The Struggle for Liberation and Reconciliation in Chiapas, Mexico

Las Abejas and the Path of Nonviolent Resistance

by
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In the past few years violent conflict has escalated in Chiapas, Mexico, not only between the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista Army of National Liberation—EZLN) and the Mexican government but also within indigenous communities, where political divisions have increased, thousands of people have been displaced, and over a hundred political assassinations have taken place. Paramilitary groups formed and operating within rural communities have terrorized local populations, reaching such extremes as the events in Acteal, Chenalhó, where 45 members of Las Abejas (the Bees) were massacred while praying in a local chapel on December 22, 1997. In this context, diverse actors—the state and federal governments, the army, hundreds of independent peasant organizations, the Catholic Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, and the EZLN, among others—state that they are working to promote peace. Unless the causes of violence and oppression are addressed, however, peace is an empty term. It could refer to increasing militarization, a cease-fire, or suppression of any activity challenging the established social order. As the anthropologist Richard Fox observes, scholars often assume that peace means "the absence of collective violence," and therefore peace has been untheorized and underexplored (1995: 275).

For the case of Chiapas, Rosa Rojas (1995) writes of the "violent peace" or "pseudo-peace" that fails to address the just demands of the impoverished peasants and indigenous peoples. This violent peace contains racism, marginalization, exploitation, dispossession, lack of respect for indigenous

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culture, and violations of human rights, among other forms of structural violence. In many cases the federal government's call for "peace and reconciliation" is a call for a pseudo-peace that fails to take into account the demands of the oppressed. In contrast, a number of peasant organizations and the EZLN insist on a "peace with justice and dignity."

This article explores the call for peace from Las Abejas, a predominantly Catholic group of Tzotzil Mayas dedicated to nonviolent resistance in highland Chiapas. The struggle for peace of Las Abejas's more than 4,000 members addresses two central issues: (1) liberation, broadly defined as the eradication of oppression and domination, and (2) reconciliation, working to restore their own dignity while rejecting violence, vengeance, and hatred. For Las Abejas these two issues are closely linked; while liberation refers to structural political and economic changes, reconciliation involves strengthening on-the-ground relationships within the community. The pursuit of reconciliation is not a matter of silencing or forgetting the violence of the past or ignoring the violence of the present but one of promoting memory of past hope as well as suffering in the interest of the present struggle.[1]

Las Abejas was established in 1992, two years prior to the Zapatista uprising, to fight for justice through nonviolent means in the highland municipality of Chenalhó. Its members demand the right to cultivate their own lands, have formed cooperatives for the production of coffee and honey, protest electoral fraud, impunity, and corruption, and resist poverty, inequality, and exclusion.[2] In short, they work to defend their human rights, broadly defined as the right to a dignified life. The massacre at Acteal brought the group national and international attention; its history involves complexities and testimonies that go beyond the headlines. This article describes Las Abejas's struggles to demonstrate, contrary to the contention that indigenous communities are inherently intolerant, the strength and relevance of an indigenous initiative for peace.

ROOTS OF RESISTANCE: FAITH AND THE STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL

Although the immediate catalyst for the birth of Las Abejas was the violence surrounding a 1992 land dispute, the roots of the movement can be traced to three interconnected changes of recent decades: the work of the progressive Catholic Church, economic crisis, and the formation of opposition political parties, peasant organizations, and other groups.

Las Abejas's struggle is inspired by its members' Catholic faith and has been greatly influenced by the Catholic Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las

Casas. Beginning in the 1970s, Samuel Ruiz García (bishop of the diocese from 1960 to 1999) and pastoral workers committed themselves to constructing a church that defended the dignity of the poor.[3] Bishop Ruiz has asserted that he was converted to the poor through witnessing poverty and oppression and accompanying Catholics in their struggle for a dignified life. Although he began by viewing the indigenous poor as passive objects of evangelization, he came to see them as protagonists themselves taking up the work of announcing the word of God and denouncing injustice in their communities. He was profoundly influenced by the meetings of the Second Vatican Council in 1962–1965 and the Latin American Bishops' Meeting in Medellín, Colombia, in 1968, which emphasized the structural roots of poverty and called on the Church to take concrete actions to end injustice. In 1975, members of the Diocese of San Cristóbal formally committed themselves to work "with and for the poor," recognizing the poor not only as subjects of their own history but also as the preferred subjects of the revelation of the word of God. The diocese's approach to evangelization changed in the 1970s from a top-down model of disseminating information on salvation and prayer to a participatory model that attempted to place the concerns of the poor at the center of its work. The training of indigenous catechists who took on important social roles in their communities that extended well beyond preparing people to receive sacraments was an important move in respecting communities' ability to create their own path to liberation. Pastoral workers emphasize that in the eyes of God all are equal—rich and poor, men and women, indigenous people and mestizos—meaning that the inequality in Chiapas is contrary to God's will.

By the 1980s, Chenalhó catechists were meeting two or three times a year to discuss changes and innovations in liturgy and to study specific readings of the Bible but also to share news of community achievements and to attempt to work through difficulties. In addition, pastoral workers in Chenalhó organized courses for local health promoters and midwives and workshops on human rights and cooperatives. Members of Las Abejas told me that it was through pastoral workers that they had learned about human rights; before that, they had been fearful of the government. One man said, "It was when the Word of God arrived that we learned that we had rights, that they [the government] cannot squash us" (interview, Yab-jteclum, November 11, 1993).[4] It is not that the indigenous people suddenly became aware of their poverty and oppression because of the Church's work but that pastoral workers brought the language of human rights—a language for denouncing oppression that is recognized nationally and internationally—to indigenous communities. In addition, indigenous people found in the Church a new ally in their centuries-old struggle against oppression.

