

## 8. Testimony of a Guatemalan Indian Woman on the Formation of Christian Base Communities ♦ Rigoberta Menchú

*Rigoberta was in her early twenties when she narrated her experiences to anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, in an unlikely place: Paris. Rigoberta's commitment to the defense of the rights of her people cost her persecution and exile but won her the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992. In this part of her account she talks about what it is like to read the Bible through the eyes of the oppressed. Such people found in the Bible a source of inspiration and strength to rise against oppression and to assert their dignity as human beings and Christians.*

We began to study the Bible as our main text. Many relationships in the Bible are like those we have with our ancestors, our ancestors whose lives were very much like our own. The important thing for us is that we started to identify that reality with our own. That's how we began studying the Bible. It's not something you memorize, it's not just to be talked about and prayed about, and nothing more. It also helped to change the image we had, as Catholics and Christians: that God is up there and that God has a great kingdom for us the poor, yet never thinking of our own reality that we were actually living. But by studying the scriptures, we did. Take "Exodus" for example, that's one we studied and analyzed. It talks a lot about the life of Moses who tried to lead his people from oppression and did all he could to free his people. We compare the Moses of those days with ourselves, the Moses of today. "Exodus" is about the life of a man, the life of Moses.

We began looking for texts which represented each one of us. We tried to relate them to our Indian culture. We took the example of Moses for the men, and we have the example of Judith, who was a very famous woman in her time and appears in the Bible. She fought very hard for her people and made many attacks against the king they had then, until she finally had his head. She held her victory in her hand, the head of the king. This gave us a vision, a stronger idea of how we Christians must defend ourselves. It made us think that a people could not be victorious without a just war. We Indians do not dream of great riches, we want only enough to live on. There is also the story of David, a little shepherd boy who appears in the Bible, who was able to defeat the king of those days, King Goliath. This story is the example

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for the children. This is how we look for stories and psalms which teach us how to defend ourselves from our enemies. I remember taking examples from all the texts, which helped the community to understand their situation better. It's not only now that there are great kings, powerful men, people who hold power in their hands. Our ancestors suffered under them too. This is how we identify with the lives of our [Mayan] ancestors [who] were murdered and tortured because they were Indians. We began studying more deeply and, well, we came to a conclusion: that being a Christian means thinking of our brothers around us, and that every one of our Indian race has the right to eat. This reflects what God himself said, that on this earth we have a right to what we need. The Bible was our principal text for study as Christians and it showed us what the role of a Christian is. I became a catechist as a little girl and I studied the Bible, hymns, the scriptures, but only very superficially. One of the things Catholic Action put in our heads is that everything is sinful. But we came round to asking ourselves: "if everything is sinful, why is it that the landowner kills humble peasants who don't even harm the natural world? Why do they take our lives?" When I first became a catechist, I thought that [it was] God's will that we should live in suffering, that God did not give us that destiny, but that men on earth have imposed this suffering, poverty, misery, and discrimination on us. We even got the idea of using our own everyday weapons, as the only solution left to us.

I am a Christian and I participate in this struggle as a Christian. For me, as a Christian, there is one important thing: that is the life of Christ. Throughout his life, Christ was humble. History tells us he was born in a little hut. He was persecuted and had to form a band of men so that his seed would not disappear. They were his disciples, his apostles. In those days, there was no other way of defending himself or Christ would have used it against his oppressors, against his enemies. He even gave his life. But Christ did not die, because generations and generations have followed him. And that's exactly what we understood when our first catechists fell. They're dead, but our people keep their memory alive through our struggle against the government, against an enemy who oppresses us. We don't need very much advice, or theories, or documents: life has been our teacher. For my part, the horrors I have suffered are enough for me. And I've also felt in the deepest part of me what discrimination is, what exploitation is. It is the story of my life. In my work I've often gone hungry. If I tried to recount the number of times I'd gone hungry in my life, it would take a very long time. When you understand this, when you see your own reality, a hatred grows inside you for those oppressors that make the people suffer so. As I said, and I say it again, it is not fate which makes us poor. It's not because we don't work, as the rich say. They say: "Indians are poor because they don't work,

because they're always asleep." But I know from experience that we're outside ready for work at three in the morning. It was this that made us decide to fight. This is what motivated me, and also motivated many others. Above all, the mothers and fathers. They remember the ones they would like to have with them now but who died of malnutrition, or intoxication in the fincas, or had to be given away because they had no way of looking after them. It has a long history.

And it's precisely when we look at the lives of Christians in the past that we see what our role as Christians should be today. I must say, however, that I think even religions are manipulated by the system, by those same governments you find everywhere. They use them [either] through their ideas or through their methods. I mean, it's clear that a priest never works in the fincas, picking cotton or coffee. He wouldn't know what picking cotton was. Many priests don't even know what cotton is. But our reality teaches us that, as Christians, we must create a Church of the poor, that we don't need a Church imposed from outside which knows nothing of hunger. We recognize that the system has wanted to impose on us: to divide us and keep the poor dormant. So we take some things and not others. As far as sins go, it seems to me that the concept of the Catholic religion, or any other religion more conservative than Catholicism, is that God loves the poor and has a wonderful paradise in Heaven for the poor, so the poor must accept the life they have on Earth. But as Christians, we have understood that being a Christian means refusing to accept all the injustices which are committed against our people, refusing to accept the discrimination committed against a humble people who barely know what eating meat is but who are treated worse than horses. We've learned all this by watching what has happened in our lives. This awakening of the Indians didn't come, of course, from one day to the next, because Catholic Action and other religions and the system itself have all tried to keep us where we were. But I think that unless a religion springs from within the people themselves, it is a weapon of the system. So, naturally, it wasn't at all difficult for our community to understand all this and the reasons for us to defend ourselves, because this is the reality we live.

