Globalization, Poverty, and Migration

Álvaro Leonel Ramazzini Imeri

A bishop from Guatemala explores some root causes of migration in the deep poverty caused by the unjust distribution of economic resources in his country. This poverty, in turn, has led to an astounding wave of violence.

All Christians are called to work for social and structural change and a commitment to solidarity with the poor.

The situation in which we live now in Guatemala is in a certain way worse than the situation we lived through during the armed conflict. In other words, there is more poverty in Guatemala now than during the conflict. One indicator of this growing impoverishment is the increase in the number of people who are trying to come to the United States. That is why the debate going on right now in the United States on the reforms of immigration laws is very important for us. And that is why we received with a lot of indignation the news of the approval by President Bush of the construction of a wall along part of the border between the United States and Mexico. We do not believe this wall is going to prevent migration. The wall, I think, will have two immediate, negative effects. On the one hand, the migrants are going to try to find other routes that could be more risky.

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and dangerous. And on the other hand, the so-called “coyotes,” who guide migrants to come all the way from Guatemala and cross the border to the United States, will start charging much more money. If they have been charging migrants about two thousand dollars over the past years, they would probably start charging five thousand dollars. In the local currency of Guatemala, this is a lot of money. This means that many migrants would need to work for about a year to pay the debt to the “coyote.”

But migration also has a positive aspect at this moment. Currently, the remittances sent by Guatemalan migrants in the United States to their families back home form the second largest source of income in the whole national economy. The International Organization of Migration recently organized a conference in Guatemala on the topic of remittances. There are about 1,600,000 Guatemalan immigrants in the United States. This is a verified fact. It was stated at the conference that the amount of remittances sent to Guatemala from the United States during 2006 is approximately three billion dollars. In terms of the areas in Guatemala that benefit from these remittances, the capital, Guatemala City, comes in first place. San Marcos and Huehuetenango come in second and third place respectively. There is a direct relation between the areas where the remittances go and the number of people who leave these places and migrate to the United States. This is all related to the process of impoverishment, which is one of the serious problems affecting our country at the present moment.

Globalization and Poverty

One could ask, what are the causes of this process of impoverishment? One of the main reasons is the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few. Guatemala is the country in Latin America that has the highest index of unjust distribution of economic resources. We are 12 million people, with 60 percent indigenous, who mostly work in agriculture and live in rural areas. It is primarily the indigenous and peasant populations who are suffering the most as a result of the process of impoverishment. The United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) has just released a study on child nutrition in Guatemala. The results are tragic. Last year a U.N. commissioner also did research on the situation of hunger in the country and published the results of the study. The conclusions are similar. Fifty-nine of every 100 children ages 1 to 5 among the indigenous population suffer from chronic malnutrition. Malnutrition does not only cause serious health problems for children of this age, it also causes the loss of 11 percent of their mental abilities, added the UNICEF study. These are tragic indicators for a country that has a southern coastal area where it is possible to have three harvests each year. Without any doubt, the land problem, that is, the concentration of land in the hands of a few, prevents the production of the food needed for sustenance.
One of the main challenges we are facing as a conference of bishops is the promotion of what we call a rural development program. What we really mean by rural development is no less than an agrarian reform. But because speaking of agrarian reform in Guatemala continues to be dangerous, we prefer to call the program rural development. However, for us who are involved in the program, it is clear that rural development requires an agrarian reform. This is directly related to the issues of poverty, migration, and malnutrition mentioned above.

Guatemala is a cosigner of the United Nations’ agreements on social, cultural, and economic rights. By signing these agreements, Guatemala commits to provide enough good-quality food for its people. But these agreements are not implemented. They are not implemented precisely because there is a direct relation between ownership and use of the land and the production of the food needed for sustenance. As an episcopal conference, we are insisting that the government should not just talk about food security in general. We need to talk about the right to food, which is a different matter. The right to food is a question of justice, not favors and charity from the state. We are talking about eradicating the causes that make Guatemalans suffer from hunger and lack of necessary food.

