, "witnesses." Unlike many who are called martyrs today as a result of religious or secular violence, Gospel martyrs give witness to true freedom made manifest only in love and forgiveness.

One such case comes to us from the highlands of Chiapas, Mexico, where a Maya Tsotsil Chamula Indian, Zacario Hernandez, decided to risk even death to proclaim his freedom: *"I live now not I, but Christ!"* (Gal.2:20) Arrested in January 2003, Zacario spent five years in the state prison of Chiapas as both a political and a religious prisoner: political, because the government often relies upon arbitrary means to justify its policies rather than dealing head-on with inequality and other ills; religious, because his "crime," as a catechist in the Diocese of San Cristobal de Las Casas, was the proclamation of the Gospel.

Although freedom of religious expression is guaranteed by the Mexican constitution, the state uses religious issues to divide and weaken communities. In general it uses the guise of democracy to hide its organized efforts to suppress subversive forces, whether competing political parties or bothersome religious groups. Since the preaching of the Gospel represents a cry for justice, especially for the poor, it becomes a threat to state order. The government still operates in ways that are too frequently

*Fr. Michael  
(Miguel)  
Rolland, O.P.  
in the  
mountains  
above San  
Cristobal.*





*Catechism Class.*

beholden to the power of local “bosses” (*caciques*), who often control economic monopolies or key sources of graft and protection, including traffic in illegal substances, unauthorized arms, and even migrants from Central America. Recent cartel wars reflect the ambiguous interests of the Calderon government and other powerful players in a very dangerous drama of life and death.

The Gospel message in this environment is a most inconvenient truth, teaching social awareness and spiritual consciousness, which in turn promote human rights and dignity, sometimes leading to active non-cooperation with corruption.

Zacario was originally attracted to the faith because he liked the hope and promise of a better life, “*on earth as it is in heaven.*” He soon developed his knowledge of the Gospel and became a Catholic catechist to teach others. He was following the example of another Chamula catechist, Candelario Hernandez, a

candidate for the indigenous diaconate, who had been jailed numerous times attempting to build a small church of cinder blocks. He pastored the community under constant threats of death, along with his wife Maria – also a catechist and the true founder of the community, because it was she who first convinced her husband to become Catholic!

Since the late 1990’s, Zacario’s Catholic community in the small barrio of Temtoj in the village of Tres Cruces has resisted the *caciques*, local mafia-like men who will either oppose any form of public Christian practice or attempt to assimilate it as a base of power. Indigenous people in general are not part of the government in Chiapas even though they make up more than half the population of the state.

Candelario had been making a plea to government agencies to stop the local bosses from carrying out their plan to destroy a traditional sacred water hole – a source of natural water that by custom had been open to all nearby communities. Because of Candelario’s plea against the *caciques*, death nearly took him and his wife when, early one morning in January 2003, a horde of at least 100 local and state police launched a surprise attack in which Candelario’s brother Gregorio was killed, their mother shot in the breast, and another brother and their father arrested. Candelario and his wife were gone that morning

and soon found themselves on the run, but Zacario and his brother were at their own home, and they too were forced out, beaten and taken to the state jail.

Quick to move on the case was the local human rights center, a legal defense office for the poor founded by Bishop Samuel Ruiz Garcia and named after the great 16<sup>th</sup> century Dominican bishop and staunch defender of the Indians, Fray Bartolome de Las Casas. Several protests were organized on behalf of those unjustly jailed, including Zacario and his companions. Of particular note were the many letters sent to the government by Dean and Carol Filer and the Chiapas committee at Most Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Phoenix. On numerous occasions Chamula Catholics gathered to make a pilgrimage of prayer, showing their support for the freedom of their brothers.

While in jail, Zacario read and reflected about those wrongly imprisoned who fasted as a way to protest, desiring to manifest publically with their bodies



*Candelario and Gregorio’s mother.*



*Mass for prisoners at the Cathedral in San Cristobal.*

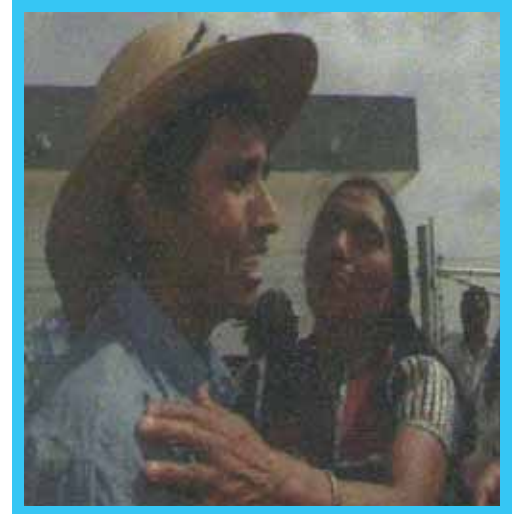
the truth in their hearts, even at the risk of death. In a recent interview, Zacario confided to me that during that time, every night he prayed, *“Lord, if it be Your will that I do this, give me Your wisdom and strength to do it.”* He said that at this point he began to suffer even more, which only made him pray more. He decided that if God allowed him to keep his faith and to survive a fast, then he would feel confirmed in his mission to be a catechist and teach others the importance of trust in God. He told his family and friends that he was tired of allowing the government to use him to justify a lie, and would not end his sacrificial fast until state authorities acknowledged his innocence and released him; if not, he would accept death with dignity, his heart intact.

