



Bulldozers & Blasphemy

IN LATIN AMERICA, CATHOLICS ARE STANDING UP
TO THOSE WHO COVET THEIR GOLD AND TIMBER

By Marilyn Berlin Snell

I HEAR FATHER JOSÉ ANDRÉS TAMAYO CORTEZ before I meet him, his voice crackling over a public-address system, warning a young groom that in the 21st century it is not OK to come home drunk and abuse his new wife. It's a steamy day, and the small cinder block church is packed with wedding-goers. Women fan themselves. Babies wriggle and fuss. The priest's camouflage-clad bodyguards stand at the chapel door and windows, their M-16s pointed at the dirt.

I've traveled to Olancho, a lawless logging region known as the Texas of Honduras, because Tamayo has an international reputation for standing up to the logging interests, legal and illegal, that have been chainsawing their way through mountains rich in pine and tropical hardwoods. He and a growing number of Catholic clergy throughout Latin America have come to see protection of the land and water as God's work, their duty to the region's 500 million Catholics.

Although few North Americans seem to have noticed it yet, in the past few years a "liberation ecology" movement, with the church at its spiritual heart, has been taking shape from Chile to Mexico. Will the Vatican, I wonder, encourage or stifle it? Latin American Catholics have, after all, taken on what they saw as forces of injustice before. The liberation theology movement that began to gain strength in the 1970s

sided with the poor during a time when military regimes, supported by the region's oligarchs, ruthlessly suppressed social reform—killing more than 200,000 people in Guatemala alone, most of them indigenous.

Critics of that Catholic activism, including Pope John Paul II, feared that some in the clergy were flirting with godless Marxism. Rome assigned an enforcer, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, to rein in what it saw as renegade priests and bishops. Ratzinger's policy helped derail the movement and gave his career a solid boost. In 2005, the Roman Catholic Church elected him its Supreme Pontiff, Pope Benedict XVI.

Today both Guatemala and Honduras are embroiled in particularly contentious struggles over resources. I arrive in the spring, during the otherworldly ceremonies of *Semana Santa*—Holy Week—and just ahead of Benedict's highly publicized visit to Brazil, his first as pope to this part





Logging is big business near Olancho, Honduras, above, and efforts to fight destructive practices there have been met with violence. Since 1998, six environmentalists have been killed, and Father Andrés Tamayo, right, must now travel with armed bodyguards.



of the world. Drumbeats echo from village walls and tangy incense clouds the streets, along with an air of danger and possibility.

I've been in the region two weeks and traveled more than 1,500 miles on rough and scary roads by the time I visit Tamayo. A confession he makes confirms my impression that the stakes are high in this place where fragile economies and ecologies intertwine.

Tamayo, 51, is short and wide-shouldered and reminds me of the images of Mayan warriors chiseled into vine-covered temples. Yet his hands tremble as he speaks. "Sometimes I get so scared I can't think at all," he says. "I get paralyzed. I just wait for death to come."

PREPARING FOR THIS TRIP, I CONSULTED AN OLD FRIEND, a former priest who had lived for years in Mexico and now works at a parish in North Philadelphia. He sent me essays by American poet and farmer Wendell Berry. In one, Berry contrasts the disembodied "rational mind" of industry and economy with a "sympathetic mind" that is moved by "affection for its home place, the local topography, the local memories, and the local creatures." The sympathetic mind believes that "landscapes should not be used by people who do not live in them and share their fate."

Central Americans have always mined and logged. Mayans adorned themselves in gold and silver jewelry and used the precious metals to decorate their temples. For centuries, though, foreigners have seen the region's resources as booty. "Our wealth," Uruguayan journalist Ed-

uardo Galleano writes, "has always generated our poverty by nourishing the prosperity of others." The transnational companies that now have a corner on Central American timber and metals—most of them from Canada and the United States—are part of a lineage dating back to the 16th century, when conquistadors began sending ships loaded with New World gold and silver back to Spain's Catholic rulers to fund the Inquisition.

