

ARTICLES

THE GUAYMI INDIAN AND CERRO COLORADO
(PANAMA) *

"He who oppresses the poor insults his Maker."
(Prov 14.31)

by David (Chiriqui) and Daniel E. Nunez N.
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With smiling faces, in spite of worms and malnutrition, the children are playing outside the house. The mother is sewing a many-coloured large leather bag, while a naked child, a few months old, is creeping beside her. The grandmother is bringing water and firewood with two little boys; the father and two sons have returned from the sugarcane fields ("socolar") and are joyfully received. There is a wind blowing and one can feel the peacefulness. In the midst of their poverty, there is great affection among them, there is love. Some are baptized, others are not; but Jesus' message of freedom is beginning to stir up their hearts. It is a scene at a Guaymi house in any place in the Territory of Tabasara. They do not know it, but they are threatened.

I. WHY DO WE SPEAK?

This year we are again commemorating the Day of the Indian Peoples. The Priests' Council of this Diocese, and I, as its Pastor, recall what was affirmed at Puebla: in spite of the fact that we are far from living what we preach, and asking pardon for our faults and limitations, *we wish to be the voice* of those who cannot speak or who are silenced in their deepest desires and hopes. In the faces of our Guaymi brothers we recognize "the suffering features of Christ the Lord, who questions and appeals to us . . . Living marginalized lives and in inhuman conditions, they can be considered *the poorest of the poor*." (1)

During all these years at the head of the Diocese of David we have tried, with more or less success, to collaborate in the struggle for the complete freedom of these poorest among the poor. For this very reason they have been and are the principal subject of our anxiety. It is for them that we wish to commit our words and our life.

The copper mine of *Cerro Colorado* is a project which has been talked about for years in our country, but in the last months it has become almost the centre of attention. There is a great deal of discussion about the financial advantages or disadvantages; there are disputes in favour of and opposed to the Contracts; the Friends of Plant and Animal Environment (Amigos del Arbol y de la Fauna) raise their cry of alarm; the politicians also cast their eyes on this project. But, *what of the Guaymi? Almost no one has spoken on their behalf*, their case has not been relevant.

On other occasions we have shown our interest in this project and its direct consequences on the poor people of the zone. We said expressly that "the mine should be at the service of man and not man at the service of the mine" (2) Today, because it is the day especially dedicated as a tribute to the Indian, we wish to explain a few principles, based on our faith in Jesus Christ, that will help us to see, with more Christian seriousness, the effect of this mine on the Guaymi race.

We recognize clearly that the mining project also affects communities of peasants whose condition of poverty and exploitation has been for years just like that of the Guaymi. Some of the aspects we will mention affect them in the same way that they do the Indians; but because this day is expressly dedicated to the Indian, we make direct reference

only to the Guaymi. Nevertheless, we are greatly concerned about the problem of the "machete worker" to whom not even one day is especially dedicated.

II. ORIENTATING PRINCIPLES

We Bishops, and through us the Latin American Catholic Church, publicly took in Puebla a "preferential option for the poor." (3) Already last year we recalled in our *Pastoral Letter*: "Although Jesus never rejected a rich or powerful man who approached him seeking salvation (e.g. Nicodemus, Zaccheus) we see that his *preference for the poor* runs through the whole Gospel. To them he announces the Kingdom (cf. LK 6.20-21); all those persons who for social and religious reasons were marginalized in his time, are gathered together, defended and their welfare promoted." (4) This must be, then, one of our principal parameters. In the light of this preferential option, we want to analyze the mining project.

In Puebla also it was recalled that "every insult to the dignity of man is at the same time an insult to God himself, whose image man is" and, therefore, we condemn "every sign of contempt, diminishment or insult to these persons and their inalienable rights." (5) This principle of action is based on what the Lord Jesus said and what he did in his mortal life (cf. LK 6.24; 11.46 and Mt 20.25 ff.) and on what Saint Paul says: that we are to denounce the barren deeds of darkness (cf. Eph 5.11). Therefore, if this project is going to outrage, scorn or diminish in any way the human dignity of the Guaymi, we cannot, as Christians, accept it.

Development cannot be reduced to simple *economic growth*. In order to be authentic, it must be complete, that is, promote the welfare of all men and every man. One must not take the risk of increasing still more the wealth of the wealthy and the power of the strong, thus confirming the misery of the poor and adding it to the servitude of the oppressed. (6) That is, an ethical principle that must rule or orient the approval of the mining project is to keep very much in mind that those primarily affected are the Guaymi Indians. They are an ethnic minority certainly, but their rights are prior to the State which was established on this piece of American land. For that same reason, it is necessary to set up effective measures in order not to drive it to extinction.