As I was saying, for us the Bible is our main weapon. It has shown us the way. Perhaps those who call themselves Christians, but who are really only Christians in theory, won't understand why we give the Bible the meaning we do. But that's because they haven't lived as we have. And also perhaps because they can't analyze it. I can assure you that any one of my community, even though he's illiterate and has to have it read to him and translated into his language, can learn many lessons from it, because he has no difficulty understanding what reality is and what the difference is between the paradise up above, in Heaven, and the reality of our people here

on Earth. We do this because we feel it is the duty of Christians to create the kingdom of God on Earth among our brothers. This kingdom will exist only when we all have enough to eat, when our children, brothers, [and] parents don't have to die from hunger and malnutrition. That will be the "Glory," a kingdom for we who have never known it.

I'm only talking about the Catholic church in general terms because, in fact, many priests came to our region and were anticommunists, but nevertheless understood that the people weren't communists, but hungry; not communists, but exploited by the system. And they joined our people's struggle too, they opted for the life we Indians live. Of course, many priests call themselves Christians when they're only defending their own petty interests, and they keep themselves apart from the people so as not to endanger these interests. All the better for us, because we know very well that we don't need a king in a palace but a brother who lives with us. We don't need a leader to show us where God is, to say whether he exists or not, because, through our own conception of God, we know there is a God and that, as the Father of us all, he does not wish even one of his Children to die, or be unhappy, or have no joy in life. We believe that, when we started using the Bible, we began studying it in terms of our reality; it was because we found in it a document to guide us. It's not that the document itself brings about the change; it's more that each one of us learns to understand his reality and wants to devote himself to others. More than anything else, it was a form of learning for us. Perhaps if we'd had other means to learn, things would have been different. But we understood that any element in nature can change man when he is ready for change. We believe the Bible is a necessary weapon for our people. Today I can say that it is a struggle which cannot be stopped. Neither the governments nor imperialism can stop it, because it is a struggle of hunger and poverty. Neither the government nor imperialism can say: "Don't be hungry," when we are all dying of hunger.

To learn about self-defense, as I was saying, we studied the Bible. We began fashioning our own weapons. . . . Perhaps I shouldn't talk of weapons [which] were very simple. And at the same time, they weren't so simple when we all started using them, when the whole village was armed. As I said before, the soldiers arrived one night. Our people were not in their homes. They'd left the village and gone to the camp. They made sure that we hadn't abandoned the village altogether but thought it would be better to occupy it in the daytime. So sometime later, when we weren't expecting them, about fifteen days later, our lookouts saw the army approaching. We were in the middle of building houses for our neighbors. We needed some more huts there. We had two lookouts. One was supposed to warn the community and the other had to delay or stop the soldiers [from] entering.

They were aware that they might have to give their lives for the community. At a time like this, if someone can't escape, he must be ready to accept death. The army arrived, and the first two to enter wore civilian clothes. But our children can easily recognize soldiers, by the way they walk, and dress, and everything about them, so the lookouts knew they were soldiers in disguise. They asked the names of certain compañeros in the community so they could take them away, kidnap them. One of the lookouts got away and came to warn the village that the enemy was nearby. We asked him if he was sure and he said: "Yes, they are soldiers, two of them. But as I was coming up here I saw others coming, farther off, with olive green uniforms." The whole community left the village straightaway and gathered in one place. We were very worried because the other lookout didn't appear. They were capable of having kidnapped him. But he did turn up in the end and told us how many soldiers there were, what each one was like, what sort of weapons they had, how many in the vanguard and the rearguard.

This information helped us decide what to do, because it was daytime and we hadn't set our trap. We said: "What are we going to do with this army?" They came into the village and began beating our dogs and killing our animals. They went into the houses and looted them. They went crazy looking for us all over the place. Then we asked: "Who is willing to risk their lives now?" I, my brothers, and some other neighbors immediately put up our hands. We planned to give the army a shock and to show them we were organized and weren't just waiting passively for them. We had less than half an hour to plan how we were going to capture some weapons. We chose some people—the ones who'd go first, second, third, fourth, to surprise the enemy. How would we do it? We couldn't capture all ninety soldiers who'd come to the village, but we could get the rearguard. My village is a long way from the town, up in the mountains. You have to go over the mountains to get to another village. We have a little path to the village just wide enough for horses. . . . and there are big rivers nearby so that one of those bends and when the soldiers pass, we'll ambush the last one." We knew we were risking our lives, but we knew that this example would benefit the village very much because the army would stop coming and searching the village all the time. And that's what we did.