Today a new breed of clergy is more inclined to side with people like Quintin Miranda, a shopkeeper I met in western Honduras. Miranda had the good fortune to grow up in the lovely highland town of San Andrés. San Andrés had the misfortune to be perched atop a massive cache of gold. In 1997, a Canadian mining company, Greenstone, offered to buy every house in San Andrés so that it could develop the area as an open-pit mine. When villagers balked, the company sweetened the deal by saying it would build "San Andrés Minas" and relocate the population en masse a few miles away to company-built homes at a lower elevation.

Greenstone representatives warned the reluc-



"This isn't a middle-class movement as it is in the United States. It's in the villages, in the highlands. For us, it's life or death." BISHOP ÁLVARO RAMAZZINI

tant Miranda that if he didn't sell, the government could legally expropriate his land. Miranda held out. The air in San Andrés was crisp and several degrees cooler than in the new town. The night stars shone so brightly they lit the village streets. His brother, father, and great-grandmother were buried in the town cemetery. "I would rather be poor in San Andrés than anywhere else," he says. But when his was one of three families left, his village a ghost town, he finally gave in. The company appropriated the town's name for its mine and then bulldozed the place.

Residents of the village of San Miguel, a few miles away in a valley, don't have gold underfoot. They're merely too close to the open-pit San Andrés mine, whose new owner, Canada's Yamana Corporation, wants room to expand its dumping grounds. According to local activists, the company has been buying dwellings in San Miguel and smashing them without offering to build shelters elsewhere. (Yamana did not return phone calls.) Aqua blue and cream-colored houses stand beside piles of demolished adobe. Women hang laundry and tobacco leaves in their yards. Chickens, piglets, and children scramble around in the dirt. But it's too quiet, as if this once vibrant world were populated with apparitions.

I did not tour the San Andrés operation, which had sales of \$12 million in the first quarter of 2007. I did, however, gain entrance to the San Martín mine, ten hours away in Honduras's Siria Valley. U.S.-Canadian metals giant Glamis opened the mine in 2000. (Glamis was acquired by Goldcorp, headquartered in Toronto, in 2006.) At its peak of productivity, the mine used 220 gallons of water a minute in this semi-arid region, pulling 180 ounces of gold a day from the rubble. (On average, mines grind out three tons of rock waste to make a single gold ring.)

My guide at San Martín is environmental director Renán Chávez, a Costa Rican biologist who had previously worked at a Goldcorp mine in his own country. Chávez compares "open sky" gold mining to coffee brewing. First, workers dig enormous pits. Then they crush the displaced rock and shove it into massive piles, or heaps. In a process known as heap leaching, they spray the piles with cyanide, which percolates down, adhering

RESOURCE RICH AND STILL POOR

GUATEMALA

Population: 13 million

Size: 42,000 square miles (slightly smaller than Tennessee)

GDP per capita: \$5,000

Citizens living below the poverty line: 56% (2004 est.)

Forested area as of 2005: 9.6 million acres

Forest lost between 1990 and 2005: 2 million acres

Marlin mine revenue, first quarter 2007: \$41.6 million

HONDURAS

Population: 7.5 million

Size: 43,200 square miles (slightly larger than Tennessee)

GDP per capita: \$3,100

Citizens living below the poverty line: 53% (1993 est.)

Forested area as of 2005: 11.3 million acres

Forest lost between 1990 and 2005: 6.6 million acres

San Martín mine revenue, first quarter 2007: \$7.5 million



to flecks of gold before passing into a pipe that carries the slurry to plastic-lined lagoons (the coffeepot, I guess).

Three lagoons hold and help process the cyanide and gold mixture. The first of these, the dreg pond, contains the highest concentration of cyanide; Chávez tells me that its chemical smell keeps birds and other animals away. By the third holding area, pumps have collected the gold and sent the bulk of the cyanide back uphill for more leaching. A great white heron fishes on the banks of this pond, while ducks skid over its surface and turtles bask on semi-submerged logs. "It's usually nice over here, but this is great!" Chávez says, smiling. He shows me another area that workers had replanted a year and a half ago. Native *guanacaste*, mahogany, and pine trees flourish.