"Every program conceived to increase production has no other reason for existence, when all is said and done, than the service of the person. If it exists, it is to reduce inequalities, to fight against discrimination, to free man from slavery, to make him capable of being in himself the agent responsible for his material improvement, his moral progress and his spiritual development . . . *Economics and technique have no meaning unless they are for men, whom they must serve*." (7) This wise teaching of our well remembered Paul VI helps us to fix still more in our memories the meaning of the above reference: a project like that of the copper mine, has to fulfill these objectives. If this project is to be developed in a country which is said to have a Catholic majority, more attention must be paid to the teachings and centuries-long experience of our Church.

"The Church has always taught that the fundamental duty of power is a concern for the common good of society: this is where its fundamental rights come from. Precisely in the name of this premise concerning the objective ethical order, the rights of power cannot be understood in any other way but as a basis for respect for the objective and inviolable rights of men." (8) The authoritative words of His Holiness John Paul II indicate to us that a project like the one we are discussing cannot be imposed on a people and the Government has the duty of taking every

precaution, *cost what it may*, that this project not be detrimental to those who are really the base of power, the people; this people who suffer tuberculosis and have to sell their strength as workers.

III. CONCRETE EFFECTS OF THE MINING PROJECT

Taking into account that "the social order must be developed daily, based on truth, built on justice, vivified by love" (9) and now that we have explained the series of normative principles that come from our faith, we want to say something concrete about the mining project. We do not claim, in any way, to point out all the aspects under which we suppose a project of this nature falls and neither do we consider ourselves experts in economics, finance, law, administration, politics or ecology. Nevertheless, *the Church, an expert in humanity, in whose heart everything that is truly human finds an echo and which feels closely and really in solidarity with men and their history* (10) communicates to us the ability to point out, criticize and orient everything that is not ordered to the dignifying of men, in this case, of our Guaymi brothers. Therefore we make clear that our intention is not to monopolize or to put an end to discussion on this topic. We simply make a few notes which come somewhat from our scientific knowledge but especially from our pastoral preoccupation.

Through the information that we have gathered, [we understand that] the *social impact* that the mining project will have is of such magnitude that there are those who speak of the extinction of the Guaymi people as such. We do not want to be alarmists or pessimists but neither do we wish to be naive. In the light of the principles explained, let us look at several points that concern us.

1. There is talk of a 63 km. highway for whose construction land 100 mts. wide will be needed, given the rolling nature of the terrain; this is equivalent to 630 hectares. There is talk of a "zone of influence" for the mine and another for the harbor with a radius of 10 km., which is equivalent to an area of 31,400 hectares at the mine and as many more at the harbor. (11) If to this we add the water dams that will have to be built and the possible redirection of the course of the *San Felix* river, we have a good amount of land occupied or with possible direct influence on the part of the mine. What does that "zone of influence" for the mine suppose exactly? How many small villages have to disappear and be relocated to give way to this project? How high is the number of persons affected in this manner? Why is concrete information with respect to this not being published? *Where is it intended to relocate these persons?* In October, 1978, the Social Department of CODEMIN told us it was "premature" to speak of relocation, but what about now?

2. The Guaymi live fundamentally on a subsistence agriculture, complemented by the bit of fishing and hunting that is left. The agriculture of cut and burn, on bad lands that need a rotating rest of a few years, cannot produce as much in the same space as mechanized or rich soil agriculture. Therefore, the Indian needs a larger piece of land. Furthermore, there is talk of "deforested lands" and that the ecological damage under this aspect is minimal (12). It is true that they are deforested lands, but they are this way because they are the lands that the Guaymi cultivate or use for cattle pasture, therefore, they are used.

Given their technology and demographic growth, at present there are no available lands in the Territory of Tabasara. All the people who will be relocated have some bit of land that they cultivate; what lands will be given them in compensation for the land they lose? There is talk that there have been and will be indemnities, what formulas

are being used to evaluate this? Have there been investigations about the use of the land? What is being paid for, the area that is presently being destroyed or the production of that land year after year?

Family ties are fundamental for the social organization of the Guaymi people, since they do not depend only on their own household, but on the other households in the same community (which frequently are those of relatives); thus, the relocation has to be not only to available lands for each one but for whole communities as such.

3. CODEMIN has raised the possibility of throwing refuse from the mining (concentrating) process into the *San Felix* river. It is said that studies are being begun to see the ecological effect of this action. We are exceedingly surprised that, since there is a Feasibility Study in 48 volumes, there is no completed study of the effect upon the population directly concerned (13). The Indians use this river to fish, to drink, to bathe in, to wash, for their animals etc., especially in summer when water is scarce. What will they do if the river is polluted? How is this loss to be compensated for?