The work of Bishop Ruiz and the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas has certainly contributed to the awareness of human rights and promoted the formation of a number of grassroots groups in which people work to defend their dignity. However, the Catholic pastoral agents neither created Las Abejas nor control its members. Attributing the struggles in Chiapas to "outside" actors such as Bishop Ruiz or Subcomandante Marcos fails to grant any agency to the indigenous and peasant poor.[5] In contrast, Anna Peterson's analysis of progressive Catholicism during El Salvador's civil war emphasizes that religion can strengthen resistance, "particularly through theological conceptions and values organized into coherent narratives linking sacred and secular history. Underlying this argument is an assumption that ordinary people, and not just professional theologians, construct, adapt, and seek to live by theological and ethical systems" (1997: 11). The notion of ordinary people's seeking to live by theological and ethical systems is useful in analyzing the way in which religion can influence but not control grassroots movements. Members of Las Abejas are not following a party line set for them by political or religious organizations but resisting poverty and racism through a variety of active projects.

The diocese's commitment to working with and for the poor coincided with a changing economic reality in Chenalhó. For decades Chenalhó residents relied on wage labor outside their municipality, especially on *fincas* (coffee plantations), but they remained tied to their own land, cultivating cornfields, and their community of origin was the center of cultural and social life (Eber, 2001). Beginning in the 1970s, large numbers of Guatemalan refugees began to replace Mexican plantation workers, and this and the increase in the use of large landholdings for cattle ranching made work in the fincas a less viable option for highland communities (Rus, Hernández Castillo, and Mattiace, 2001). The decline in coffee prices in the late 1980s (which impacted those in Chenalhó who cultivated coffee in small quantities as a cash crop), the national economic crisis beginning in 1982, and diminished landholdings due to population increase led to a dramatic increase in poverty. In this context of this crisis, residents of Chenalhó searched for new ways to survive, some forming cooperatives and some entering into political alliances with opposition parties, peasant organizations, and religious groups (Eber, 2001; Rus, Hernández Castillo, and Mattiace, 2001).

The power of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary party—PRI), long the ruling party of Chenalhó, began to crumble, although many would continue to affiliate themselves with the PRI to gain access to resources and political benefits (Eber, 2001). Throughout the state, opposition to political and economic oppression had been growing. A number of new organizations had emerged with demands for land, wage increases

for rural day laborers, higher prices for crops, and respect for human rights. Even as they were met with government repression, these groups offered an alternative to the PRI politics that had dominated the state for decades.[6] Particularly relevant to the formation of Las Abejas are two indigenous mobilizations of 1992: the march of the organization Xi'Nich' from Palenque to Mexico City and a mass demonstration in San Cristóbal de Las Casas commemorating 500 years of indigenous resistance.

The Xi'Nich' March for Peace and Human Rights of the Indigenous Peoples began on March 7, 1992, when some 700 Ch'ol, Tzeltal, and Zoque Indians left Palenque protesting the state government's corruption, political repression, and human rights violations and the national government's dramatic cuts in public spending in the countryside.[7] The name Xi'Nich' signifies "ant" in the Ch'ol language. As Xi'Nich' member Sebastián González explains, "The anthill seems small on the surface, but there are many more underneath. If we compare this with our protests, at first there were few ants, in the second a few more, but when the government squashed the anthill, they all came out" (quoted in SERPAJ, 1996: 59). Representatives of the federal government met with Xi'Nich' marchers just outside Mexico City and agreed to comply with their demands, although in many cases these proved empty promises (Harvey, 1998).

On October 12, 1992, 10,000 indigenous people marched into the city of San Cristóbal de Las Casas to demonstrate their unity and resistance to colonial Spanish and contemporary mestizo control. The protesters convened at the plaza of Santo Domingo, where they dismantled a statue of Diego de Mazariegos, the Spanish conqueror who had founded the city.

News of these two events certainly impacted highland indigenous communities; in fact, it is likely that a number of Chenalhó residents participated in them. Both events were empowering not only for their participants but also for those who heard about them. In addition, they made evident the power of nonviolent protest in affirming indigenous rights.[8] As the streets of San Cristóbal filled with indigenous people, peacefully demonstrating, the mestizos of the city feared revolt, while the indigenes realized the power in numbers.

COMING TOGETHER LIKE BEES IN ONE HIVE

Members of Las Abejas (quoted in SIPAZ, 1998), describe the group's emergence as follows:

> We came together in 1992 because we are a multitude and we want to build our house like the honeycomb where we all work collectively and we all enjoy the same thing, producing honey for everyone. So we are like the bees in one hive. We don't allow divisions, and we all march together with our queen, which is the reign of God, although we knew from the beginning that the work would be slow but sure.

In response to political and structural violence, Las Abejas's founding members in the community of Tzajal-ch'en made the conscientious decision to take up the path of nonviolent resistance. In 1991, in the context of increasing political divisions both within the PRI and between PRI-affiliated and independent groups, a conflict arose over ownership of a 120-hectare plot of land in Tz'anhem-bolom, a hamlet near Tzajal-ch'en.[9] While there are a number of accounts of who was the owner of this land, all narratives concur that despite community members' numerous visits to the Secretaría de Reforma Agraria (Department of Agrarian Reform) to request assistance in resolving the dispute, the authorities did not respond. The slowness and negligence of the government in responding to agrarian conflicts in Chiapas often contributes to the escalation of violence (Gómez and Kovic, 1994).