Church and community groups call this idyllic scene illusory, pointing to studies that found high levels of heavy metals in the soil and water near the San Martin mine. They say the company is depleting the water table, drying up wells, and forcing a once productive farming region with a population of 50,000 to import food. Chávez calls the studies bad science and opposition to mining bad economics. The mine, he notes, employs 224 people, most from this area, who spend their paychecks locally.

Opponents argue that a few hundred jobs are

standoff in the highlands

GUATEMALA'S MAYAN DESCENDANTS BATTLE FOREIGN-OWNED MINES

TENSION, WROTE CHILEAN NOVELIST ROBERTO BOLAÑO, is "the alternating current of tragedy." In the steep mountainous realm of western Guatemala, tension describes the relations between the indigenous population and the nation's largest gold mine.

To get to the highland villages, my Guatemalan interpreter, Carlos, and I bounced several hours up tracks better suited to goat hooves than a four-wheel drive. Over a couple of days, we visited two village churches. In one, we sat in a circle of chairs with a raggedy dog sleeping in the middle, rain pounding the tin roof overhead, as indigenous villagers told how a gold-mining company had pressured them to sell their lands.

In the town of Sipakapa, I spent the night in Catholic Church quarters, in a room with a bed, a roughly hewn cross on the wall, and a baseball bat by the door.

"Is the bat for protection?" I asked Carlos.

"Maybe it's just a bat for baseball," he said.

I wasn't so sure. Most of the townspeople would like operations halted at the Marlin gold mine they accuse of bullying its way into their lives, and our host, Roberto Marani, is one of the leaders of the environmental opposition. An Italian whose uncle had been the village priest, Marani manages the church and does virtually everything for the parish except preach and perform sacraments.

Most people in the village had never heard of open-pit mining in 2003, so when representatives of the multinational corporation Glamis (now Goldcorp) began poking around, Marani and two indigenous leaders, brothers Juan and Mario Tema, went to the company for answers. (Executives at Goldcorp's Guatemalan operations did not respond to interview requests.)

"They gave us lunch, beer, a video presentation, and said the mine would be a good development," Marani said, smiling. "We

left really happy. But then we started doing our own research."

Not only did the men discover the less pleasant details of open-pit mining, but they also found that other indigenous communities were fighting similar operations. Activists from Argentina and Peru visited Sipakapa and the surrounding villages. In late March of this year, Juan attended a *cumbre*, or summit, in Guatemala. Three thousand indigenous leaders from all over Latin America showed up. For the first time, mining, logging, and water privatization topped the grievance list.

Many nations, including Guatemala and Honduras, are signatories to the International Labor Organization's Convention 169 on the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples. The convention requires companies that have designs on indigenous people's natural resources to consult beforehand with those who might be affected. Marani and the Temas said that didn't

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happen here, so in 2005, Sipakapa and neighboring towns held a series of educational gatherings and a *consulta*, or referendum, on Goldcorp's project.

"We used indigenous methods," said Mario. "We didn't vote with paper. We raised our hands."

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The World Bank had loaned the venture \$45 million to help build the Marlin mine, so in late 2005, Mario and others from the community flew to Washington, D.C. Armed with proof of

insignificant. The only serious improvements to the area's standard of living, they say, owe to remittances sent back by entrepreneurial Hondurans who have ventured to the United States. Though unpopular, the Goldcorp operation appears to be relatively well run. Others aren't. A 2003 cyanide spill at the San Andrés mine, for example, poisoned a nearby river, killing 18,000 fish and contaminating the water supply as far away as the region's largest city, Santa Rosa de Copán, 11 miles downstream as the crow flies. The company paid a fine critics call nominal.

THE PROBLEMS NOW RUINING VILLAGES throughout Honduras were set in motion in 1998. Hurricane Mitch killed more than 5,000 Hondurans, left hundreds of thousands homeless, and destroyed almost three-quarters of the nation's crops. While villagers were still digging bodies from the mud, the Honduran Congress, desperate for foreign investment, passed a mining law so generous, opponents say, it seemed written by the transnational mining operations' lawyers. (One Honduran lawmaker assured me it was.) The law requires only a one percent tax on mines' profits and allows companies to seize homes and move inhabitants. Environmental regulations are exceedingly lax.

