



## Mayan and Catholic Spiritual Traditions

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# Mayan and Catholic Spiritual Traditions

A Foundation for Development in the Mountains of Guatemala

Wendy Tyndale

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*“I am more and more convinced that we shouldn’t follow the examples of development of Europe and the United States,” says Monseñor Alvaro Ramazzini, Bishop of San Marcos and President of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Guatemala. “It’s true that they provide a certain degree of well-being but we are seeing that in the long run this is at the expense of the environment and all that is natural—life is becoming increasingly artificial. Development in our mountain regions must be based on knowledge of and respect for the cultural values of the people who live*

*there.” When the bishop speaks of people’s cultural values, he is referring to the Mayan culture, embedded in ancient Mayan spiritual traditions. The present article aims to show how a blend of Catholic and Mayan spirituality is the basis of the approach to development in the mountains adopted by the Pastoral Social of the Diocese of San Marcos. The vision is of a development model based on values of human dignity and solidarity—a model that does not mean abandoning life in rural communities nor the Mayan reverence for nature.*



## Challenges to development in the *altiplano*

The Department of San Marcos, which covers the same geographical area as the diocese, lies in the west of Guatemala, on the borders of the Mexican state of Chiapas. Of its 800,000 inhabitants, 43% live in the highlands or *altiplano*, which rises to 4000 m above sea level. The other 3 regions of the department are the valley, up to 2300 m, the coffee-growing area on the foothills of the mountains, and the coastal plain. San Marcos is the poorest of Guatemala’s 22 departments and the poorest region within it is the *altiplano*, where, according to the government’s planning department, 97.7% of the largely Mayan population live in poverty.

The challenges in the *altiplano* to any sort of ‘development’ are immense. The soil is poor and agricultural production low (Figure 1). Poverty has led to mass migration from the region, mostly to Chiapas for seasonal work and illegal migration to the United States on a longer-term basis. This has deepened the severe social disintegration caused by the internal armed conflict of 1960–1996, during which the indigenous people suffered unspeakable persecution at the hands of the military. With the population growing at 2.6% a year, violent conflicts over land use and the control of water sources are frequent. These have been exacerbated in recent years by poppy growing and drug trafficking in the region. In addition to all this, only about one-third of the population is functionally literate.

## Spirituality as the basis for natural resource management

The inhabitants of the mountains of San Marcos belong to the *Mam* group of Mayas, except for the small number of *Sipakapenses* who live in the municipality of Sipakapa. The Mayan vision of the universe is based on the Creator and Former, Father and Mother, who is manifested in all our natural surroundings as Mother Earth, Father Air, etc. Each person is integrated into the cosmos at birth and is responsible for promoting a way of life that keeps a balance between nature and culture.

Most of the Mayas of San Marcos are Catholics but their vision of the universe persists, interwoven with their Christian beliefs. The Diocese of San Marcos is par-

*“Our vision is that everything around us is one totality. An economic action reflects a political practice and both influence our natural surroundings, which in turn influence both the economic and the political. No aspect of life can be isolated.” (Susana López, a Mam who works with the Land Pastoral)*



**FIGURE 1** Shepherd boy in Ixchiguán, San Marcos. (Photo by Wendy Tyndale)



**FIGURE 2** Bishop Alvaro Ramazzini giving a course on Catholic Social Teaching. (Photo by Wendy Tyndale)

*“There were very direct threats against my life. This has to do with options we have taken in the diocese—options in favor of the poor, the excluded—a commitment to achieving an integrated agrarian reform and to defending the rights of populations to use their natural resources in appropriate ways.” (Bishop Ramazzini)*

ticularly open to accepting Mayan spirituality as an integral part of people’s faith and has recognized that the two traditions share many values, of which a strong sense of community is one of the most important.

In Sipakapa the church has been a leading member of a coalition of local groups, including the municipality, which has come up with a model of territorial development for the area based on the care of natural resources, support for ecologically-oriented agriculture, and strong community organization. The approach is fully in consonance with the Mayan principle that technology must maintain a balance with nature.