One alternative for the refuse from the mine is the land situated to the south of the *Tole* district. In case this alternative is accepted, what will happen to the peasant communities that live in that area? How will they be compensated?

4. The project overwhelms us with millions of tons of rock that will have to be removed annually. We can't really imagine sizes or volumes, but questions arise in our minds; what effects will this very immense movement of earth have on the underground water which is really life for those who live there? Has a study been made of the use of streams and springs of water by the Guaymi of the zone, the underground currents, etc.? Will not many landslides be caused by such a broad highway, used for very heavy equipment on such uneven ground? What will happen to communities like *Laguna, Cangrejo, Tebujo, Maraca, Cerro Ceniza, Palmagira, Cerro Puerco*?

5. According to those who are familiar with the subject, the different economic, social and spiritual aspects of the life of the Guaymi people are highly interrelated, so that to change one aspect of them in any depth brings as a consequence unforeseen changes in the other aspects. Therefore the agriculture and cattle projects that CODEMIN is intending in certain Indian communities (14) must take into account the *whole* impact they will have and not only the possibility of a merely technical improvement.

If serious changes are promoted in the agricultural system, it can happen that a spirit of internal competition will break down the spirit of co-operation and generosity that still exists among the Guaymi. What will happen, for example, to the work fraternities if all are cultivating for the market? What studies has CODEMIN carried out in order to plan its agriculture and cattle projects? What participation do the dwellers in the Territory have in the planning and execution of these projects?

6. Through various reports and through our own knowledge we are aware that in the Guaymi Territory there are many cases of respiratory diseases and also a high incidence of tuberculosis. With the huge movement of earth and the dust that will arise, especially in the summer when there is so much wind, it seems to us that this type of disease will increase. What measures are being taken to avoid it? CODEMIN says that it has promoted "medical and dental assistance, by means of periodic visits." (15) To what does this periodic character refer? What places have been "assisted"? How much is it intended to spend on all this?

7. One of the most serious problems that the Guaymi presently have is the cultivation of land which gives them only enough to survive and makes it necessary for them to "go out" to work for wages. CODEMIN has said that the mine will be a great source of work and that "training courses have been in process . . . with the object of preparing Panamanian workers, especially the Guaymi" (16). We know that the mine will use a highly rated technology, which means that it will be difficult for a Guaymi to be able, in a few years, to work in the mine as such. On the other hand, how many Guaymi have received these courses? Where are they working? What will they do after the construction of the mine?

8. Through the experience of other countries, we know that a project that supposes such a large gathering together of people (five, ten, fifteen thousand?) in occupations directly or indirectly involved with the enterprise, causes very serious social changes. The centres for the sale of liquor will increase (it has already happened), probably also centres of prostitution. There will be speculation on the prices of different articles; the Guaymi will be induced to new patterns of consumption foreign to their culture, etc. What measures have been thought of to prevent the Guaymi being brought by the mine to more slavery and misery in the ways indicated?

9. In the reports, CODEMIN speaks of an encampment in *Hato Chamí*, in the very heart of the Territory, with a capacity for 3,500 persons. *Hato Chamí* is not a "practically uninhabited" place, whatever may be said to the contrary. What measures have been thought of to avoid the resulting shocks and problems that would surely arise with the arrival of so many "Latin" people? It is to be hoped that the Indians are consulted about the details of the project in each one of the communities. We know that for a time there was a radio program in the Guaymi language; what impact did it have? CODEMIN says that the leaders of the communities have shared in the decision-making with respect to some activities (17). How many meetings of this kind have there been? In what places? On what occasion? What has been the real participation of the people? What will be done if some communities are opposed to being relocated?

10. In the previous nine points, we have mentioned the possible effects that the mining project will have on the Guaymi people. The following question then arises: if the Guaymi are the ones who will have to pay most dearly in human terms, if they are the ones who will have to suffer radical changes in their way of life because of the mine, *what percentage of participation will they have in its benefits?* A short time ago, at a Guaymi gathering, a leader said that he was intending to ask CODEMIN for a truck load of food for his community, and another said he was going to ask for a stake of 1,000 balboas for projects for his community. It is to be hoped that the Guaymi will not have to put up with what that poor Lazarus did who could scarcely feed himself with the crumbs that fell from the table of the wicked rich man. (cf. LK 16.19 ff.)

IV. WHAT DO WE SUGGEST?

As was said in Puebla, "the Gospel must teach us that, faced with the realities in which we live, one cannot nowadays, in Latin America, truly love one's brother, and therefore God, without being committed on the personal level, and in many cases, on the structural level as well, to the service and advancement of the most dispossessed and humiliated groups and social strata, with all the consequences that follow on the plane of these temporal

realities." (18) In accordance with this, we wish to commit ourselves personally to this problem in which perhaps the future of the Guaymi race is at stake. From our humble position, we also believe that in this case, there has to be a serious commitment on the structural level to the most dispossessed and humiliated.

