

An experience of development: a Christian and Mayan focus.

The case of Awacatán

With the tender smile of the women elders of Awacatán, we say "This is a testimony from the life which God has given us, here in the mountains of Awacatán", of Guatemala, a country in Central America. Awacatán is a municipality in which four cultures live together: Kiché, Chalchiteco, Awakateco and mestizos (of mixed indigenous and Spanish race). It is situated at a distance of 339 kilometres from the capital city. We are telling of this experience from the perception of the actors (men and women) themselves, who in themselves and in their practice affirm their relation with two expressions of Christianity, Catholic and Protestant, as well as with Mayan spirituality.

The testimonies have developed from their own assessment, from how each person, family and community feels. These people, with their actions, their social and cultural local functions and their plans for the future, keep two elements of their lives closely linked: spirituality and work. Spirituality involves their thinking, feeling, being and their presence in their community or church. Work relates them to the economy, health, education and many other things. They do not separate these elements of spirituality and work. If we keep this world view in mind, we are able to discover the positive aspects of each participant and their relationship to their environment.

We use four steps for this work: discovering the possibilities, that is to say their own perception, their vision, their planning and their actions.

Their own perception

Their potential

1985 was an important date in the life of the "Bethlehem" church of the Central American Mission. In 1983 and 1984 the church divided into two groups. One group considered that the church should attend to material as well as spiritual needs; the other group declared that the church should not attend to any material need. These two visions brought them into conflict and there was no way to reconcile either the people or the different ideas of these two groups.

The group which considered that the church should take on integral care based their proposal on the fact that since faith cannot be separated from daily reality, it invites people to attend to needs. The other group insisted that the church should not and cannot attend to human needs, even if they are basic. "It is not the responsibility of the church to attend to material things" was one of the statements.

In view of the conflict, the group organised by and made up of Chalchitecos and Awakatecos, members and leaders of the church, began a process of going more deeply into the relation of faith to life. Fully convinced, they affirmed that they made the effort because they felt that they were "called by God to be light and salt in their town". Because of this it was considered that they were a problem and that they were going against the principles of their own church.

These leaders identified the problems which were affecting them and they searched for answers until they were able to visualise some viable alternatives. They say that “to deal with material needs, faith is necessary; it can’t be left on one side”. Clearly for this group a human being has two sides which cannot be neglected: spiritual needs and material needs.

The churches of the Central American Mission, with their dispensationalist doctrine (historical development in stages) considered that deaconry service to attend to the needs of the parishioners was inappropriate and that it was damaging to attend to the needs of the community who did not belong to the church. In any case, the deaconry service should be used to proselytise; the people who receive any sort of help should become members of the church.

This tendency to remove oneself from the world used to be the attitude of all the churches, because they qualified material needs as “things of the world”. It was unacceptable that the evangelical church should collaborate with, act in solidarity with or attend to non-evangelicals; the mortal sin was to attend to Catholics. “Unconverted”, “worldly”, “pagan” are among the common terms used to describe Catholics.

At the beginning of the 90’s a slight reformulation of the work of service of the church can be perceived. There was a move towards the idea that service should be only and exclusively within the church itself, looking after the needs of those who belong to it, in order not to become contaminated by “pagans” and the “worldly”. For some Christians this was a big step. The Christians with a broad vision interpreted it as a modification: “The attitude of indifference remained.”

In 1985 the group of Christians committed to the gospel and the values of the kingdom of God took some first steps to face the consequences of the armed conflict (in Guatemala) which had already been going on for 25 years. This armed conflict had led to internal as well as external displacement. Many families sought refuge in neighbouring countries.

The armed conflict had left behind thousands of families who had disappeared or were divided, widows and widowers, orphan boys and orphan girls. In addition to these problems there was the military control which did not allow any daily activities to be carried out freely. Agricultural work suffered incalculable losses, above all in the smallest communities, because people were forced to spend up to 65 per cent of their time patrolling their community.

In view of these circumstances, the group which had been excluded from the church, was convinced it should attend to the needs of widows, needs which had arisen from the armed conflict and generalised violence. Each widow with an average of five children was forced by the harsh reality to play the double role of father and mother at the same time. They had no experience in looking for resources to meet their basic needs, because this had been the contribution of their partner who had been torn away from their side. This conflict lasted more than 35 years. Even today, in 2003, its consequences are still visible and are suffered by families in their daily life.