One version of the dispute is that the large parcel was held communally by a group of men who had formed a cooperative to farm the land collectively. According to another version, it was private property and had been left as an inheritance to the owner's three children—Catarina, María, and Agustín Hernández López. It is quite possible that both versions are accurate—there are many unresolved land disputes in Chiapas, and, again, negligence on the part of the authorities causes or aggravates local conflicts.[10] In Tz'anhem-bolom, the agrarian conflict played into the existing division among political groups; in order to obtain benefits from the state and federal government, some residents of Chenalhó had affiliated themselves with the PRI and others with Solidaridad Campesina Magisterial (Teacher-Peasant Solidarity Movement—SOCAMA), a wing of the national teachers' union. The two sides of the agrarian conflict followed this political division. One group, led by Agustín Hernández López, was affiliated with the PRI and could count on the support of Chenalhó's PRI-controlled municipal government. The second group, led by Agustín's nephew Nicolás Gutiérrez Hernández, who had been trying to take the land from his uncle (perhaps to farm it communally), was affiliated with the SOCAMA.[11] To complicate matters, Agustín did not want to share the inheritance with his sisters. A local community assembly determined that the land should be divided equally among the three siblings. Agustín instead kept 60 hectares for himself and gave the 60 remaining

hectares to his political supporters in a number of Chenalhó hamlets rather than to his sisters.

Tzajal-ch'en residents were urged to choose sides and take up arms to fight, but a large group refused to do so, demanding a solution based on dialogue rather than violence. On December 9, 1992, 22 communities of Chenalhó under the umbrella of the Society of Coffee Producers of Tzajal-ch'en formed Las Abejas. Beyond a call for an end to violence this amounted to a call for unity, for it opened the door to the possibility that the groups in conflict could unite rather than defending themselves against one another. In addition, the formation of Las Abejas added to the situation an independent organization, one without ties to the PRI.

The next day the conflict between the two armed groups resulted in a death; Agustín's supporters shot at Nicolás and his brothers Vicente and Lorenzo, and Vicente was killed. A group of men from Tzajal-ch'en carried the two wounded brothers to the nearest road, where they had arranged to be met by an ambulance. However, when they reached the road five of the men[12] were arrested without any warrant and placed at the disposition of the municipal authorities, accused of attacking the three brothers. Indicted before the penal judge on December 13, they were taken to the jail (Centro de Readaptación Social 5) in San Cristóbal de Las Casas. Members of the newly founded Las Abejas were dismayed, for they knew that these five men were innocent. At the same time that this was taking place, three of Agustín's supporters attacked the wives of the wounded men, and one of the women (Catarina Arias Pérez) was raped. The women presented a formal declaration to the Public Ministry naming the aggressors, but no one was detained.

In November 1993, almost a year after the violence and arrests, I spoke with a group of catechists and prayer leaders at the small training center for catechists in the hamlet of Yab-jteclum, Chenalhó, about the events in Tzajal-ch'en. Their story was one of sadness, violence, and injustice, but it was also a story of hope and faith that reaffirmed their struggle for liberation. Three men explained that after the illegal arrests and aggression of December 1992 a meeting was held in the local church of Tzajal-ch'en to decide what action should be taken (interview, Yab-jteclum, November 11, 1993):

> There we called all the people of Tzajal-ch'en to a meeting. We went to put these things before God. And there we remained in the church; there we stayed all day and all night. At dawn, the people asked, "What are we going to do?" . . . We went to Yab-jteclum. We met here in the kitchen and spoke with the sisters [nuns who work in the community] and with the coordinators [of the catechists]. We told them about this very sad event. And there . . . we spoke until dawn. [We said] that we are very poor, that we are very humble, but we are going to resolve this problem together.

Pablo Romo, a Catholic priest who worked at the Catholic-based Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas Center for Human Rights recalled what had happened when Las Abejas met in a local church to decide what to do in the face of the illegal arrests. He had asked the men and women in the church if he could assist in any way, thinking that perhaps they would want him to offer support in writing letters, making phone calls, or contacting human rights organizations. However, Las Abejas had another idea; it envisioned another form of resistance: "Father, we want to pray, and we want you to pray with us." After praying all night, the people again arrived at the same question: "What should we do?" Again they came to the same answer: they would continue to pray and fast to place the problem in God's hands.

While it might be easy to dismiss these acts as a passive acquiescence in repression, it is important to recognize that for these indigenous peasants prayer provided an opportunity to reflect on the situation, gather strength, and reach a collective decision. Prayer and fasting are not dependence on divine intervention but part of the cultural style of decision making in indigenous communities. In the meeting in the church, as in many other meetings, each person's story was heard and different options were carefully considered in order to build consensus on what action would be taken.[13] This story demonstrates the local initiative of these Tzotzil Catholics. Although motivated by their faith and supported by the Catholic hierarchy, they were not by any means controlled by pastoral workers. The authority for decision making came from the community itself.

The actions of Las Abejas were nonviolent from the very beginning. Nonviolence has often been misunderstood as passivity or acquiescence. In Brazil, in contrast, it is referred to as *firmeza permanente* (relentless persistence); neither passive nor resigned (see McManus and Schlabach, 1991), it has the potential to transform both the oppressed and the structures that oppress them.[14] For Las Abejas the spiritually based actions of prayer, fasting, and reflection in the church led to marches, sit-ins, and pilgrimages.

On December 21, more than 200 Tzotziles representing 36 communities in Chenalhó began a march to protest the violence and the arrests. They walked 41 kilometers from Yab-jteclum to San Cristóbal de Las Casas, where they began a sit-in in front of the cathedral in the main plaza. One man from Chenalhó contrasted the pilgrimage with the "dirty" marches of the PRI, for which people were brought in by trucks and buses paid for by the government. The religious aspect of the resistance was emphasized through prayer and a visit to a monument of Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas in San Cristóbal. "They went to the monument . . . because the elders said that [he] is a fighter and a great person who supported the Indians. . . . They went to worship and

pray, because his soul always lives, even though this is only a monument" (interview, Yab-jteclum, November 11, 1993).