So then, we point out some minimum requirements that we believe the mining project ought to fulfill. The fundamental requirement is the *real and effective participation* of the Guaymi in the *planning, execution and benefits* of the project and in every decision that has to do with their economy, ecology, social organization, health, etc. Our Holy Father John XXIII once reminded us: "We are convinced that the protagonists of economic development, social progress and cultural advancement in the rural areas must be the workers of the land." (19)

It is necessary for a percentage of the profits of the mine to be assured for the benefit of development programs in the zone. It is imperative that the *culture and special characteristics* of the Guaymi people be *deeply respected* in this whole process. *A just relocation and compensation* must be *assured* for the families and communities affected. All precautions must be taken, cost what it may, so that the movement of earth, the effect on surface and underground waters, the new towns that may be created, etc., are not to the detriment of the human dignity of the Guaymi. We believe that now is the time when an *Organic Law* for the *Guaymi Territory* is most urgent and necessary, and we trust it will soon be defined in a just way; it is also urgent for the National Government to implement the *Law of Indian Policy*, that was proclaimed by the President of the Republic last January.

V. CONCLUSION

"Righteousness raises a people to honour; to do wrong is a disgrace to any nation." (Prov 14.34)

We end this tribute to the Indian and in particular to the Guaymi with the words that His Holiness John Paul II addressed to the Indians in Mexico: *the Indian "has a right to be respected, not to be deprived — by artifices that at times are equivalent to real plunder — of the little he possesses . . . He has a right to efficacious help — that is neither alms nor crumbs of justice — that he may have access to the development that his dignity as a man and a son of God deserves."* (20) These are the rights that we have wished to explain in this letter, *we do not ask for crumbs nor for alms for the Guaymi but we demand what is just.*

We have explained a series of principles based on our faith which we believe must regulate the putting into practice of a project like that of the copper mine of *Cerro Colorado*. We have suggested some minimum requirements that the mining project ought to meet to justify its being carried out. We repeat what we said last year: our interest is that "no harm should be done to any of the human rights of the inhabitants of these lands" (21), whether they are Indians or poor peasants.

It seems to us that our intention is clear. With this letter we do not wish to serve as a political banner for anyone, nor are we interested in directing votes to any party; neither are we — obviously — opposed to the progress and welfare of the nation. We recognize that some groups are using the copper mine to promote their own interests, leaving the Government in the difficult position of having to defend the interests of its transnational partner. Our fundamental desire is — as we have already said — "to be the voice of those who cannot speak or are silenced in their deepest desires and hopes, principally of those considered the poorest of the poor."

Of course, it is not up to us to decide if the copper mine is to develop or not. Nevertheless, with all respect and

"in the strength that comes from God" (2 Tim 1.8) we say that if this project is not ordered in conformity with the principles we have explained and does not meet the minimum requirements that we also suggest, we will be obliged to reject it because it is not ordered for the dignifying of the image of God, that is, man, in this case, Guaymi man.

The words of Jesus, "I tell you this: anything you did for one of my brothers here, however, humble, you did for me," (Mt 25.40) resound in our hearts and are those that have impelled us to say these words.

May the love of God our Father, the freedom that Jesus brings us, and the Strength of his Spirit be with us and especially with our Guaymi brothers.

NOTES

1. Documents of Puebla, No. 20.
2. Daniel E. Nunez, "The Cerro Colorado mine and its human design", in *La Estrella de Panama*, September 11, 1978.
3. Puebla, Nos. 897 - 930.

4. *Pastoral Letter*, May 14, 1978.
5. Puebla, Nos. 203 and 215.
6. Cf. *Populorum Progressio*, Nos. 14 and 33.
7. Idem, No. 34.
8. John Paul II, Encyclical *Redemptor hominis*, March 14, 1979.
9. Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution "Gaudium et Spes", No. 26.
10. Idem, No. 1.
11. Panel, of CODEMIN, Forum of Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture of Panama, March 26, 1979. The Mining Development Corporation of Cerro Colorado (CODEMIN) is a Panamanian government enterprise created by means of Law 41 of August 1, 1975 with the principal purpose of promoting the development of the mineral-metallurgical Project for Cerro Colorado.
12. Idem
13. Idem
14. Cf. "CODEMIN answers", in *El Matutino*, March 20, 1979.
15. Idem.
16. "CODEMIN answers", in *El Matutino*, March 15, 1979.
17. Cf. note 14.
18. Puebla, No. 224.
19. *Mater et Magistra*, No. 144.
20. Discourse in Oaxaca, January 29, 1979.
21. Cf. note 2.