Needs visualised by the leaders

At first the Awakateka families struggled to survive through their own means and efforts. They faced great and diverse challenges, including family disintegration, a precarious economic situation,

and unequal social relationships. This situation reflects the reality of the exclusive, racist and discriminatory society of Guatemala.

The most immediate resource of the poor is their labour. With that they provide the basic necessities to keep their family going. They use this resource in their agricultural activities which consist of production on small plots of land.

The armed conflict had a negative influence on the production of agricultural products from the end of the 70's until the mid 80's of the last century. In 1986 the armed conflict diminished which allowed the beginning of a process of growth in rural activity. Families dedicated themselves full time to agriculture.

Nevertheless, they had not foreseen the problem of the market and they faced two serious problems: the intermediaries and direct trading. The intermediaries bought products from them at a miserable price which in many cases was 60 per cent less than the price in the market. The saturation of the local market with products allowed this exploitation of the price on the terms of the intermediaries. The direct sale of products on the national or international market without having any experience was inconceivable.

The roads added to the problem of the market, as they were few and far between or impossible to use in winter time. The efforts made did not bear the fruits that had been hoped for and the dreams of a better future were dashed. That this made the problem of survival more acute was noticeable during the harvest time on the large farms. Before, the families used to emigrate to the coffee plantations for three months every year but in this situation they emigrated for up to six months in the year to recover from the losses they had suffered. This situation had repercussions for their state of health: there was a noticeable increase in common illnesses. Either some member of the family fell sick on coming back from the period of work on the farms or the whole family came back ill. The few resources they had acquired were invested in medical treatment. This economic reality did not allow for the possibility of carrying out any project.

Education was another need which was felt and seen. The adults dreamt of a better future for their children but to achieve it, the children would have to get an academic training according to their abilities. With this dream they managed to define two objectives: to overcome their own situation of being unable to read and write and to overcome their economic situation and thus provide for their basic needs. One limitation linked to education was the distance between the home and the schools which was normally a journey of one or two hours. In total, there and back, this meant two to four hours walking every day because of the lack of roads and transport. This has improved over recent years. Nevertheless, the lack of economic resources makes it impossible to solve the problem of the distance. Better service was the demand of the Bethlehem College of the Central American church of the same name.

Another problem identified was that of health. Health care was almost non-existent at the local level. Related to health was housing, drinking water, electric light, that is to say public services. In the light of this situation, the leaders focused on two aspects: how to provide treatment and how to make the most of local medical knowledge to contribute to an improvement of health.

In 1987, having identified the problems and the approach with which to deal with the situation, as well as the possibility of providing health care, the work began. From the beginning, the project was known as the Evangelical Confraternity of Integral Development and it that is still its name. The leaders had a clear vision of the work and saw no contradiction with the doctrines of their faith. Nevertheless, for the pastor of the church it was a delicate issue since it was not permitted by the doctrine of the Central American churches.

In 1989 the problem with the Bethlehem College became acute. The disagreement among the adults affected the care of the children and this ended in the expulsion of the director of the College and the need for a new educational establishment. This problem, as well as the disagreements with the pastor which were getting worse, ended in the expulsion of the members of the working commission.

The different situations had created a social conscience among the majority of the members of the development working commission of the Bethlehem Church. The increasingly fractured relations ended in a division into five groups: some organised themselves into the Good News Church, some stayed with the management of the Bethlehem College, one group dispersed into others, a fourth group remained without going to any church at all and then there were those who organised themselves into the Presbyterian Church which developed the work of the Evangelical Confraternity of Integral Development (CEADI). To do this, they established their own development programmes and their own school. The leaders of this work were two brothers: Pedro and Juan Castro.

The problem of the interpretation of the dichotomy of reality still remains. The leaders of the churches maintain the division of life between the material and the spiritual. They spread the idea that the church's duty is to take care of the spirit. In order to denounce integral work, they condemn any attention given to the families' enormous material needs. Development work is associated with the work of the devil, of the antichrist and of communists.

The Castro brothers and their followers were not daunted by this situation. Without paying any attention to the ridicule and condemnation, they looked for resources to buy the land on which they eventually built the College. Then they built the church to provide integral care for the children.