As news of the events reached other highland communities through the channels of the diocesan infrastructure, the resistance to the arrests grew, and on December 24 more than 5,000 Tzotziles walked 20 kilometers to visit the prisoners in jail. On January 4, 1993, more than 800 Indians from seven municipalities marched to San Cristóbal de Las Casas for another sit-in in front of the cathedral.[15] Finally, on January 7 the prisoners were released for "disappearance of evidence," meaning that the evidence offered in the case could not be considered legally valid, perhaps because it had been fabricated in the first place.

In his 1999 autobiography Father Miguel Chanteau, parish priest of Chenalhó for over 30 years, writes that a Chiapas newspaper accused him of being the intellectual author of Las Abejas's protests. The front-page headline read "French Priest Stirring Things Up in Chenalhó," and the article stated: "Miguel Chanteau guided the Indians who in their ignorance commit atrocities." Chanteau recalls that this was far from true. In fact, he had not known about the situation until a friend told him about it later. The newspaper's charges were part of a broader attack on the Diocese of San Cristóbal in response to its criticisms of the state government for human rights abuses, and they depended on the racist assumption that indigenous people cannot act on their own but must be controlled or "stirred up" by outsiders.

THE RIGHT TO WORK THE LAND

The struggle of Las Abejas did not end with the liberation of the detained. Rather, empowered by its success, the group went on to address a number of issues. One concern was control over land. In 1989, under the leadership of Governor Patrocinio González Garrido, the state government had implemented a forestry law requiring peasants to obtain permits to cut down trees, ostensibly in an attempt to control environmental damage. Las Abejas found this to be a tremendous burden. As one man explained (interview, November 10, 1993):

> Before, the people could walk freely to cut their wood and plant their cornfields. But now they can't because of the order of the Ejidal Authority. Before, people were not ashamed to plant their cornfields, but now we live in fear of planting our cornfields. Why? Because in an assembly the [Ejidal Authority] ordered that if we want to cut the woods to plant, we have to ask permission first in Agraria [the government agrarian office]. And the people

> thought, "How? We do not have a lot of land. We are only planting on our small piece of land, and if we have to ask permission every moment it will be hard."

The idea of being "ashamed to plant cornfields" suggests that the new law was an assault on the peasants' dignity. Planting corn is, of course, the center of peasant livelihood, and having to ask permission of government authorities to cut down trees imposes strict controls on peasant life. The conflict is between community and state interests. Members of Las Abejas decided that they would not obey this law:

> So, the people said, "May God forgive us, but we are not going to ask permission because they are not the owners of this land. And we are not going to ask God's permission because God created the land." So they didn't pay attention to the order. And in cutting a tree to make firewood or to make our home, we have to ask permission from the forestry agents. But the people made an effort and didn't pay attention to the order. "Well, if they put us in jail, we'll see how we can mobilize ourselves," the people said in my community and in other communities.

In this act of civil disobedience, these Tzotzil peasants were demanding the right to make their own decisions about the use of land as they protested the imposition of laws that they considered unjust. Because the struggle for control over their lives was a defense of dignity, their dignity was strengthened by it. One man explained that when government officials arrive to build roads or search for petroleum they do not ask permission to cut trees or even to build a road through a cornfield. "[The officials] feel as if only they are the owners [of the land], that we are not the owners." He affirmed the peasants' right to work the land by referring to God's will: "We feel that we are the owners because God has given the land to his children" (interview, Yab-jteclum, November 10, 1993).

LAS ABEJAS IN THE WAKE OF THE ZAPATISTA UPRISING

On January 1, 1994, the EZLN took over seven towns in Chiapas and demanded basic human rights—land, housing, jobs, food, health care, democracy, and justice. It declared "Enough is enough!" and denounced the exploitation of the indigenous peoples and peasants of Chiapas. While Las Abejas does not agree with the use of arms, its goals are similar to the EZLN's. Vicente Ruiz, a member of Las Abejas, explains that its proposal is

the same as that of the EZLN but the two groups have selected different paths (quoted in Hidalgo 1998: 63):

> Just as our body has two eyes, two ears, two hands, two feet, society must have two feet. The EZLN is one and we as civilians are another. We are not EZLN because we do not respond to their orders. We have to struggle pacifically and not with arms. We are their brothers, and for both of us, the principal enemy is the government and the PRI-ista authorities that organize paramilitaries who do not distinguish between members of civil society and EZLN.

Given their different views on the use of arms, how is it possible that members of Las Abejas refer to the Zapatistas as their brothers? The two groups have common goals and a common enemy, and Las Abejas recognizes its own path of nonviolence as one of several types of resistance. According to Vicente Ruiz, the nonviolent resistance of Las Abejas—that of one foot of society—does not negate the validity of the path of the EZLN. In fact, he seems to suggest that society needs both just as it needs two feet to walk.[16] The two groups' acts of protest are similar in a number of ways. Since the 12 days of armed conflict between the EZLN and the army in January 1994, the Zapatistas have for the most part relied on strategies that are clearly nonviolent: marches, public communiqués, and local, national, and international congresses. The critical difference between the two groups—and it is a significant one—is the Zapatistas' decision to take up arms and the ongoing military threat that their presence poses to the Mexican government.