### Mining: the way development should not work

Development programs for the Mayan people are never high on the political agenda. On the contrary, Exequiel López, a Sipakapan Catholic catechist, is convinced that successive governments have seen the indigenous population (about 60% of all Guatemalans) as an obstacle to development. The only major official ‘development’ initiative in the *altiplano* of San Marcos is the open cast gold and silver mine that Montana, a subsidiary of the US-Canadian company Glamis Gold, started operating in November 2005 with support from the International Finance Corporation, an arm of the World Bank.

Arguing that mines will create jobs and development for the region, the government has granted 11 further licenses in the *altiplano* of San Marcos, but so far Montana has given employment to very few local people and the giant electricity cables that span the mountains and valleys to supply it with energy bypass all the houses in the region. The mine consumes thousands of gallons of water every day and its use of cyanide to extract the gold brings a high risk of contamination of the local water sources. Furthermore, Guatemala’s Mining Law of 1977 requires foreign companies to return royalties of only 1% to the Guatemalan government.

“Those who will benefit are the shareholders of Glamis Gold in New York

and Toronto,” says Bishop Ramazzini. As a result of his outspoken criticism of the introduction of mining in the diocese, the bishop is now accompanied by 3 hefty bodyguards. In spite of the threats against him, the bishop has refused to be silenced. In his view, an essential role of the Catholic Church is to contribute to the development of the country “in the prophetic sense,” by speaking out in favor of models of development that respect the dignity of the human being (Figure 2). In opposing the mines, he is supporting the people of Sipakapa, who in June 2005 voted overwhelmingly against the extension of the mine and, with the help of the Church, have kept up a vigorous opposition to it. “The mine is the blood which is flowing out from our Mother Earth,” says Exequiel López. “Our struggle is for the government to respect our right to health and to the land where we have lived for thousands and thousands of years.”

### Advocacy work of the church

The *Pastoral Social*, which brings together different social programs of the diocese, bases its criteria on the Social Teaching of the Church. Emphasizing development as an integral human process and insisting on the principle of “subsidiarity,” whereby people themselves take decisions about programs that will affect their lives, it has joined peasant movements of the region in tireless advocacy for access to land and for help with activating a peasant economy.

In the *altiplano* this has meant lobbying government bodies to buy land or to give loans to peasant farmers for renting plots to plant potatoes or maize. In the longer term the goal is more equal distribution of land. In Guatemala as a whole, less than 2% of the landowners own 70% of the fertile land, and San Marcos is no exception.

### Movement of peasant workers

One of the programs of the *Pastoral Social* is the Movement of Peasant Workers (MTC). Formed in 1977, its aim was originally to defend the rights both of the permanent workers who live in semi feudal

conditions on the coffee plantations and of the seasonal harvesters who migrate there each year from the *altiplano*. Today it deals, too, with themes of the rights of the indigenous people and access to land, and it encourages both men and women to participate in local community and municipal councils, where decisions are made about the spending of government money for development.

The large majority of the women of the *altiplano* cannot read or write, and speak only their indigenous languages—*Mam* or *Sipakapense*—whereas Guatemala's official language is Spanish. In addition to these limitations, the patriarchal values of Guatemalan society have led to women being excluded from decision-making at all levels of society.

Slowly and patiently the MTC has been encouraging the formation of women's councils, a form of organization used by the Mayas of old in their search for structures that express equality, participation, and complementarity between people. The focus is on learning practical skills from other women in their midst—a recognition that reading and writing Spanish is not the only worthwhile form of knowledge—and on strengthening community solidarity and the women's ability to participate in local decision-making bodies.

The MTC receives strong support from leaders within some parishes, but in others, whose priests prefer less political work that they can more easily control, conflicts have arisen. Nevertheless, whatever its relationship to the Church as an institution, spirituality plays a key role in keeping hope alive and encouraging a strong sense of purpose and identity in this movement, in whose assemblies time is given for both Mayan and Christian prayers.

