

III. Dissent and Hope: The Church in San Lucas Tolimán, Guatemala

Modern-day Guatemalan history is marked by the thirty-six-year-long civil war that ravaged the nation. The 1954 CIA-backed military coup of President Jacobo Arbenz led to an extended period of violence and armed conflict, the longest in Central American history. The civil war began in 1960. Military strategies included kidnappings, torture, disappearances, and death lists. More than 245,000 civilians were disappeared or killed and over 400 villages destroyed. In addition, over 1 million people were displaced from their homes.²⁰ The armed conflict thus damaged the people, the environment, and the very psyche of Guatemala, creating a culture of corruption, fear, and silence. The civil war ended in late 1996 with the signing of the Peace Accords.²¹ However some scholars and activists argue that while the Accords were signed, peace has yet to be established in present-day Guatemala.

The Catholic Church's involvement in the peace process stands in sharp contrast to its history in Guatemala, one that is marked by staunch anticlericalism beginning in the nineteenth century.²² The 1960s and 1970s were

²⁰ "Accompanying these massive population displacements was the deliberate destruction of huge areas of the highlands (burning forests, etc.) to deny cover to the guerillas and to assure that the region would never again serve as a theater to revolutionary operations. The environmental devastation was irreversible, even modifying climate and rainfall patterns." Susanne Jones, *The Battle for Guatemala: Rebels, Death Squads, and U.S. Power* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), 149.

²¹ Jeffrey Klaiber outlines several characteristics that distinguish Guatemala from its Central American neighbors: it has the largest Indigenous population; it is the site of the longest guerilla war in Latin American history; it experienced the greatest violence in Central America; and it has the fastest-growing Protestant population. Jeffrey Klaiber, SJ, *The Church, Dictatorships, and Democracy in Latin America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998).

²² A dramatic moment in this anticlerical period occurred during the 1831–38 liberal presidency of Mariano Gálvez. "Among his most sweeping anticlerical measures were the economic reforms, enacted in 1832, that abolished the tithe, placed strict limitations on the size and future acquisition of Church landholdings, and expropriated the national diocesan treasury for the national treasury. The same year, Gálvez secularized the cemeteries, made civil marriage compulsory, and put legislation into effect to gradually decrease the number of 'religious' in Guatemala while turning the orders' assets over

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marked by a more politicized laity and clergy influenced in part by liberation theology. The strengthening of relations between Guatemalan popular Catholicism and the institutional church at the grassroots level led to the active participation of priests and women religious in social justice struggles. Because of its growing alliance with popular movements the church began to be persecuted by the military. Priests and women religious were kidnapped, killed, or forced to leave the country.

Perhaps no other moment in the history of the modern Guatemalan church has better demonstrated the integration of Catholicism and social justice than the REMHI (Recovery of Historical Memory) project.²³ The REMHI initiative emerged from frustration surrounding the nature and scope of the official United Nations Truth Commission.²⁴ The scope of the REMHI initiative was to be broader than the Truth Commission's and was to benefit from the church's presence in rural areas. A significant feature of the REMHI project was its naming of both victims and perpetrators of violence. Its purpose was to use memory as a tool in reconciliation and to name the injustices suffered by individual communities.²⁵

to the state. Finally, in what was intended to be a lethal blow to Catholic authority, in May 1832 Gálvez endorsed an amendment to the federal constitution that called for 'freedom of conscience and religious freedom' for all religious sects in Guatemala." Virginia Garrard-Burnett, *Protestantism in Guatemala: Living in the New Jerusalem* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 3–4. This is in contrast to the 1824 constitution, which declared the region as exclusively Catholic. After the expulsion of the clergy, the 1830s conservative dictatorship of Rafael Carrera reinstated some church privileges. However, as a whole the century is marked by the increased marginalization of the church from the public sector of society. As an institution that is marked by its historical ties to Spain, in postindependence Guatemala, as in the rest of Latin America, the institutional church is pushed increasingly into the shadows of the social order. In 1871 liberals came to power and unleashed yet another campaign against the church, one that is recognized by some scholars as creating the worst anticlericalism in Central America. Among those expelled were the archbishop, his auxiliary bishop, the Jesuits, and other religious orders.