Las Abejas's political enemies—PRI supporters and more recently members of the paramilitary groups operating in the region—consider it a threat and view it as an ally of the Zapatistas. Tensions between Chenalhó's PRI supporters[17] and Zapatistas had been building for years and had intensified in the six months immediately prior to the Acteal massacre. In the state elections of October 1995, a PRI candidate won a majority of votes for the position of municipal president. The Zapatistas had boycotted these elections, and in April 1996 their supporters and supporters of the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (Democratic Revolutionary party—PRD) established an alternative and autonomous municipal government based in the hamlet of Polho'. These dissenters chose Javier Ruiz Hernández as municipal president by using electoral methods they described as conforming to local *usos y costumbres* (that is, according to community norms rather than according to laws of the Mexican Constitution). Zapatista base supporters in Polho' cite the San Andrés Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture (the first agreements signed in the peace talks between the EZLN and the federal government) in support of their right to establish an autonomous municipal

government. These accords redefine and expand specific cultural, territorial, and political rights for indigenous peoples and are therefore of regional and national significance.[18] Polho' is only one of dozens of autonomous municipalities, villages, or regions established throughout Chiapas.

The conflict in Chenalhó escalated in 1997 when some 30 people (partisans to both positions) were killed between May and December (see Centro de Derechos Humanos, 1998a). The violence created thousands of displaced persons who had suffered threats from PRI supporters, and many saw their homes and belongings destroyed. In addition, a smaller number of PRI supporters had to flee their communities. A group of 325 displaced persons who were members of Las Abejas sought refuge in the hamlet of Acteal, and others sought refuge in Polho'. On December 22, 1997, just days after the collapse of the talks among Las Abejas, PRI supporters, and Zapatistas and amid continuous rumors of a coming attack, the Las Abejas members at Acteal met at the Catholic chapel of their community to pray. In this act of faith and of nonviolent resistance, they asked that God calm the problems in their municipality and reflected on what to do. A man who survived the massacre reports (Centro de Derechos Humanos, 1998b):

> I and my *compañeros* were in the church, because that is where we have our peace camp. . . . There we were calm, and we never imagined that something so terrible was being plotted against us. . . . In the church we met to talk and reach small agreements in coordination with the group and principally to pray and to ask God that the problems in the municipality be resolved, but on December 22, without knowing anything, we heard a lot of shots that came from behind the church and moved closer to the church, and there was a frightening shower of bullets.

According to witnesses, some 50 men were firing high-powered weapons such as AK47s. The residents attempted to flee or hide in a canyon, but they were surrounded on all sides. The shots lasted until six in the afternoon. A total of 45 peasants were killed, among them 21 women, 15 children, and 9 men. In addition, 25 people were wounded. The perpetrators were members of paramilitary groups supported (at least indirectly) by the government.[19]

Why were Las Abejas at Acteal rather than the Zapatista base supporters at Polho' the focus of the attack? It seems logical—if logic can be applied to such a situation—that the paramilitaries would have attacked Las Abejas instead of the Zapatista supporters because they could anticipate that there would be no counterattack. However, Las Abejas was and is a challenge to the very logic of militarization. With two increasingly polarized groups in Chenalhó—those supporting the Zapatistas and those supporting the PRI—

Las Abejas offered another option and challenged the increasing polarization and militarization in the region. Vicente Ruiz explains: "We are the *colchón* [literally, a mattress; a shock absorber] between the government and the Zapatistas, because we are civil society, and in the case of an attack against them, we are the ones that can resist. If this colchón is broken, it is easier for the government to attack the brothers of the EZLN" (quoted in Hidalgo, 1998: 63).

What does it mean to be a shock absorber? Is Las Abejas better able to resist an attack? A number of scholars emphasize the strategic values of nonviolent resistance. It lessens the power of rulers by challenging their legitimacy at the same time that it increases the legitimacy of the nonviolent group and its ability to win broad-based support. "The nonviolent group not only does not need to use violence, but they must not do so lest they strengthen their opponent and weaken themselves. . . . nonviolent action tends to turn the opponent's violence and repression against his own power position, weakening it and at the same time strengthening the nonviolent group" (Sharp, 1973, quoted in Burgess and Burgess, 1994: 19). It is more difficult for the state to deny the demands of a nonviolent group, and it is even more difficult for it to justify the use of violence and repression against it.

The Mexican government has attempted to delegitimize the EZLN and its demands by criticizing its use of violence. For example, in a presidential message delivered January 6, 1994, Carlos Salinas de Gortari blamed "professionals of violence" for the Zapatista uprising, denying indigenous people's agency in the decision to take up arms. In September of the same year, during his sixth annual presidential report, Salinas discredited any economic motive for the rebellion, emphasizing that Chiapas had received more federal aid that year than any other state. Thus he implied that the EZLN uprising was a revolt without need, a revolt to serve mestizo outsiders and not indigenous interests. Las Abejas, in challenging this dismissal, may reinforce the EZLN's demands.[20]

The decision to resist nonviolently was ethical as well as strategic. Members of Las Abejas hoped to build unity in the pursuit of justice and dignity. One member of Las Abejas explained (CIEPAC, 1998a): "Our symbol is a bee; a bee has a queen. The queen is in the box with her bees, in only one box, and they do not break apart. The queen signifies the Kingdom of God; the bees are the multitude of the world. The queen, God, wants neither injustice nor violence nor imprisonment but liberty for all human beings." This call for liberty for all human beings reaches a broad audience, and hundreds of Mexican and international observers have traveled to Acteal to show their solidarity with Las Abejas and to learn more about the massacre. Many nongovernmental organizations, national and international, have made economic contributions

to Las Abejas, and this support helps pay for the material needs (food, shelter, medicine) of the thousands of displaced persons and has financed a health care clinic, among other projects. At the same time, this external support allows Las Abejas to hold frequent memorial services in Acteal and to travel within and outside Mexico to carry its political message to a broader audience.[21]

MEMORY: FIGHTING FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE

Much has taken place in Chenalhó in the years since the massacre. Although the federal attorney general conducted an investigation and a number of men from Chenalhó were charged with homicide and arrested, no high-level government officials were punished. Hundreds of displaced persons living in refugee camps returned to their home communities from August to December 2001, although paramilitary groups continue to exist and thousands of people are still displaced from their communities and living in poverty. Las Abejas remembers the events of December 1997 in a number of ways. On the 22d of every month it holds a community event with prayer and pilgrimage to commemorate those who died in the massacre. The small wooden chapel where the massacre took place remains intact, and members of Las Abejas show visitors the bullet holes in the chapel as they recount the story of the violence. A brick building stands above the graves and holds photos, an altar, and other items in remembrance of the dead.

