

SPIRITUAL EXERCISES IN “CLAVE MAYA”

August 2008
Chiapas, Mexico

In August, I traveled to Chiapas, Mexico to participate in a 10-day silent retreat of the Spiritual Exercises. The Spiritual Exercises were originally created by St. Ignatius, over five hundred years ago, as a month-long silent retreat for men preparing for priesthood in the Jesuit order. These Exercises would be condensed into 10 days. And they would be in “Clave Maya.” “Clave” means “code” or “key” in Spanish, so we might say that these Ignatian Exercises incorporated Mayan symbols, rituals and spirituality as a way to “unlock” our hearts so that we might enter into the experience in a more profound way.

The retreat involved almost 40 people, including Jesuit priests and brothers, Sisters of “El Divino Pastor” (a Mexican congregation founded by Fr. Antonio Repiso, SJ), lay men and women, Mestizo and Tzeltal Maya—all staff from the Jesuit Mission and its affiliate, the Center for Indigenous Rights. The retreat was led by Fr. Victoriano (“Vico”) Castillo Gonzalez, SJ and Eduardo (“Guayo”) León Chik, a Quiché Maya, both from Guatemala, and Fr. Pedro Arriaga, SJ and Josefa (“Chepita”) Fernández Perez, a Tsotsil Maya, both from San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas.

With the exception of the first morning, our days began at 7 AM when we gathered in small groups to share our dreams. After breakfast, we did one hour of physical labor: picking up garbage in the street or doing various chores on the grounds of the center such as painting, cleaning and washing windows. The entire group gathered at 10 AM, to listen to the retreat leaders present the themes of the day. We had time for personal meditation, prayer and artistic expression as well as meetings with our spiritual directors both before and after the main meal at 1:30 PM. At 5 PM, we gathered again for a community celebration of Mass, incorporating Mayan rituals and spiritual expression. At 7 PM the retreat leaders invited four retreatants (who differed each day) to share our experiences, and then the leaders suggested Bible readings and reflection questions. We ate dinner at 8 PM. Except for our dream groups and time with our spiritual directors, we were silent.

Here are some excerpts from my journal and photos of my experience:

DAY 1:

We begin the Exercises before a large wooden cross in the courtyard with the late afternoon sunlight illuminating the enormous clouds gathering on the horizon. At the foot of the cross there are 12 yellow candles and 12 white candles, nestled on a bed of green pine needles. White is the color of the North and symbolizes birth. Yellow is the color of the South and symbolizes death. The North to South direction is the journey of humankind from birth to death. At the four corners of this altar are large conch shells. What will we give birth to in these next ten days? What will we let die? These are the questions we ponder, as we walk to the chapel, each holding white and yellow candles, the flames flickering in the gently falling rain.

The chapel is dark. We walk slowly through a path of pine needles illuminated by candles, searching for the symbol that speaks to us most deeply. In the center of the room, we gaze at the Mayan altar. The red candle stands at the East, where the sun rises, symbol of blood and corn. The black candle stands in the West, where the sun sets, symbol of night, “dream time” and hope for a new day. The West to East trajectory (sunset to sunrise) is the path of God. The white candle of the North and the yellow candle of the South span the path of



humanity. Where the two paths intersect, in the center of the altar, are a blue candle and a green candle. The blue candle stands for the heavens, and the green candle for the earth, because for the Maya People, God is “Corazón del Cielo” (Heart of the Heavens), “Corazón de la Tierra” (Heart of the Earth).

“The Spiritual Exercises are experienced through our feet, not our heads,” says Fr. Arriaga. “It is an embodied experience that allows our hearts to be at home in our bodies, as the Maya say.”

DAY 2:

This is a silent retreat. Fr. Pedro explains: “Silence is our ‘cave’ where we can connect with ourselves and God, much like Ignatius retreated to. Caves Peoples: they invite us in to to say in our cave, in our “Yo at our deepest intimacy. ‘cave’ and distracts us from helps us to listen. “God does falling on a stone, but like a drop of water on a sponge.”



the cave at Manresa that St. are also important to the Maya encounter God. Silence helps us profundo” (our deep “I”), to arrive Conversation takes us out of our what our heart says.” Silence not speak loudly, not like rain

Fr. Vico explains that in the sacred book of the Maya, the Popul Vuh, God created the first humans by forming them from “masa,” corn dough. “God continuously forms us.” We gather around a pile of red clay and are invited to take a handful. As we work and form our clay, we ask: “How does God feel forming me?”