²³ The Guatemalan church played a significant role in the peace process, at both the formal and the grassroots levels. This participation transformed the nature of the Guatemalan church itself, placing issues of social justice at the center. In particular, CONFREGUA (Conference of Religious in Guatemala) played a pivotal role at the level of grassroots participation and organizing.

²⁴ The Oslo Accord was signed by the government and the URNG (Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca) in 1994.

²⁵ The questions posed by the 700 volunteers for the REMHI project focused not only on the violence, but also the aftereffects of that violence. Also significant was the gathering of testimonies in Mayan. "Two-thirds of the testimonies were collected in Mayan languages, a concrete sign of change in Guatemala, to hear the excluded majority in their mother tongue; to hear those whose history and memory are known among themselves

The REMHI report itself, *Nunca Más*, while denouncing brutality, was marred by a cloud of violence shortly after its presentation. Bishop Juan Gerardi was killed on April 26, 1998, two days after publicly presenting the *Nunca Más* report. Throughout his episcopacy Gerardi strove to learn from and work with Indigenous people in Guatemala. The *Nunca Más* report attributed 80 percent of civil war crimes to the military. Gerardi's murder demonstrates the power of memory and historical voice. Ultimately, the work of the REMHI project was a threat to the dominant power structures that sought to intimidate and silence the Indigenous population. Transformed by the suffering and violence inflicted upon the Guatemalan people, the church became a voice for the marginalized. This created a new form of persecution, for Catholicism became associated with reactionary and revolutionary movements.²⁶

In the town of San Lucas Tolimán, 1964 marked the beginning of a quiet revolution within the Catholic Church, one where the local parish began extensive social outreach in order to empower the people to ameliorate their standard of living and create an infrastructure of economic, educational, and social programs. San Lucas Tolimán, nestled at the foot of two volcanoes on Lake Atitlán, is a rural town with a population of 22,000 (including outlying communities). Almost 90 percent of the population is Indigenous Kaqchikel, and the rest of the population is Ladino. The town depends heavily on farming, with 85 percent of the population earning their living working in agriculture. The story of San Lucas and the Catholic Church's work there for the past forty years is a tale of struggle, solidarity, and empowerment.

While not wishing to reduce the numerous people of San Lucas who have contributed to the work of the San Lucas Mission, one cannot understand the great work accomplished by the Catholic Church in collaboration with the

but did not form part of the collective history of Guatemalans." Marcela López Levy, "Recovery: The Uses of Memory and History in the Guatemalan Church's REMHI Project," in *Truth and Memory: The Church and Human Rights in El Salvador and Guatemala*, ed. Michael A. Hayes and David Tombs (Leominster, UK: Gracewing, 2001), 108.

²⁶ The REMHI report attributes the growth of Protestantism in Guatemala to the denunciation of Catholicism during the Civil War and the military's support of certain Protestant groups. Participation in these groups, which were smaller and thus less apt to mobilize on a large scale politically, was seen as a certain refuge from violence. As noted by David Martin, "Those who have analyzed evangelical expansion in Guatemala have attributed its dynamism partly to a special appeal for the large and depressed native population, and partly to the political and natural disasters overtaking the country. The evangelical churches offer relief and healing, and they also act as apolitical shelters in time of vengeance and civil strife." David Martin, "Evangelical and Charismatic Christianity in Latin America," in *Charismatic Christianity as a Global Culture*, ed. Karla Poewe (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), 83.

community without recognizing the connection with the Diocese of New Ulm, Minnesota, and in particular the commitment of one priest, Father Gregory Schaffer, who arrived in 1964.²⁷ Under his leadership the parish established an experimental farm, including medicinal plants; a bee-keeping project; animal husbandry, through raising rabbits that are given to families for food and their own cultivation; reforestation; a medical clinic; a school; and coffee exporting. In addition to the school in San Lucas proper, the parish has also contributed to the creation of schools in neighboring rural areas.