While this memory may play a role in promoting reconciliation, it may also contribute to what Martha Minnow (1998: 147) calls "a narrative of victimization." In 1999 a statue called the *Columna de Infamia* (The Pillar of Shame), a copper-and-bronze sculpture about 8 meters high with human bodies and faces twisted together in anguish, was installed in Acteal. The sculpture was neither made nor requested by the residents of Chenalhó but produced by the Danish sculptor Jens Galschiot as just one of a number of pillars that he is placing in different parts of the world to recall the atrocities committed there.[22] While the sculpture is useful as a physical structure—it serves as a meeting point or a place to begin pilgrimages, and its concrete base provides a space to sit down and rest—it is not consistent with Las Abejas's public discourse of forgiveness, healing, and hope. Why remember, let alone enshrine, infamy? Might it not create a narrative of victimization, consuming hope or the possibility of change?[23]

In many ways it seems that the members of Las Abejas are not trapped in the past but remembering the past in order to move forward. For them,

memory affirms dignity as it promotes the struggle for justice. In October 1998 a special program was held in San Cristóbal de Las Casas to discuss Gandhi and the role of nonviolence in Mexico. The nongovernmental organization Servicio Internacional para la Paz (International Service for Peace—SIPAZ) sponsored the event commemorating the 50th anniversary of Gandhi's death. Antonio Gutiérrez, one the founding members of Las Abejas, stated: "When the killing at Acteal took place they wanted to finish us, but the opposite took place. We discovered that our organization serves to defend the rest of the peasants; after the massacre of Acteal a thousand people from ten communities in Chenalhó joined Las Abejas."[24] Their presentations were focused on hope even in the face of violence—they recounted the formation of Las Abejas, the struggle against the forestry law, their prayers and fasts. Carmela Pérez Santis recalled that in January 1998 (days after the massacre), as hundreds of soldiers were attempting to enter the hamlet of X'oyep, Chenalhó, she linked arms with other women forming a human chain and demanding that the soldiers leave.[25] Las Abejas argues that collective memory is necessary in the face of official memory, which denies the existence of paramilitary groups in Chiapas.[26] The continued complaint after the massacre at Acteal is that no high-level officials were arrested, and collective memory can resist impunity. In addition, Las Abejas continues to demand that its members be allowed to return to their communities, to their land.

In remembering the massacre, one story of forgiveness is commonly repeated. When José Saramago, the Portuguese Nobel Prize winner in literature, visited Acteal in March 1998, Antonio Gutiérrez recounted the events of the massacre, including a strong message of reconciliation. According to Gutiérrez's story, Alonso Vázquez Gómez, coordinator of the catechists in the region, had been praying when the paramilitaries began to fire. "He said to his wife, 'We are going to die today.' But she was shot in the back, and so was the son she held in her arms. So, he prayed, 'Forgive them, Lord, these men know not what they are doing' " (*La Jornada*, March 16, 1998). This story, whether factual or not, is part of the memory of the massacre and carries a strong message of forgiving one's enemies; it recalls Christ's final words at his crucifixion (according to Luke) and implies that the dead of Acteal are at once martyrs and saints. Some might see this story as a passive acceptance of violence or even as evidence of a vocation for martyrdom, but it shows the great abyss between the option for violence and for nonviolence and reaffirms Las Abejas's ethical position. In addition, it reaffirms the strategic value of resisting oppression through nonviolent means in a context in which indigenous people are killing one another with the state's complicity. This emphasis on forgiveness and reconciliation is a way of embracing a different

set of values, for forgiveness can "seek to break the cycles of violence by transforming perpetrators and victims" (Minnow, 1998: 19). Although the emphasis on nonviolent resistance remains firm in Las Abejas's message, the commitment to reconciliation may be wearing thin, given that some of those responsible for the massacre are still at large. On my most recent visit to Acteal (summer 2001), two community members told me that Protestant pastors had organized the paramilitaries responsible for the 1997 massacre. While some of the paramilitaries were Protestants and those killed were Catholic, the conflict was not a religious one, and, more important, there are no reports that Protestant churches were involved in organizing the massacre. My concern is that some members of Las Abejas may start to position themselves as "good Catholics" in contrast to "violent Protestants."

In contrast, in Tzajal-ch'en, the birthplace of Las Abejas, one story suggests the possibility of reconciliation on a local level.[27] In 1998, Tzajal-ch'en was one of the few communities in Chenalhó in which no one had been displaced by the conflict and families affiliated with the PRI and PRD, Catholics and Protestants, lived together. Many distrusted one man who frequently changed his political and religious affiliation and failed to follow through with community agreements. On Good Friday of 1998 he invited a group of people to his home "to drink a glass of water." He asked forgiveness for his actions in a sort of ceremony of reconciliation, and those visiting admitted that they had spoken badly of him and read and reflected on the biblical story of the prodigal son. This is just one small story of forgiveness and healing, of the attempt to build unity within the community. It is not necessarily a unity based on homogeneity (given the multiple religious and political affiliations in the community) but a strategic unity in which all work together to resist extreme poverty and racism. While Las Abejas demands that state and federal authorities be held accountable for their role in the massacre, building and strengthening human relationships at the community level is the ongoing work of reconciliation.