DAY 3:

During the retreat, we learn about the daily symbols on the Mayan lunar calendar and incorporate them into our reflections. Guayo explains that today is “jun bats” on the Maya calendar. “Jun” means one; we are unique. “Bats” is red. Red is the color of beginnings, of the rising sun, of the beginning of God’s journey from west to east, sunset to sunrise. We ask: what does my heart feel? We consider each of the elements of the Exercises so far, create a symbol reflecting our experiences on pieces of colored paper, and then weave them together with red thread.

We celebrate Mary’s Ascension into Heaven today. Outside, we gather in a circle around the large wooden Cross, alternating men and women to balance the energy. We sing a Tzeltal song to Guadalupe, “Xcoltanucat Ch’ul Maria.” Then the men turn to the women on their right and ask for forgiveness (both personal and collective) for all the ways they have devalued or marginalized women, cast them aside, failed to listen, neglected to give us space.



DAY 4:

Vico explains that today is “kip beh” on the Mayan calendar. Kip is two and beh is road. The number two represents unity and duality. Today is the point where two roads meet: God’s path from west to east, and the path of humankind from north to south. In considering the number two, we consider duality. We are the complement of another person. In Quiché, the meaning of “companion” is *the person who is*



concerned about my integrity. Sin breaks the integrity and “complementarity” between us. It is a lack of solidarity. This day calls us to journey.

We consider the sin or evil in our world. “Sin is not human,” says Fr. Vico, “but it may take human form.” Around the altar we find newspaper articles about war and violence, poverty, loneliness, environmental and human degradation. We spend the day reflecting on personal and structural sin.



The afternoon Mass begins outside. We gather around the Cross. Three men sound conch shells and we lift our gaze skyward to the great beyond. What do our hearts say?

We process around the Cross led by Sebastiana with a basket of offerings on her head and two



women carrying large red flowers. We walk at “grandmother’s pace,” slow and thoughtful.

Chepita and Guayo build a fire with special incense, carbon and jocote. Chepita explains that in the past, the old ones smoked ceremonial cigars in a rite of purification, exhaling the smoke in

the four directions: above, below and to the sides. Chepita gives us each a cigar and then Guayo purifies us with a bundle of basil and rosemary and fragrant herbs, slapping us on the shoulders, our backs, our thighs and our feet. We are invited to light our cigars from the sacred fire, and smoke them, releasing all the sins that weighed us down with each exhalation. Guayo and Chepita add incense, chocolate and more jocote to the fire as we smoke our cigars. We from the fire in our hands and bless and feet. Many weep. We receive death and the path of humanity), celebrate Eucharist and add our



DAY 5:

Today we reflect on how our sins are forgiven, and how we forgive. Unlike Western religions that focus on an individual’s sinfulness before God, the Eastern perspective (in this case the Maya’s) is *to see God is good because God forgives us*. When a Maya seeks reconciliation, she says, “I want your heart to see me!” Today we reflect on the Bible stories of the woman accused of adultery and the prodigal son. With whom do I need to reconcile? From whom do I need to seek forgiveness?

Fr. Vico talks about the Mayan calendar. Today is “oxip aj” (three = corn stalk) day. The number three is between two (duality, unity) and four (perfection, four corners, four colors of corn). Three represents the search for perfection, the journey toward completeness. “Aj,” a stalk of corn, is the symbol of authority. Those with leadership roles in Mayan society, carry a staff, a symbol of their authority, authority gained by service to their community.



In the afternoon, we gather in a large circle in the courtyard. We sing songs and process to the outdoor chapel, with Guayo carrying the stalk of corn. Following a Mayan ritual of forgiveness, we divide into pairs of men and women. Chepita explains that we are to think of someone of whom we need to ask forgiveness and imagine that person to be standing before us. We kneel before the other person and place our hands on that person's feet and our forehead on the ground. From this posture, we ask forgiveness of the person standing before us, who symbolizes someone from our life with whom we want to reconcile. Before long, the chapel is full of the cries and sobs of people asking for forgiveness. The second part of the ritual comes after the person kneeling has said his piece. The kneeling person rises to his knees and clasps the person who is standing around her hips and continues to ask for forgiveness or is simply silent. The person standing comforts the kneeling one as a parent would comfort a child. When the kneeling one feels ready, he begins to stand with the other helping him to his feet. Then the two embrace, the standing person hugging the other as a parent would hug a child. The chapel floor is wet with puddles of tears. We celebrate Eucharist, each receiving Communion from the other in silence.