After his city's water was contaminated, Bishop Luis Santos of Santa Rosa de Copán decided to take a stand against the law. Wearing his



The Marlin mine concession, left, occupies nearly 250,000 acres in a mountainous area of Guatemala almost entirely populated by indigenous people. Cyanide, above, is mixed with water and used to process the gold.

the widespread opposition, they met with representatives of the organization, including then-president Paul Wolfowitz.

"We went to explain to him what happened in our democratic process," said Mario. "And we asked him to recognize the legitimacy of our consulta."

World Bank representatives agreed to send a letter doing just that. It had yet to arrive when this story went to press.

Marani and others I spoke to acknowledged that much of the progress indigenous groups have made against foreign mining companies wouldn't have happened without support from powerful church leaders. The combined strength of the people and the pulpit can be formidable.

"Sipakapa is the point of the arrow," said Marani. "We are now organized, but we were late. The company had already bought land and started operations. Yet because of our efforts, consultas are happening in places where mining concessions have been granted but the project has not yet begun. It won't

be so easy for those mining operations to open."

By this point in the evening, we were drinking a home-distilled, biting strong anise, and the Italian, who'd seemed gruff when we first met, was beginning to open up.

I asked Marani about a photo on the refrigerator in the church kitchen. It shows him sitting on the roof of the church compound beside a huge, hand-lettered sign. He smiled and explained that Goldcorp planes routinely fly over the church, so he and the villagers painted a message the company executives couldn't miss: "Sipakapa is not for sale."

That may not matter. Despite Convention 169, Goldcorp sought injunctions to stop the consultas in 2005, arguing their illegitimacy. At first, Guatemala's Constitutional Court ruled that the consultas could proceed. But in another ruling just after my visit, the court declared that the consulta results aren't binding. In effect, indigenous people have the right to speak up, but no one has to listen to them. —*Marilyn Berlin Snell*

LEFT: FLAVIANO BIANCHINI RIGHT: MARIYON BERLIN SNELL



"We want development, but a humane, sustainable development. The church must be a force for change in these matters." BISHOP LUIS SANTOS

clerical collar and a black jacket, a massive silver cross hanging around his neck, Santos does not convey warmth when he speaks about mining. I also get the sense that he doesn't care much for North Americans. "Our country is small and very mountainous," the bishop tells me. "The water sources are in the mountains, and that's where the mines are—more than 300 concessions.

"Honduras," he says, "is losing its riches to foreigners. We want development, but a humane, sustainable development. The church must be a force for change in these matters."

With a few nudges from Santos, last year the 39 parish priests of his diocese urged their flocks into the streets. Ten thousand parishioners, trade unionists, environmental activists, and campesinos blocked the Pan-American Highway for more than 12 hours, demanding that the Honduran Congress abolish the mining law. The protestors left the streets only after Honduras's president, Manuel Zelaya, agreed to meet with Santos and his alliance.

While Santos remains adamant that the law be wiped off the books, others believe it can be reformed. The Catholic relief and development organization Caritas and Cardinal Oscar Andrés Rodríguez Maradiaga—the powerful archbishop of Tegucigalpa who was once rumored to be a papal contender—have joined with Honduran politicians to propose changes. Among other things, they would increase taxes, improve environmental monitoring, and give communities more say over whether a company can mine. Last year the Honduran Supreme Court gave

them a boost, ruling many articles of the mining law unconstitutional. In April, Caritas persuaded 11 Canadian parliamentarians to write to members of the Honduran Congress, urging them to pass the proposed reforms to the law—a particularly important development given that Canadian firms control the country's most controversial mines. (In July, 12 people were injured and 72 arrested in a national protest against open-pit mining.)

