



*Bishop Ruiz during the Peregrination for Peace, August 4, 1996*

*Giving communion on the day Bishop Raul Vera, the second bishop of San Cristóbal, arrived, October 4, 1995.*

*Photographs by Janet Schwartz.*



This catechist-Maoist collaboration started out promising enough. By 1979 the LP had midwived the formation of two more community unions in the canyons, both of which included Protestants, and a year later induced the original union, the two new unions, and four other organizations to unite in the Union of Community Unions and Associated Peasant Groups, suddenly the central highlands' major agrarian movement.

In a short while, however, prompted by the LP for its own strategic purposes, the Union of Unions removed its president and its secretary, both of whom were catechists, and hewed to an LP line. Unlike other agrarian movements, it did not launch a campaign for more land or farmworkers' unions. Instead it negotiated with the federal government and won the authority to administer a new program of rural credit, production incentives, and marketing facilities for its affiliates, hopefully to enable them to produce their way out of poverty.

For two years afterward, to recover their own organization, the bishop and his priests and missionaries worked to remove the LP from the new union's leadership, all the while looking for other politically experienced organizers to help. A group of social workers engaged in projects north of San Cristóbal soon became the diocesan favorites around San Cristóbal. Unknown to the bishop, priests, and missionaries, however, they were cadres of a Che Guevara-inspired movement, the Forces of National Liberation, the FLN. The FLN had a proudly se-

cret and violent past. Formed in northern Mexico in 1969 among survivors of guerrilla action, it had suffered bloody losses, betrayals, and purges, but had revived by the late seventies to run clandestine operations in several states. Its structure was military: the highest authority was its commander in chief, who with two other comandantes formed a national executive, which directed a political bureau, the commands of "combat fronts," and the "clandestine zone directive committees." These offices directed two sorts of organizations, the cells of "Students and Workers in Struggle" and the units of the "Zapatista Army of National Liberation," the EZLN. The new cadres were in Chiapas to open a new underground front in the long national struggle "to defeat the bourgeoisie politically and militarily" and "install a socialist system."

For the next ten years the bishop's faithful catechists and deacons would contend not only with landlords, merchants, the government, and the PRI, but also with Communists, Maoist LP cadres, and clandestine Guevarista FLN cadres for

the region's organization of the Indian poor. The conflict went through several twists and turns. In 1983 the Union of Unions split from its "associated groups," the main LP cadres left, and the FLN cadres moved down into the canyons. For a while the diocesan organizers and the still incognito FLN did wonderfully together. By 1985 there were over six thousand catechists, more than thirty-three hundred of them Indians, and some one hundred Indian deacons, again in charge of the Union of Unions. The FLN cadres helped the union regain its former strength, recruited its new secretary, induced the formation of armed guards in the canyons, and started militarizing the zone; senior among its new subcomandantes there was "Marcos." But in 1986 the LP cadres began returning and resurfacing. Covertly sponsored by a group of new reformers inside the government, principally the minister of budgeting and planning, Carlos Salinas, who for fifteen years had had close contacts with the movement's main cadres nationwide, they regained substantial influence in the union. Still clandestine, the FLN named Marcos chief of the EZLN's southeast combat front.

Then in 1988 the diocese stopped collaborating with the FLN cadres. In the presidential election that year between Salinas and Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas many priests and missionaries waxed enthusiastic for Cárdenas, and some FLN-recruited catechists and deacons in high office in the union began organizing for him. Marcos accused them of betraying the revolutionary movement. They quit the FLN. And the diocese supported them against FLN opposition. By 1990 the Mao-inspired LP cadres were running President Salinas's multimillion-dollar antipoverty program, Solidarity in the Canyons, winning land disputes for the communities, and regaining authority in the union. The Che-inspired FLN, at odds with the bishop and his clerics, had formed seven EZLN regiments, and was preparing for war. In 1991 it organized a public "peasant alliance" to compete with the union, then won its most promising victory yet, the election of its prize recruit, the deacon of deacons, to president of the union. If he moved its communities secretly to approve armed actions, the Zapatista army would swiftly dominate the region.

In this tension in 1992-93 the deacon of deacons proved truer to his people and religious duties than to the revolution. The diocese then counted some eight thousand catechists, four hundred deacons. The deacon of all could not rule them, only serve as they authorized him, and they could only authorize him as their communities authorized them. And through 1992 these communities, numbering altogether more than three hundred and fifty, gave contradictory direc-

tions. In the privacy of their assemblies many of them deliberated the question of an armed uprising. It was in the course of their deliberations, in October 1992, that the union and its various rivals made the anti-Columbus Day march together in San Cristóbal; it was the FLN contingent that knocked down the conquistador's statue.

Stirred one way by LP-Solidarity cadres, the other way by FLN cadres, most communities refused to make a decision on going to war, and remained intact and at peace. Only a few communities decided clearly, about half one way, half the other. In January 1993, figuring its force then at twelve thousand, the FLN high command met in secrecy to decide, regardless of the deacon, how soon to go to war. Marcos, citing the church's and Solidarity's gains in the canyons, the continual loss of recruits, the increasing danger from army patrols, and the government's probable disarray during upcoming national elections, argued for action as soon as possible, and carried the day. But in May an army patrol discovered an EZLN training camp. Assuming the union supported the EZLN, it seized a nearby community and took away union members. The deacon of deacons did his primary duty. He publicly denied the union's involvement in any subversive activity, in effect separating the union from the EZLN.

Once the deacon had defected from the revolution, Bishop Ruiz acted. He went down into the canyons with priests and missionaries to advise communities not to support armed struggle. And he composed a pastoral letter for the diocese, which for maximum public effect he delivered to Pope John Paul on the papal visit to Yucatán in August. It was a long summary of his then thirty-three years in San Cristóbal, an account of the social mission, the defense of the poor, the incarnation of the church in Indian cultures, plus all the Left's standard criticisms of the Mexican government and Salinas's reforms, but finally it was a plea for "dialogue"—no military actions, and negotiations to stop the impending war.

He labored in vain. In September, at another clandestine meeting in the canyons, Marcos humiliated the FLN national executive and took independent charge of the EZLN in Chiapas. The rebels could not go into action before the corn harvest in late November. On November 17 the U.S. House of Representatives voted for NAFTA, to take effect on January 1, 1994. And so it was that in the morning of the first day of the new year Marcos's Zapatista army started its revolution.

That day went splendidly for the Zapatista EZLN, which captured three sizable towns as well as the city of San Cristóbal, and stunned the whole country, if not the world. On the