Land distribution and housing construction are significant programs for the mission. The parish has sponsored and built various housing developments within San Lucas, as well as public construction projects that benefit the communal life of the town. Approximately 3,000 families have received homes and land through the parish. Accompanying the construction is the acquisition of lands and the creation of an infrastructure that supports the housing communities, providing, for example, electricity and drinkable water. All of these projects are geared toward elevating the standard of living within the San Lucas community. Given the history of Guatemala and the significance of land for Mayan people—both as a basic need and cosmologically—this aspect of the mission's work is fundamental for creating a more just society within the municipality.

The educational work of the mission, however, is not limited to the institutions it has funded and created within San Lucas. The educational work of the parish extends to the United States and abroad through its volunteer programs. Individuals and groups spend time at the mission to learn about its efforts, to work on its projects, and to create global solidarity with the people of San Lucas. Fr. Schaffer grounded the work of the mission in a Christian vision of humanity created in the *imago Dei* and a common human family as children of God. The work of the mission is geared not toward acts of charity, but instead toward empowering the community to become the subjects and agents of their own historical destiny. The volunteers and groups at the mission are there to learn from the community and not vice versa. Underlying the entire program is the belief that through these concrete encounters a stronger sense of global solidarity will emerge.

The respect of Mayan religion in the mission's larger work is clearly seen in the manner in which the church continues to encourage and participate in Indigenous rituals. This is exemplified in many popular rituals, though perhaps best witnessed during the Holy Week celebrations. The processions that are celebrated throughout the week find their roots in medieval Spanish

²⁷ For a relatively comprehensive history of the parish, see Encarnación Ajcot and Myra Maldonado, *Maltiox Tat "Thank You Father": A History of Father Gregory Schaffer and the San Lucas Tolimán Mission* (New Ulm, MN: Diocese of New Ulm, 2000).

Catholicism and Mayan religion. A key figure throughout the week is the Mayan god Maximón.²⁸ Maximón is one of the most popular Mayan gods, and shrines to him are scattered throughout Guatemala. Several towns have their own statue of Maximón. Within each town, there is a *cofradía* that cares for Maximón, facilitating visits to his shrine and receiving petitions and offerings that are made to him. Most petitions center around daily life: care for a sick relative, the return of a wayward spouse, the hope of employment. Maximón, to varying degrees, has become a Christianized Mayan god, and religiosity and iconography surrounding him often have Catholic elements. He is often referred to as San Simón, yet his Christian feast day is the feast of St. Peter.

In San Lucas one does not talk much of liberation theology. The great writings of Latin American liberation theologians came after the parish began its work, and it is best to understand this academic reflection as emerging from the context of such grassroots communities. When you speak to the people of San Lucas they do not speak of the preferential option for the poor, hermeneutics of suspicion, or the epistemic break that is demanded by a true acceptance of liberationist perspectives. They speak of the food on their tables, the homes they have been able to build, the education of their children, their healthcare, and the overall impact the church has had on their daily lives. The church in San Lucas reminds us of one of the great lessons of liberation theologians, the importance of action. It is a voice of dissent against injustice and of hope for social transformation.

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IV. Catholic Thresholds, Spatial Contests, and the “Crisis in the Church”

In Washington, DC, at the top of the long hill up Wisconsin Avenue where Massachusetts Avenue crosses Thirty-Fourth Street, there has been for a long time a fixture on the landscape. An old man, life scarred and

²⁸ For Maximón, see Jim Pieper, *Guatemala's Folk Saints: Maximón/San Simon, Rey Pascual, Judas, Lucifer, and Others* (Los Angeles: Pieper and Associates, 2002).

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