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At Mass, Pope Francis Embraces ‘Misunderstood’ of Mexico

by Jim Yardley and Paulina Villegas

SAN CRISTÓBAL DE LAS CASAS, Mexico — [Pope Francis](#) came to the highlands of Mexico’s southern frontier on Monday to offer a pastoral embrace to the region’s impoverished indigenous people, expressing shame over discrimination and exploitation and honoring the legacy of a beloved local bishop who once clashed with the Mexican government — and the [Vatican](#).

In visiting the state of Chiapas, a region on the Guatemalan border long synonymous with the struggles and armed rebellions of Mexico’s Mayan communities, Francis presided over an outdoor morning Mass before tens of thousands of people ringed by rugged green mountains. Looking over the crowd, Francis invoked the harsh treatment endured by indigenous people and called for social justice.

“On many occasions, in a systematic and organized way, your people have been misunderstood and excluded from society,” Francis said. “Some have considered your values, culture and traditions to be inferior. Others, intoxicated by power, money and market trends, have stolen your lands or contaminated them.”

He added, “How worthwhile it would be for each of us to examine our conscience and learn to say, ‘Forgive me!’ ”

Midway through a six-day tour of Mexico, Francis has blended familiar calls for hope and mercy with stinging critiques. He warned Mexican bishops against “triumphalism” and complacency. He [preached against inequality](#) while standing at the edge of one of the country’s poorest slums. And he has bemoaned the country’s drug-related violence.

Yet Francis is also treading carefully. As in past trips abroad, he has so far avoided directly criticizing the nation’s leaders, alluding to corruption but resisting a sharp-worded accounting of the failures of a government with dismal popularity ratings. As yet, it was also unclear whether Francis would meet with relatives of the [43 students](#) who mysteriously disappeared in 2014 in the state of Guerrero, a crime that has deeply embarrassed the government.

In Chiapas, Francis extended a running theme of his papacy — the exploitation of native peoples and the need of the Roman Catholic Church to embrace some of their rituals and popular

devotions. Chiapas is a particularly apt locale because the state's complex social ferment had its origins in the earliest years of the colonial era, when a Dominican missionary, Bartolomé de las Casas, denounced the brutality of the Spanish conquerors, who divided up the land and enslaved the Indians living on it.

Centuries later, the local Mayan communities remain among the poorest people in Mexico, often overlooked by the political class. As Francis toured the center of San Cristóbal in his popemobile, people raced after him, shouting out his name, while others seemed stunned that a pope had come to a place grappling with poverty, migration and violence, where people often feel forgotten by the government in Mexico City.

“It's so great that a Latin American pope, someone who speaks our language and is Catholic, would come here to explain his message to us — in a way we can understand,” said Arturo Lionel Galindo, 63, a street musician near San Cristóbal's cathedral. “Unlike a European pope, he can tell us how his presence here can help us, and how we can all help end this violence, this exploitation of our people, that continues to this day.”

After his tour, Francis made a short visit to the cathedral to pray at the tomb of the bishop, Samuel Ruiz García, who for decades championed the rights of native peoples. An adherent of liberation theology, Bishop Ruiz denounced abuses and discrimination, especially by powerful local leaders.

“He saw that not only was their struggle for land, but that the Indians had no access to education or political power,” said Andrés Fábregas Puig, an anthropologist from Chiapas. “Something had to be done about that.”

Bishop Ruiz [made enemies](#) of landowners and was also distrusted by the Mexican state for his closeness to the Zapatista National Liberation Army, the armed rebels who led a short insurgency against the state in 1994. He served as the mediator in peace negotiations between the Zapatistas and the government but later quit, accusing the government of persecuting him and not negotiating in good faith.

As bishop overseeing a diocese one-fifth the size of Italy, Bishop Ruiz faced a severe shortage of priests and eased the burden by ordaining several hundred married male deacons, a vast majority of them indigenous men. But some church officials suspected he ultimately intended to ordain some of the married deacons as priests. In 2002, Pope John Paul II prohibited the diocese from ordaining any more deacons.

But in 2014, Francis reversed that edict as some skeptics questioned whether the new pope was signaling a softer line on priestly celibacy, something denied by Vatican officials. Priest shortages remain a problem in the diocese, which currently has 108 priests for 1.3 million Catholics, even as evangelical Protestants have made headway in recent years their more expansive approach to worship.

Five years after his death, Bishop Ruiz, who was known as Tatic, a local term for “father,” remains a powerful presence. He is credited with building the diocese’s first primary schools and translating the Mexican Constitution into local languages so people would know their rights.

Before the morning Mass, one of the speakers onstage led a cheer. “The people walk with Tatic Samuel,” the people shouted, “and with Francis.”

Bishop Raúl Vera, who worked closely with Bishop Ruiz, said the symbolism of Francis’s visit to the tomb would resonate with many people — and also raise expectations.

“Pope Francis is a Latin American, and his duty now is to pick up the work that men like Ruiz have done in the past,” Bishop Vera said.

On Monday, leaders of indigenous groups from 15 Latin American countries came to San Cristóbal to demand that Catholic leaders take action on the pope’s environmental encyclical.

Francis, returning to the themes of that encyclical during his morning Mass, said, “We can no longer remain silent before one of the greatest environmental crises in world history.”

Azam Ahmed and Elisabeth Malkin contributed reporting from Mexico City.

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