After Mexico's elections in the year 2000, the political scenario at the national and state level is changing. President Vicente Fox of the Partido de Acción Nacional (National Action party—PAN) breaks the PRI's 71 years of control, and Pablo Salazar Mendiguchia, of a multiparty coalition, is the first non-PRI governor of Chiapas. These changes open the political possibility that the state and federal government will punish the intellectual authors of the massacre, dismantle the paramilitary groups, and create the conditions for a return of displaced to their communities. Even if the new governments do all this, the need for Las Abejas to work toward reconciliation at the local level will still exist.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

From October to December 2000, Las Abejas and Xi'Nich' made a 365-kilometer pilgrimage from Chenalhó to the Basilica of Guadalupe in Mexico City. Participants prayed for the disbanding of paramilitary groups, the demilitarization of Chiapas and Mexico, the return of the displaced to their communities, the implementation of the San Andrés Accords, community reconciliation, and peace with justice and dignity for all Mexico (Message from the Pilgrims from Acteal to Tepeyac, October 20, 2000). One of the pilgrims, Victor Guzmán, explained: "In walking we are born. We are carrying not drums of war but banners of peace. Pilgrims we are, but we carry nothing but a handful of sacred land sprinkled with the blood of martyrs. Displaced we live, but we carry neither hate nor the desire for vengeance, only prayers from the people who sent us" (*La Jornada*, November 21, 2000).

This recent pilgrimage, like the first meeting in the church of Tzajalch'en, demonstrates the spirituality that is central to Las Abejas's being. It is not that spirituality informs its actions but that those actions are spiritual as much as they are political. The coexistence of spirituality and resistance is likely to make academics uncomfortable. It may be hard to accept that indigenous peoples are affiliating themselves with the Catholic Church in their struggle to defend their dignity, their communities, and their way of life. Some might even suggest that Las Abejas's nonviolence is not resistance at all but self-abnegation or a refusal to fight. To this I would answer that Las Abejas's commitment to nonviolence is inextricably linked to its commitment to liberation. Its path of nonviolent resistance is a reaffirmation of members' dignity, an attempt to redeem their humanity as they work to humanize those who might be labeled their enemies. Their pilgrimage for peace with justice and dignity in Chiapas denounces injustice as it restores hope. In a nation that has marginalized indigenous peoples and in the context of low-intensity warfare, keeping hope alive is an act of radical resistance.

At the 1998 commemoration of Gandhi, Rafael Landerreche proclaimed: "Today, to recover the path to peace is to recover the path to hope."[28] The events around the second anniversary of the massacre at Acteal were a time for mourning but also a celebration of hope. The welcoming statement of Las Abejas read, "Brothers and friends, welcome to celebrate with us this time of repentance of evil and the rebirth to change our thoughts, our ideas, our attitudes as believers; welcome men and women of goodwill." Its path to liberation relies on relentless persistence: a firm commitment to community and to the memory of hope and suffering in the continued struggle for peace with justice and dignity.

NOTES

1. A number of scholars have noted the link between reconciliation and liberation. Robert Schreiter says that liberation is a prerequisite rather than an alternative to reconciliation: "Thus, we do not call for reconciliation instead of liberation; we call for liberation in order to bring about reconciliation" (1992: 22).

2. In defense of their livelihood, members of Las Abejas oppose the neoliberal economic project, which has no place for small-scale cultivation for local consumption. This economic project, begun under the presidency of Miguel de la Madrid (1982–1988) and continued through the present, entails cuts in credit and subsidies for rural producers, the withdrawal of government assistance for commercialization, and the end of agrarian reform. Members of Las Abejas opposed the 1992 modification of Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution because the new law officially marked the end of agrarian reform with the government claiming that there was no more land to redistribute, allowed once inalienable *ejido* lands to be bought and sold, and was passed without any real consultation with the indigenous people and peasants who would be most impacted by it. For a discussion of the impact of neoliberal reforms on the Chiapas peasants see Harvey (1994) and Nash and Kovic (1996).

3. Samuel Ruiz García formally retired at age 75 in 1999 in accordance with canonical law. On March 31, 2000, Felipe Arzmendi, former bishop of Tapachula (Chiapas), was named his successor. Monsignor Raúl Vera served as coadjutor bishop from 1995 to 1999.

4. Interviews were conducted with Patricia Gómez as part of a project on human rights and agrarian conflict carried out by the Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas Center for Human Rights. Translations are my own.

5. For example, Enrique Krauze (1999) attributes some of the violence in contemporary Chiapas to actions of the Diocese of San Cristóbal, and others hold it directly responsible for the Zapatista uprising (Marco Levario, cited in Meyer, 2000; Pazos, 1994).

6. During the 1980s, the state government systematically co-opted or repressed the growing number of independent peasant organizations. From 1982 to 1987 there were 86 political assassinations (Burguete, 1987, cited in Gómez and Kovic, 1994).

7. The immediate catalyst of the march was the state government's violent eviction of 300 peasants in a protest in the city of Palenque on December 28, 1991. One hundred three members of the Committee for the Defense of Indigenous Freedom had been detained during the eviction and accused of sedition, mutiny, disturbing the peace, and other crimes simply for protesting government policies. However, in their march to Mexico City, Xi'Nich' members carried a comprehensive list of demands. They were protesting neoliberal policies, in particular the reforms to the constitution's Article 27.

8. Although this march was a sort of test run for the EZLN (Harvey, 1998), it was nonetheless an event of nonviolent resistance.