1989, the beginning of the work of CEADI as a Presbyterian initiative

The assembly of the Awakatekan Evangelical Confraternity of Integral Development, CEADI, is made up of 45 people representing 20 communities. The representatives of the communities are not all Protestants; some are Catholics and others have keep the practice of their Mayan Awakatekan spirituality. This integration of Christianity and Mayan spirituality is a new element which has enriched the practice of CEADI. Its multicultural and plurireligious character opens up a communitarian way forward while at the same time arousing strong criticism about CEADI's nature and mission.

Not allowing themselves be intimidated by the circumstances mentioned above or by the difficulties they faced in negotiating the official registration of the college, the members of CEADI began the educational project with 185 children. They rented a building, the public schools gave them old black boards, the Co-operative Habitat for Humanity offered them four classrooms free of charge and the

teachers worked for six months voluntarily and then for six months on a partial salary. January 1990 was thus a historic date.

The families who formed CEADI did not cease to keep their dreams alive: with the purchase of the land one dream was fulfilled; another had been to buy some land for communitarian agricultural production. They did not wait around with their arms folded. They went out to look for resources and they became associated with different organisations with concrete expertise. At present they have the college and the church as well as the land for communitarian agricultural production, having obtained the latter in association with the Conference of the Evangelical Churches of Guatemala (CIEDEG).

The amount of land for agricultural activity is relatively small. The families already counted on vast experience in the cultivation of garlic, onions and basic grains. The land for cultivation was used immediately because CEADI became simultaneously associated with the Association of Non-Governmental Institutions of Development and Service (ASINDES) and obtained a credit of 200.000.00 quetzales for all the associated farmers. They invested these funds in technology for the cultivation of garlic and onions, products for which the market collapsed at the end of the 90's. The low interest of this credit gave them advantages compared with the banking system with its payment of 1 per cent for any delay.

Their broadly ranging vision included the perspective of co-ordination with other peasant farmers who were also carrying out initiatives to overcome their situation of a scarcity of means and resources to survive. However, with the collapse of the garlic and onion markets this dream was cut short. .

Apart from agriculture, the vision and mission of CEADI envisaged the integration of six well-defined programmes: community organisation; the training of young people, of church leaders and of peasant farmers; and theological training, above all with reference to being a Presbyterian Church identified by the name of the Emmanuel Church. The other programmes were civic and citizenship training; medical attention for women and reproductive health; and animal husbandry in the framework of sustainable agriculture. These are the programmes which have been developed.

Participation of women

In 1998, 14 women began visibly to participate in CEADI when they were trained as health and animal husbandry promoters, coordinated by Dr. Helen Robinson from the Australian Government's co-operation programme. Two women managed to become promoters. Up to the year 2000, they had vaccinated 3,700 chickens belonging to a total of 115 families through their chicken vaccination plan in more than ten communities.

On the basis of this experience of health training, in 1999 the women organised themselves into the Association of Community Women of Awakatan (ADEMCA) in order to promote the development of sustainable agriculture. In the year 2002 they went on a tour of the department of Chimaltenango, 350 kilometres away from their community, to get to know the "peasant to peasant" method of learning. Now they talk of their work as "peasant woman to peasant woman". The women's leader is Mrs. Rosalinda de Castro, wife of the pastor, Pedro Castro.

Women and agriculture

Now there is a larger number of women who have joined in with the agricultural activities. In the community of Agua Blanca ten women have got organised and they grow strawberries, flowers and citrus and other fruit trees on a piece of land of 1,500 square metres. Strawberries are a product which is not grown in the region and thus they offer a better opportunity to sell on the internal market. In fact it is a product which has been in high demand and so that the present production does not cover the local market. It is foreseen that, in the medium term, they will be able to cover the market's demand. With the cultivation of flowers, the women have experienced the same phenomenon as with the strawberries.

More than 60 families from the communities of Agua Blanca, Río San Juan, La Estancia and Exchimal participate in the agricultural work. They are making an effort to improve their agricultural production, their technology and the variety of products, above all products which are not common in the locality, in order to have a large market. With the products already mentioned, they have made surprising gains through having no competition.

These 60 families, plus 40 others, are planning to disseminate their ideas and activities. This would mean relating different activities which should be linked together. As we have indicated, if the women are to have land to cultivate for agricultural development it requires adequate fertilisation. In order to obtain permanent and adequate fertilisation of the land, the women are proposing to carry out domestic chicken rearing, particularly chickens for fattening and hens for laying eggs. The women say that the benefit will be greater because they will get an economic income from the land and the agricultural work, as well as food from the animals and manure to fertilise the land. Another aspect which they consider important is that the long-term investment will be less. The greatest benefit is to health because the products will be cultivated ecologically with fewer polluting products.