The United States has its own problematic mining law that allows claimholders to take minerals, including gold and silver, from public lands without royalty payments to taxpayers. In the 1970s, big mining companies bought towns like Bingham, Utah, piecemeal and buried them under tons of mine rubble—the fate threatening San Miguel. The difference is that the U.S. law has been on the books since 1872, and every meaningful reform effort has been thwarted. Honduras, the original "Banana Republic," is likely to pass a bill to protect people from bad mining policies by the end of the year.

THROUGHOUT LATIN AMERICAN HISTORY, powerful forces have alternately torn nations apart and worked toward reconciliation. In 1996, for example, Guatemala's Bishop Álvaro Ramazzini helped negotiate an end to the 36-year armed conflict between the military and rebels pushing for better economic conditions for the nation's poor. Peace came; reform didn't.

A few years later, Ramazzini began hearing complaints from parishioners about the massive Marlin gold operation in his diocese (see "Stand-off in the Highlands," page 40). Events came to a head in 2005, when a mining truck hauling equipment was hindered by a pedestrian bridge over the transnational highway. Hundreds of people angered by the effects of mining took the opportunity to stream onto the highway and block the truck from continuing via another route.

After several weeks the military broke the impasse by shooting to death one protestor and beating others. A short while later, the government appointed Ramazzini to recommend reforms to Guatemala's mining law. The report, delivered to the Guatemalan Congress in 2006, calls for much higher taxes and safer mining methods. So far



Last year, Bishop Luis Santos, above, led 10,000 Hondurans in protest against a law he says favors multinational mining companies over campesinos.



Faith flourishes in Latin America, where suffering is enshrined and reenacted each year during Holy Week. Villagers in Guatemala, above and right, walk along streets adorned with religious scenes as intricate as a Navajo sand painting.



nothing has happened, though Ramazzini is still pushing for reform.

It's not hard to see why Catholic environmentalism, with its challenges to the powerful, resonates with liberation theology in the minds of many. But something important has shifted. The Berlin Wall fell in 1989, and so did many Marxist regimes. Suddenly it became harder for critics to equate priests' efforts on behalf of the poor with an ideology that condemns religion.

"Here in Guatemala," Ramazzini says, "I am insisting that our social movement have a spiritual basis. Without this, I find too many people become frustrated and fall into the temptation of money or violence. After so many years of violence, I don't want to see any more."

A few minutes later, the round-faced bishop with the booming baritone reads to me in English from the "ecology of peace" passages of a speech Pope Benedict gave on New Year's Day: "Respect for nature is closely linked to the need to estab-

lish, between individuals and between nations, relationships that are attentive to the dignity of the person and capable of satisfying his or her authentic needs. The destruction of the environment, its improper or selfish use, and the violent hoarding of the earth's resources cause grievances, conflicts, and wars precisely because they are the consequences of an inhumane concept of development."

Ramazzini sets the speech on the coffee table in his modest living quarters and leans back on the couch we share. It's the morning before Good Friday, and parishioners are already lining up to speak to him. We hear them through an open window, along with birds making a racket from the bougainvillea blooming bloodred in his courtyard. "In many places people are beginning to speak about environmental issues," he says. "This isn't a middle-class movement as it is in the United States. It's in the villages, in the highlands. For us, it's life or death."

IN LATIN AMERICA, DEATH COMES WILDLY TO LIFE as the faithful reenact Christ's suffering throughout the Holy Week leading to Easter. During those April days in Guatemala, children put on devilish red masks representing Judas and demand money from highway travelers slowed by small towns' axle-bending speed bumps. Villagers work

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through the night to create tableaux on the pavement using pine needles and other natural materials. I see a crucified Jesus made of corn kernels and bark on a street in San Marcos; a Saint Francis in the forest with a fawn and ducks made of painted sawdust. Male parishioners wearing hooded black robes shoulder heavy crosses or pull floats displaying Christ's mutilated body through the streets, trampling the art.