The Root Causes of Poverty

Why is there poverty in Guatemala? I indicated above that one of the reasons is the incredible inequality that exists between the “haves” and “have-nots.” The current government of Guatemala continues to think that increasing foreign investment will help the country solve the problem of poverty. For this reason, they signed the Free Trade Agreement. The government’s publicity insists that there will be more and better opportunities for trade and making more money as a result of the free trade agreements. The question is, who is going to participate in free trade and who is going to benefit from it? A clear example that will help us understand who are the main beneficiaries of the free trade agreements is the issue of gold and silver mining. At this moment in San Marcos, in a place called San Miguel Ixtahuacán, there is a mine called Marlin. This mine belongs to a company called Montana. Montana depends on another Canadian company with shared U.S. investment called Glamis Gold. They are negotiating to sell the mine to another bigger company. Montana came to San Marcos and did its exploration without mentioning anything to the people. They bought land from the peasants for market price without saying how they were going to use it. The peasants who sold their land thought they had gotten a good deal. But when they realized how much money the company was going to make from gold mining, they became very angry. Glamis Gold invested $145 million, out of which $45 million was a loan from the World Bank. Their plan is to make $800 million profit in 10 years.
How much of this profit will benefit Guatemala? Maybe $10 million. And this is not the whole story. The mining company has the right to use all the water it needs for its operation for free in a region where the peasants do not have enough irrigation water, and where many people do not even have sufficient drinking water. I asked one of the government officials, “How is it possible that you would allow a mining company to use all the water it needs?” The answer was, “There is a lot of water underground.” I said, “Then how come the government never had any projects to extract this water and use it for the people? Why did they have to wait until a Canadian company came to extract and use the water that people need?” This is only one dimension of the problem. I have not even discussed the environmental impact and social tensions that the mining operations have generated in this region.

Yet, there are some positive aspects that developed as a result of this situation. First, the topic of mining has become a national debate in Guatemala. Second, the indigenous communities have organized themselves and are demanding the implementation of the International Labor Organization (ILO) agreement in relation to any development project on their land. The ILO convention no. 169 states that no development project is permitted among indigenous communities without prior consultation with and agreement of the concerned community. In the above-mentioned case, there was no consultation with the population before starting the mining operation. At this moment in Huehuetenango, the indigenous communities have organized themselves and said that they want no mining in their land. In the case of San Marcos, the indigenous communities have also said that they do not want mining. Another typical case is Sipacapa, where the people also said they do not want mining and will not accept it. In general, there is in Guatemala at the moment a reaction against mining, and the congress is discussing a new law on mining. The present law needs to be changed because it favors multinational corporations at the expense of the country. Can you imagine that the above-mentioned mining company is exempt from paying taxes for six years?

Why am I using this example? I believe that one of the main causes of poverty in Guatemala and Central America is the neoliberal economic model that dominates our societies. In this economic system, what really matters is profit. It is a system that produces inequality. And as I mentioned above, it also produces food insecurity.

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for many Guatemalan families. Of course, the question that arises here is: Can Guatemala avoid globalization? We are observing in our municipalities and communities that the process of the so-called globalization is producing more poor people, and poverty generates violence.

Poverty and Violence

Violence in Guatemala has recently reached high levels. On average, about nineteen murders happen each day. Many of the victims are women. According to some statistics, four thousand women have been killed during the last five years. This wave of violence involves many dimensions, which include among other things organized crime, drug trafficking, and youth gangs. We recently had a police raid in the region of San Marcos, where I live. The farmers in this region grow poppy, which is used to produce drugs. The police came and destroyed millions of plants. Why do the farmers in the region of Tacomulco grow poppy? Because they are poor. By growing poppy they make more money in one year than they would normally in twenty-five years. The problem of drug trafficking in Guatemala is very serious. One could say that if there were programs for sustainable development, the temptation for the farmers to grow poppy would not be as high. As a result of drug production, the index of violence in San Marcos is very high. In Guatemala City the violence rate is much higher. Violence is concentrated in particular areas and is often attributed to delinquency and youth gangs. The government began this year to take action in order to stop this violence. But this action is very costly, and, I think, they waited too long.

Crisis of Values

For us as bishops, the situation of violence, poverty, and marginalization in which the country finds itself demonstrates a profound crisis of human values. There is a grave contradiction in the country: Why is a country that is 95 percent Christian—Catholics and other Christians—in incapable of changing this situation? One of the reasons is the lack of coherence. In other words, many Christians in Guatemala do not make the connection between their faith and their social commitment.

However, I am convinced that one of the worst forms of violence that the country suffers is poverty. I believe that if there were no such levels of poverty and injustice, many young people would not join the gangs. And many people would not immigrate to the United States if there were programs of sustainable development. The families would have stayed united. There are fathers who left their little children and have been in the United States for many years without seeing them.
Their children do not know them. There is a fundamental issue here: the United States has not ratified the migrant workers’ family reunion agreements. There are in this country eleven million undocumented workers without a possibility of being able to visit their families or their families visiting them. This is tragic!

*The Preferential Option for the Poor Is Not Optional for the Church*

What I have presented so far are mostly negative experiences. I have not talked about the positive initiatives taking place in Guatemala such as the many peasant organizations participating in the fair trade market and who themselves are exporting their products of organic coffee or honey. I have not talked about the solidarity support projects to young men and women who wish to complete their higher education. I have not talked about the resistance efforts of many communities to projects that could increase their poverty. There are lots of positive initiatives in the country. But one could ask, if there are that many positive initiatives, how come you are unable to generate social movements of solidarity that could bring structural change in Guatemala? Is it because the power of money is stronger than the power of solidarity? Or is it because the human person is always less valuable than the market? I do not think so.