With regard to their social relationships, the women say: "We have devalued the work of the rest (of the men). Sometimes we go in for criticising but even if things turn out badly, the men do the same with us women. We believe that we should abandon this attitude and dedicate all our efforts to doing our best and sharing with families from the neighbourhood and those of other communities.

The educational programme is carried out in the school itself. The first people taken care of were 185 children in the year 1989. To-day the school attends to more than 400 boys and girls. Its administrative expenses are dealt with in a tripartite way, through voluntary contributions from individuals or families and churches, institutional contributions and monthly quotas from the students who are moderately well off. From 1989 to 2000 the quota was 25 quetzales; in 2001 it was raised to 38.00 quetzales and this year, 2003, it is 45 quetzales, which is more or less the equivalent of two days work for an adult man. In the case of the women, it is the equivalent of almost two and a half days' work. It is the equivalent of 6.00 US dollars, with the rate of exchange being on average 7.50 quetzales for one dollar.

At the moment they have 35 girls and 5 boys with scholarships, all in a situation of extreme poverty and unfavourable conditions with regard to distance and other limitations. For the most part support is given to girls. Only in special cases may boys apply for the scholarships. This is above all because there insufficient resources to be able to attend to more girls and boys.

The women play an important role in the development of CEADI, especially in the area of health, through the use of local medicines. At the moment there is a group of 40 women who meet every two months for training in integral health care. All are midwives. 60 per cent of them became midwives on account of the "gift" or "vocation" that God has given them, others because of the community's needs.

There is a profound sense of service when they say: "We are very keen to work. We don't mind walking for five or even six hours, whether to learn or to serve our neighbour. We do it happily. When we are together or sharing with other families, for us these are moments of happiness, listening to other ideas, exchanging experiences. We laugh at the things we do and that gives us strength. We cannot remain in the same situation and act in the same way. We carry out all our activities according to the advice of the men and women elders, that we should take care of and respect each other and have confidence in the family. We hope to continue to share our experiences, including the failures, as long as God allows us to and gives us life."

As for the small economic income that they get from their work in health care, with a view to the long term, it is for the benefit of their children. Starting from their own experience, they think that they should contribute to improving the situation. They say: "We have great hopes in our work to help our children to study and get a better training than we did. Our children will know things which are necessary and which we don't know. It is for this that we are struggling and they must study."

They also say: "We didn't learn to read and write but we are struggling to have food, a little education and as far as we can to have clothes and minimal housing. We have learnt little by little, with a lot of sacrifice, but we have not stopped seeking the best for our family and for ourselves and for the community. All the meetings we have are useful to us in different ways, such as sharing, laughing, accompanying each other and thinking together." There is an awareness of the importance of the sense of community, and the therapeutic role it plays in the life of the people who participate in the community is well-known.

The women consider that their "meetings are opportunities to discuss our needs and what we are thinking of doing". Another interesting aspect is that we are paying attention to ourselves, because being women we have been forgotten and, of course, ill-treated."

The women affirm that "we are aware of the reality which surrounds us and that we have some ideas to remedy our situation. We are very interested in carrying out our work for the benefit of the community."

The women are facing multiple problems, from being marginalised from decision-making to cynical mockery, in many cases within their own family. They seldom have the opportunity to take or to contribute to decisions. Even when some characteristics of a communal way of living are still to be found within the family, outside it there are extremes of marginalisation. It is because of this that the women speak of the marginalisation by their husbands and outside the family. The most common reasons are: jealousy, mistrust and the undervaluing of their work. Cynical mockery arises with regard to the midwifery services they are asked for. The husbands commit themselves to paying for all the services but time goes by with excuse after excuse and they never pay for the services rendered.

The midwives charge 12 dollars for their services, from the monthly check-ups to the birth itself or its referral to a medical centre for treatment, if it is required, according to the case. They walk from one to three hours, often without eating. Many families do not even offer them food and on top of everything they do not pay them. This is the experience of 85 per cent of the 40 midwives. Nevertheless, the women say: "We shall not stop serving. The adverse situations point out the way we should go which is not at all smooth and easy, on the contrary, it is tortuous. Thanks to God, even with the deceptions, we always do good to the people themselves and we receive many blessings, more than we deserve. We do not fall ill, we have always had something to eat, even at moments of scarcity, someone arrives and shares food with us."