Later, in Honduras, the memory of crushed pine needles mixes with the scent of Olancho's forests as I walk with Tamayo, talking about a life infused with death. The priest's mother died while he was a baby in El Salvador. He later became an altar boy for Monsignor Oscar Romero. In 1979, during El Salvador's civil war, Romero sent the young seminarian to confirm a parishioner's grisly find in a field near the church: the bodies of two nuns buried standing, heads above ground and nearly severed. An informant falsely fingered Tamayo for the nuns' deaths. On Romero's orders, Tamayo fled to Guatemala, then to Costa Rica, and finally Honduras. A few years later, paramilitaries assassinated Romero as he said mass.

In Olancho, Tamayo's efforts to strengthen and enforce the country's forestry laws and to stop loggers' plunder have again made him a target. Unregulated forestry production in Honduras, one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere, is worth an estimated \$55 million to \$70 million per year. One afternoon in 2005, Tamayo was driving a colleague who worked for the priest's Environmental Movement of Olancho through a logging area about an hour from his church. Three snipers hiding in the thick undergrowth near the road, apparently aiming at Tamayo, put a bullet through his colleague's head.

"His brains were on the window," Tamayo says. To save his own life, the priest hit the gas on his church's Toyota pickup. No one was ever arrested, and it wasn't the end of the mayhem. Last December, in daylight, gunmen shot and killed two more members of the environmental group. Several men are

in custody, charged with murder.

A few months before these killings, 280 pro-logging activists surrounded Tamayo's church and tried to breach the high compound walls to get at him. The siege lasted three days before the Honduran army was called in to disperse the mob, and President Zelaya assigned soldiers to protect Tamayo around the clock. Three to five soldiers are now constantly at his side. Tamayo has grown accustomed to fear. "This is how I live," he says with a smile and a hint of defiance in his voice. "I can't stop what I'm doing. You have to have balls."

On the day I visit, I bring Tamayo a gift of chorizo, but he declines the sausage, giving it instead to his security detail. When I ask why, he tells me that as an orphan in El Salvador, living with a neighbor, he noticed that the priest was the best-fed person in his small village. This seemed wrong, and when Tamayo decided to follow his calling, he vowed never to eat better than the poorest in his parish.

Before our dinner of beans and rice, Tamayo takes me into the forest. The logging concession we see is relatively small and "legal," meaning the permit holders have permission to cut. But their techniques—bulldozing steep hillsides to get at the pine, cutting right to the banks of the creek, and felling everything except diseased or crooked trees—violate the law.

The loggers stop working when we arrive. They seem to know of Tamayo but say nothing as we walk by, two of his bodyguards flanking him while the third, the commander, hikes above us on the hillside to keep the entire scene—loggers, priest, visitors, potential sniper—in his sight.

"The company is supposed to leave a 150-meter buffer around water sources before it cuts a tree, but who is here to make sure the law is respected?" Tamayo asks. "There is no future view on sustainability."

In a forest once dense with pine, the closest trees on this concession are far enough apart to string a hammock. A logger now sleeps in one, surrounded by stumps and parched ground. Al-

ready, half of Olancho's 12 million acres of forest have been destroyed.

In his essay "Christianity and the Survival of Creation," Wendell Berry writes that our destruction of nature "is not just bad stewardship, or stupid economics, or a betrayal of family responsibility; it is the most horrid blasphemy. It is flinging God's gifts into His face, as if they were of no worth beyond that assigned to them by our destruction of them."

After I left Central America, the pope would strike a similar tone in Brazil, echoing remarks from his New Year's talk. He again criticized the socialism experiencing a resurgence in parts of South America, but he also blasted the environmental impact of unbridled capitalism and spoke specifically in support of people's rights to protect their water, timber, and land. He sounded, in short, like Tamayo, who in 2005 won the Goldman Environmental Prize.

I can't know for certain what prompted the pope to speak out so forcefully for stewardship. I do know what has driven Tamayo. One day, the priest says, he was passing through a mountain village during a funeral. A timber company had just secured a concession that allowed it to take massive quantities of wood from the area. The deceased's brothers, sisters, uncles, and cousins were so poor they didn't have money for a pine box. They buried their beloved in plastic.

"This really touched me," Tamayo says. In a land so rich in natural wealth, in a village once surrounded by lush forests, "people couldn't afford a coffin." ■

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