What I said above affirms my conviction. As Christians we have a grave responsibility for changing this world. This is what Jesus said: you either serve God or money. What is more important, asked Jesus, the gold you contribute to the Temple or the human person? Of course, this is a paraphrasing and interpreting of the gospel text. But reading this text in its totality, one comes to understand that the question Jesus asks is: What is more important, a religious practice that neglects human beings who suffer or a religious practice that helps bring them to where God wants them to be? I believe that one of the main reasons why Jesus was not accepted by the religious leaders of his time is the fact that he denounced the religious practice, which under the pretext of giving glory to God was destroying the human person. The human person is the image of God, and consequently, the commitment in favor of human development is giving glory to God. The preferential option for the poor is not optional for the church; it is an obligation. If the church is not in solidarity with the poorest, it is not the church of Jesus.

When I read the document *Ecclesia in America*, which is the result of the first encounter in history of the bishops of the Americas—Latin America, the United States, and Canada—I found one of the best definitions of sainthood. I remember that the examples of sainthood from the time when I was a seminarian mostly created in us a guilt complex because the role models they presented to us were so unusual that we thought we would never become saints. They were saints that flagellated their backs day and night, fasted for two or three weeks, and spent
entire days in prayer. I used to say to myself, will I ever become a saint like them? But reading the document *Ecclesia in America*, I encountered a definition of sainthood that I really liked: sainthood is the act of prolongation in history of the love of God manifested to the most needy and the excluded. In other words, becoming a holy man or women is sharing life with those who suffer. I believe that we encounter people who suffer all over the world. But here is where I sometimes find the contradiction I mentioned above. Ninety-five percent of the Guatemalan people are Christians, and we have the most unjust society in Latin America. What happened? I find a clue to an answer in the Gospel. “The children of darkness are more astute than the children of light.” We Christians are happy giving glory to God enclosed in our churches while outside people are killing each other, exploiting workers and their labor, abusing the natural resources, etc.

**Humanizing Globalization and Globalizing Solidarity**

We have a big challenge: the challenge to denounce the present economic system. This system puts profit in first place and forgets that the most important is the human person. It is an economic system that excludes the majority of people and privileges the market, not the relations among people. They say, “Business is business.” Catholics say we are Catholic when we go to church. When we do business we are business people, and in business one does not lose. The question is: Where is their faith? And who is their neighbor? A conclusion from what I mentioned above is that it is imperative to be on the side of the poorest of the poor and the needy. Often I ask myself if I really live a life of poverty. The answer is no—I have what I need, and I never suffer hunger like many other people. But this does not mean that I do not try every day to respond to the call to conversion and the need to change. I constantly need to change my mentality and deepen my commitment with the poor. While it is clear to me that I will never become like the poorest of the poor, it is also clear that this process of conversion should lead me to a deeper commitment of solidarity with the poorest people. I like the theme of the campaign that the Latin American bishops launched this year: We need to humanize globalization by globalizing solidarity. This is, I believe, where our challenge lies. You here and I there, united despite the distance through the power of the Spirit that unites, strengthens, animates, and encourages us.

**Questions and Answers**

*Question: Are there many Guatemalan bishops who share your analysis and vision?*

*Answer: At the level of the Bishops Conference, we support each other and share these positions. It also depends on the situation in which different bishops find*
themselves. In other words, some of us are expected to take certain positions more than others because we live in different contexts. But on the topic of mining, for example, we have a consensus. On the question of trying to find solutions to poverty and violence, we are also united. Obviously, we have discussions among ourselves, and sometimes we need to convince some who see things differently because they live in a different situation. But in the final analysis, we are all committed to the decisions we make together.

Question: Are you able to speak as freely in Guatemala as you did here this evening?

Answer: Yes. I actually do this every day. I have a half-hour daily radio program every morning where I do a commentary on the Gospel in relation to what is happening in the country. If I had been speaking the same way during the time of the armed conflict, the risk of losing my life would have been greater. I did that then, too, to a certain extent, but thanks to God nothing happened to me. A greater danger that I find, more than the risk of losing one’s life, is the risk of being misunderstood, especially by Catholics, who say to me, Monseñor, we do not understand why you are getting involved in such things. Where you should be is in the cathedral preaching good homilies. On certain occasions I participate in marches with peasants, and for some people this is scandalous. Some media take advantage of this to undermine my credibility. They say, “Look at this bishop! This is why we are losing many Catholics. Instead of dedicating himself to serving Catholics, he is doing politics instead.” I believe this risk of misunderstanding is more serious.