The spiritual part of these experiences

In all these activities, there is space for dialogue with the Creator, a moment which makes the difference to all the other activities. Both men and women agree when they say: "Everything is in the hand of God. We put everything into his hands." On the other hand they point out that "it is not possible to stop talking to God. He is with us from the time the sun rises. He looks after us, he gives us wisdom to carry out our daily tasks." Men and women are also in agreement when they point out: "We cannot leave God on one side because he accompanies us in everything." They talk of God as present in another way as well: "We breathe, we move, we reap the harvest of our work, the earth, the heat and the water make the seed germinate and grow and produce its fruits."

To Christians, their religious services seem more like a thanksgiving for everything they have received. They are a remembrance of God's goodness and a renewal of vows to be in communion with him at the same time. They show this in the words of their prayers.

For those of Mayan spirituality their religious rites are similar. They are about gratitude for the past, for the present and for the future. They remember that nothing is hidden, nor do things happen on their own, through inertia.

For Christians and for Maya, the religious element is fundamental for their existence and for the development of all their activities. In practice, spirituality is given space and importance.

THEIR VISION

All the activities have a spiritual base, whether Christian or Mayan. Training must be permanent because it is part of life. We must feed life constantly, that is to say it is of the utmost interest to get training and recreate it in spirituality.

No knowledge is for oneself. It has to be shared. It cannot be only individual. It has the possibility of bringing benefit to the community. It is important to share knowledge, to pass the ideas of one generation to another, to equip oneself and be clear that there is an alternative to everything. In this way confusion is forestalled and there is no more fear of confronting the realities which surround us.

The women's meeting is also a spiritual space. It is because of this that they say "it must go on until God tells us the contrary." We must be ready and know what is coming in the future and for this we must not forget what we have now and what the elders left us, without overlooking that all this comes from God.

To be in communion with God is a sign that they can be considered as examples in the community and it is interpreted by the rest of the women as showing that it is possible to be different on the basis of a permanent dialogue with God. This is translated into benefit for themselves, for the community and for the generations to follow. We want constantly to build a bridge between the future and the past, between what others know and what we know, "without forgetting the Creator, in the sight of whom everything has developed." We are the bridge for the dialogue with God, and between people who suffer and knowledge, because knowledge is a path and it is also an opportunity.

There is a profound sense of the relation with the Creator when they say: "Our God blesses all our work, no matter the religion or the way in which we believe in him. We are convinced that the first step of any action is important, above all if God is present until it is finished." There is a deep concern to "emphasise what makes us human beings, through respect for life and human dignity, to make known the experiences we have had so that others know about them and can be helped in their work and services and to "adapt ourselves to the people's vision of the world, their ways of worshipping God and of being aware of his presence." We are poor. We live in remote, rocky, forgotten places but with a lot of love for life.

The women invite us to observe everything and to know that there are possibilities "with the little we have and what we achieve, as well as our age, we want to have an education in accordance with our needs." They affirm that "meetings are investments. We want to take advantage of what we already know and to integrate young and old women into the groups in order to share with them."

To manage to have water, because water in summer time becomes difficult because the river is two kilometres away for some families and for others more than three kilometres.

There is awareness of the meaning and the strength which religious practice brings. The Awakateco men and women affirm: "husbands and sons should be integrated into all the productive activities so that we can attend to the different needs together."

Conclusions

The majority of indigenous peoples, in the case of Guatemala Mayan peoples, are poor. Arising from their situation they have a vision of the world which they try to build within a different and even hostile atmosphere. They use all their potential, which is based on spirituality, faith and religious practice.

As with any people, they have their visionary leaders who work where they find themselves. They do not choose division. If it occurred they would accept it but it has nothing to do with their vision. That is to say that division, separating oneself in order to do what should be done and is desired, is not their model of action.

All peoples have their contradictions, negations, distortions and tumults but not everyone remains stuck in a negative atmosphere; possibilities can always be found to overcome the situation. In other words the Maya show us that faith and spirituality are permanent forces, present in the life of the communities.

Antonio Otzoy, September 2003