Word of Zacario’s fast spread quickly, and a pilgrimage made up of over 10,000 people from 50 parishes converged on February 19, 2008, to celebrate

the Eucharist in the plaza of the “Cathedral of Peace” in San Cristobal de Las Casas. A spokesman said, *“Our pilgrimage...denounces the pain of injustice, the suffering and deceit against all poor people, caused by the powerful of this world.”* Such huge spiritual forces do not go unnoticed by the government, and this one, demanding the release of Zacario and his catechist companions as well as displaying discontent with other evils afflicting the indigenous poor of Chiapas, brought about the release of Candelario’s father. The state refused, however, to budge on the others and Zacario continued his fast. Soon the other prisoners, innocent or not, began to fast and pray with him.

On Zacario’s 38th day of nothing but water and honey, a group of some 140 faithful gathered outside the prison to pray the rosary, and Our Lady must have interceded because suddenly word came that Zacario would be released. He now travels to many faith communities to encourage other indigenous catechists to speak out for the rights of the poor. Because they violate the order established by the *caciques*, however, authorities often seek to expel them from Chamula lands, or at least deny them municipal services, such as water, electricity, and schooling for their children.

Indeed many political prisoners, including indigenous activists and church workers, remain in



*Zacario Hernandez upon his release from prison after 5 years, the last 38 days of which he spent fasting.*

the prisons of Chiapas, without recourse to legitimate due process. Today, like the local catechists, our Dominicans in Chiapas and elsewhere not only preach the Gospel but also seek to procure the rights of those they preach to. In light of Zacario’s journey of faith, I urge you to support our pastoral work in Chiapas, Mexico. May God bless you for your love and care of the poor who cry to God for justice.

*Fr. Michael (Miguel) Rolland, O.P.*

### Afterword

The primary work of missioners in recent years has been that of developing an indigenous theology in which current Christian practice refrains from imposing apriori templates of truth, pausing long enough with respect to give a second look at the sources of modern and ancient wisdom in Maya spiritual traditions. It can be an

awkward dialogue, but one that is rewarding and centuries overdue. If the missionary is humble and silent, he will find much to learn; with luck and grace, he will discover God's presence and the fruits of what He has already planted. Because the Gospel should not be tied to any one cultural understanding (e.g. Eurocentric), missionaries must be creative and imaginative with the bridges they attempt to build, having the message received and accepted by assent rather than by coercion or allures.

*Fr. Miguel*



*Children of the Chamula village of Tres Cruces.*

### Summer 2009 Mission Appeals

We are grateful to have been invited to speak on our missionary work at the following parishes.  
If you are in the area, please come to one of the Masses and say "Hello."

#### July 4-5

St. Therese of the Child Jesus  
Midvale, UT  
*Fr. Martin Walsh, O.P.*

Our Lady of Lourdes  
Magna, UT  
*Fr. Vincent Lopez, O.P.*

#### July 19 (Sunday only)

Good Shepherd, Sheridan, OR  
St. Michael, Grand Ronde, OR  
*Fr. Martin Walsh, O.P.*

#### July 25-26

Church of the Epiphany  
San Francisco, CA  
*Frs. Antoninus Wall,  
Martin Walsh, O.P.*

#### August 1-2

St. Thomas More  
Sandy, UT  
*Fr. Vincent Lopez, O.P.*

St. Joseph  
Barstow, CA  
*Fr. Martin Walsh, O.P.*

#### August 8-9

St. Philip Neri  
Lenwood, CA  
*Fr. Bart de La Torre, O.P.*

#### August 15-16

Holy Family  
Yerington, NV  
*Fr. Martin Walsh, O.P.*

#### August 22-23

St. Teresa of Avila  
Carson City, NV  
*Fr. Martin Walsh, O.P.*

#### August 29-30

Most Holy Trinity  
San Jose, CA  
*Frs. Vincent Lopez,  
Martin Walsh, O.P.*

#### September 5-6

Immaculate Conception  
Corning, CA  
*Fr. David Orique, O.P.*

Our Lady Help of  
Christians, Los Angeles, CA  
*Fr. Bart de La Torre, O.P.*