9. The details of this case are drawn from numerous documents of the Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas Center for Human Rights, including its 1992 annual report, and interviews conducted in Yab-jteclum, Chenalhó, in November 1993. Another important source is "El vuelo de Las Abejas," by Onécimo Hidalgo (1998).

10. In some cases the agrarian authorities have granted ownership of a piece of land to several parties, and in others historical claims to land by those who have farmed it for years contradict legal documents of ownership (see Gómez and Kovic, 1994).

11. SOCAMA also has ties to the PRI through its links to government authorities at the federal level. These two political groups in Chenalhó represent distinct sectors of the PRI. In the

context of the disintegration of the political regime, there were many conflicts within the PRI, particularly among groups in power at the local, state, and federal level.

12. The arrested men were Antonio Pérez Gutiérrez, Felipe Hernández Pérez, Mariano Pérez Vázquez, Sebastián Pérez Vázquez, and Manuel Pérez Gutiérrez.

13. Because this reflection or intellectual work is carried out in a religious framework, it is often overlooked by researchers. For the case of peasant insurrections in nineteenth-century India, Ranajit Guha (1988) notes that religion, which may serve as an important site of political reflection, is all but ignored in colonial texts on peasant rebellions; if anything, it is referred to as fanaticism. This omission makes peasant insurrections appear spontaneous and suggests that peasants lack political consciousness. (I thank Jan Rus for recommending Guha's work in this context.) In the case of Las Abejas, it is particularly difficult for outsiders to recognize that Mayas make use of Catholicism (an institution with a long history of oppressing indigenous peoples) to reflect upon and strengthen their resistance to the state.

14. The active nonviolence of Las Abejas has some similarities with satyagraha, a term used by Gandhi to describe "soul force" or "a firm grasping after the truth" (see Fox, 1997; McManus and Schlabach, 1991).

15. Decisions to conduct pilgrimages and sit-ins are commonly made after a series of local and regional meetings of catechists and other community representatives. After deciding to participate, community members determine who will attend the events, and donations are solicited to help participants pay for transportation and other costs.

16. Ruiz's reference to the Zapatistas as "brothers" expresses both the close relationship between the two groups and a horizontal rather than a vertical relationship. The EZLN is not a parent controlling Las Abejas's actions and decisions.

17. Among the PRI supporters were members of the Partido del Frente Cardenista de Reconstrucción Nacional (Cardenista Front of National Reconstruction—PFCRN), a party historically allied with the PRI except when it supported opposition candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas in the 1988 presidential election.

18. The federal government signed these agreements in February 1996, but in April 2001 the Congress passed an indigenous rights law that was significantly different from them. For example, in the Congress's version, indigenous communities are referred to as entities of public intent rather than as entities with legal rights. In September 2002 the Supreme Court denied the more than 300 complaints it had received against this watered-down version of the law.

19. A number of researchers and nongovernmental organizations have asserted that the plan to form paramilitary groups was carried out by local leaders and supported by the Chiapas state government (see, e.g., Centro de Derechos Humanos, 1998a; CIEPAC, 1998b; 1999). It is clear that state officials were negligent in failing to respond to the violence in Chenalhó immediately preceding the Acteal massacre.

20. In a government response to the Acteal massacre, an attempt was made to deny its role in the conflict by attributing the violence to a local conflict between families in which vengeance and indigenous tradition played a role (Procuraduría General de la República, 1998).

21. The impact of hundreds of visitors to Acteal, the material support provided by nongovernmental organizations, and the long-term presence of Jesuit priests, a Christian Peacemaker Team, and other groups is an important topic for future research. Perhaps some members of Las Abejas will become trapped in the role of victims as they constantly recount the events of the massacre to visitors. Writing of the Lacandón rain forest of eastern Chiapas, Xóchitl Leyva Solano (2001) cautions that the EZLN's international supporters may foster dependency. She notes that if members of international groups provide political and economic support while the underlying structural causes of poverty fail to be addressed, indigenous communities will

become less autonomous as they grow increasingly dependent on external aid. Las Abejas makes decisions about what types of aid it will accept and in many cases rejects government aid. This allows it to preserve some measure of autonomy but may make it more dependent on external sources of funding.

22. The first Pillar of Shame was placed in Hong Kong on June 4, 1997, to commemorate the eighth anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing.

23. Writing about the Nunca Más project in Argentina, Julie Taylor (1994) eloquently argues that the memory of terror will not necessarily lead to justice. She notes that when the project had ended, General Antonio Domingo Bussi, a torturer in power during the dirty war, launched a campaign as candidate for governor and received a significant number of votes. In the Argentine province of Tucumun there is a public museum dedicated to the victims of the dirty war that "constitutes another sort of tomb for the battle against the state: the act of remembering as the act of forgetting, of violently excluding, of silencing by fear" (Taylor, 1994: 200).

24. Antonio Gutiérrez Pérez, presentation of Las Abejas at SIPAZ, Ex-Convent of Santo Domingo, San Cristóbal de Las Casas, October 28, 1998, available at www.sipaz.org/gandhi/abejass.htm.

25. The soldiers backed down twice but returned to set up their tents near a spring that was a key source of water for the community.

26. For example, the PGR's *Libro blanco* contains such a denial.

27. Alicia Gómez, a pastoral worker of the Diocese of San Cristóbal, told me this story in the summer of 1998.

28. Presentation at the Ex-Convent of Santo Domingo, San Cristóbal de Las Casas, October 31, 1998, available at www.sipaz.org/gandhi/landers.htm. Rafael Landerreche was an important actor in the nonviolent resistance movement led by Andres Manuel López Obrador in the Mexican state of Tabasco during the 1990s.

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