DAY 6: Fr. Vico tells us that according to the Mayan calendar today is "kep ix" or "four-woman" day. The number four is the symbol of perfection, the intersection of the four corners, the four roads, red, black, white and yellow. Vico says that the symbol of the woman lets us know that the feminine is present in all of us. We are all part of our mothers. Even in the Mayan languages, the words for everyone include the words for men and women, unlike Spanish that reverts to the masculine and only implies that women are included. In Quiché, the expression for wife means "my femininity" and for husband, "where I look." The Tzeltal Maya refer to their spouses as "the pair of my mouth and of my heart." Today is time to reflect on our images of women. What is our relationship to women? What is our femininity?



Chepita explains that later we will enter the temascal, or traditional sweathouse. This is the "womb" of the Mother, the maternal cave, "the heart of the mother."



Among the Maya Peoples, a baby's first bath after birth is with the midwife and the mother in the temascal. Inside, they recuperate and then emerge to begin life's journey. We enter saying: "I want to enter the temascal, the womb of my grandmother, my mother, the Madre Tierra." We gather in a circle, pairing off, women and men. We partner with another person. We will encourage each other while we are in the temascal. By pairs we put incense into

the fire and each take a bunch of daisies and herbs. We then turn to the four directions while the conch shells sound, raising our hands and our bouquets to the sky. We finish by reverencing the fire that will burn outside the temascal.

First the women enter. We are twenty-one women, packed into the temascal, our mother's womb. The heat is intense. The stones inside had been heated since the night before. Chepita lights a few candles so we have light enough to see our faces. She puts water on the stones and a wave of humidity comes over us. In just a few minutes we are bathed in sweat. We take our flowers and herbs and bless the person next to us. Our male companions outside call out our names, one by one. They say things to encourage us and make us laugh. After a while, we emerge, dizzy with the heat. The men help us onto petates (straw mats) on the ground, pour cold water on our heads and feet, and give us water to drink. We sit around the fire and sing songs as the men enter the

temascal. A little later, one by one, we speak to the men inside. We say: "We have a bed ready for you when you come out so you can rest." The men hoot and holler. We laugh. When the men emerge, the women help them to petates, wrapping blankets around them, and giving them water to drink. Next we sit down next to our companions and look into each other's eyes and express our gratitude. We kiss each other's hands and cheeks. We receive white candles, a sign of birth and beginnings. One by one we light our candles, first from the fire and then by passing the light one to another. We greet each of the 42 of us who have experienced the temascal together, calling each other's names, gazing into each other's eyes and then bowing our heads in reverence. We walk in pairs to the sacred fire and add our candles to the flames.

DAY 7: At our morning gathering, Fr. Vico tells us that today is "hoeb sikin" or five-bird day. Five represents the fingers on one hand or foot. It is incomplete. The completeness of a person is represented by the number twenty—the number of digits on both hands and feet. A person reaches his or her completeness in the Mayan culture not through wealth or power, but through service to the community that brings moral prestige and wisdom. Ten is half a person, one who has not yet dedicated service to the community sufficient to arrive at completeness. Five represents the search for the other part, for completeness.



Sikin is a bird, which represents liberty, a messenger of God. The hummingbird has appeared in the dreams of many of the retreatants; it is a symbol of the Holy Spirit and of peace. The hummingbird spends all its life flying. Its heart is big by comparison to the size of its body. At Mass in the afternoon, we baptize each other to confirm our commitment to whatever we have discerned to be God's call to us. By pairs, we stand over the basin and pour water over the other's head and then receive the same.