#### Solidarity development fund

The Solidarity Development Fund (FONDESOL) is another example of an effort within the *Pastoral Social* to find forms of development in keeping with Christian and Mayan principles. While encouraging individual families to save and thus to accumulate capital—a concept that is new for people dependent on sub-

sistence agriculture—it is firmly rooted in local communities. Loans are granted to the trustworthy and hard-working within the community rather than to those with the most financial resources. Indeed, no guarantees of any sort are demanded, though the money is lent “according to the load that each can carry.” Since the community as a whole is responsible for the repayment of the loan, the pressure on individuals to pay their debts is high but so, too, is the incentive for the better-off to help members in trouble.

FONDESOL gives preference to the most remote, least accessible and most abandoned communities but it insists that high levels of organization and harmonious relations must exist before it starts. Rates of interest are only slightly lower than the bank rates but instead of having to pay each month, as the banks demand, FONDESOL accepts annual payments. It is reluctant to write off debts but in a crisis will give people longer to pay. FONDESOL now has over 3000 members, half of whom are women (Figure 3).

The long-term vision is for the money accumulated centrally to be reinvested in local development projects, thus reinforcing the idea of a model of territorial development. Some communities have already set up collective projects such as medicinal herb gardens and tree nurseries, and one has achieved the goal of

*“We never thought we would save, but now we have turkeys and some have pigs or a bullock for fattening.” (Donã Olympia, from the village of Chicajalaj in Comitancillo)*

**FIGURE 3** Women's Solidarity Development Fund in the village of Chicajalaj, in the poorest municipality of the *altiplano*. In its 5 years of existence, the group has never failed to pay back the loans. (Photo by Wendy Tyndale)



**FIGURE 4** Missionaries in Ixchiguán lighting candles on a Christian-Mayan altar in Ixchiguán, where in March 2006 groups from neighboring Tajumulco burnt down the houses and maize of villagers whose land they claimed to be theirs. The missionaries, determined that violent retaliation was not the way forward, organized this ritual. (Photo by Wendy Tyndale)



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independence from FONDESOL altogether.

#### Development: “No-one must be left behind”

Cultures must change with the times—and anyway they contain their own contradictions. The Mayan people have traditionally kept sheep, for instance, which, since they chew up new saplings, hinder age-long community efforts to take care of the forests. Neither the Church nor Mayan spirituality opposes moving on, but for both the Mayan people and for Bishop Ramazzini, the condition must be that the whole community moves together and no-one is left behind.

It seems that the bishop’s “worst scenario” is already taking place: the culture, identity and the very lives of the inhabitants of the *altiplano* are being destroyed in order that the rich may become richer. In helping to bring about small changes which will lead to more peace and unity and greater physical well-being in the *altiplano*, the Church in San Marcos is strengthening the self-confidence and organizational capacity of the Mayan people so that they can put pressure on gov-

ernment authorities to grant them their rights as Guatemalan citizens—rights to education, health, and support for their peasant economy such as fertilizers for their land, technical assistance to enable them to diversify their production, and technical training to increase opportunities for young people.

The commandment of Christ to love our neighbor as ourselves is reflected in the Mayan concept that “my face is your face. When I look at you I see myself”—we are all one. The mingling of Christian and Mayan spirituality in the *altiplano* may not be a path to a society based on consumerism and the accumulation of riches, but it is a path to building up strong human communities that work together to satisfy their needs in harmony with nature.

The Church in San Marcos does not choose either the people with whom it works or its activities on the basis of proving itself “successful.” It works in geographically isolated communities, in areas of conflict, and with those who seem to have least hope, and it tackles political and economic issues in situations where the odds are stacked against it. Maybe one of the most valuable aspects of spiritual motivation is that it nourishes the hope that enables enduring commitment (Figure 4). “We must keep on persevering like the hen that sits till the chicks hatch out,” said a missionary in Ixchiguán. “She doesn’t visit her eggs just once or twice to warm them up.”

Those who see development primarily in economic terms or as a technical process only are unlikely to assign much importance to all these efforts to reduce the levels of violence in the *altiplano*, strengthen peasant organization, get small-scale economic ventures off the ground, and to give women a greater say in their communities. Yet if development means people moving from the present situation to a better one, they all count. If government support were available, a model of territorial development, planned according to the physical characteristics of the region with the culture and spirituality of local communities as its starting point, could well prove to be one possible path to equitable development for the *altiplano*.