DAY 8: We are entering into the part of the Exercises when we must make a decision. "I want to choose and desire that which most leads me to my salvation." We meditate on St. Ignatius' Two Standards: One of God and the other of Lucifer. We gather in the chapel. Chepita wraps us in red thread. We close our eyes and hear the disturbing sound of a plastic bag rattling around the room. Drums beat in a cacophonous chaos. Machetes clang. We hear the sounds of coins being shaken. The noise goes on and on, making our hearts feel anxious, irritated, and overwhelmed. We open our eyes and see three magazine covers around our altar: one of a politician, one of soldiers and one of a famous narco-trafficker. Power. These are the sound and sight of evil. Next we close our eyes and hear the melodious sound of a little clay pipe. Chepita passes by with the soft touch of a white shawl on our faces. The feeling is light, gentle, delicate. This is the way of God.

We untangle from our web of red thread, breathe deeply and pray. Today we will pray for our temascal partners because we can't do this without each other's support and prayers. After an afternoon of reflecting on the ways of evil and the ways of God, we gather in the little chapel around our altar. Fr. Pedro says, "We have two paths: one toward death and the other toward life. The path of death has three steps: money, power and arrogance. The path of Jesus also has three steps: poverty, simplicity, and humility." We look at the symbols of each on our altar. Fr. Pedro says, "This is not



yet right. We must rectify things. It is not to say that the way of Jesus means that people have to live without money. This is not dignified." Fr. Pedro takes some of the peso coins and places them next to the chard of pottery, the symbol of poverty. He says, "The poor need to have some political power, to be able to participate and not be outside the system." He takes one of the magazines (with cover photo of a politician) and places it with the cup, the symbol of simplicity or powerlessness. "And we must speak out for justice and the rights of the poor!" He takes one of the machetes and places it next to the Blessed Sacrament, the symbol of humility.

DAY 9: We begin our day together by cleaning up our altar, sweeping the floor and laying down a large wooden cross made of big timbers. We put rose petals around the cross. Guayo and Chepita say that the Maya put rose petals around the cross on Good Friday to ease the sadness. Today is "seven-feeling" day on the Mayan calendar. Guayo tells us that in Quiché the expression for catechist is the one who "feels the flowers." This is because flowers are present at all community celebrations: at the patron saint celebration, weddings, funerals, etc. The catechist is present in the community's joy and sorrow. Guayo says, "The Maya believe that a person says to God with his tears, 'I am alive.'"



We celebrate Mass dedicated to the martyrs of Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Latin America and other parts of the world. We begin, following a Mayan custom, by scattering pine needles on the concrete floor of the chapel in preparation for our celebration. We receive a blessing of pine resin incense and are invited to taste a little bit of ritual tobacco mixed with herbs. We dance the liturgical dance of the Tselal Maya and recite the Eucharistic Prayer with a litany to the martyrs. We share Resurrection stories. Pepe shares that after Arminda and Blanca (Pollita) died in the bus accident in 2001, he and Paco took Blanca's body to her parents' home in Vera Cruz. When they arrived, the mother asked Pepe, "Please tell me that the body in that coffin is not my daughter's!" The family was grief-stricken and angry with the Jesuit Mission because of the accident. Pepe stayed and talked with Blanca's mother and she showed him some of the poems she had written for her daughter. When they turned the last page, they found a poem that Blanca had written to her mother the last time she was home for a visit. Her mother had never seen this poem. The poem talked about how Blanca would return home one day. Pepe and Blanca's mother cried together.

DAY 10: In the little chapel, we gather as the afternoon rain falls outside. Chepita says, "We began our retreat with rain and we end with rain, a good sign." We scatter pine needles on the floor. We stand up and shout out: "Let's go!" "Get up!" "Here we are!" Our hearts stir. In the center of the altar, Chepita and Guayo sing and pray in their native tongues. We each receive one white candle. Chepita asks us to imagine the spaces we have occupied during our retreat, and we bring



our memories to the little chapel while four men blow conch shells. She walks around the room and blesses each of us with pine incense. Guayo blesses us with a bundle of pine needles. He makes a path through the pine needles from the Blessed Sacrament out the door. We began the retreat walking through a path in the pine needles. We will leave the retreat by the same path, but this time we will walk backward. One by one, we go to the Blessed Sacrament, light our candles, bow and kiss the floor in the four directions, and slowly walk backward out the door, keeping our eyes on the fire and the Blessed Sacrament. Outside we see that a double rainbow arcs over us, and we laugh with joy.