

## **PLIGHT OF THE MAYA –**

This document seeks to help us, as missionaries, enter into the Maya culture with gentleness and compassion for the people we come to serve.

### **Spanish Conquest**

- **1523 marked the beginning of the Spanish armies moving into Guatemala from Mexico under Cortez.**
- **The Spaniards ruled the country until 1821. At that time, all of Central America became united as one nation and the capital was in Guatemala City.**
- **For the Indians, little changed because their Spanish rulers were simply replaced by Ladinos, or the Spanish-American elite.**
- **Indians were not granted citizenship and so the social and political imbalance remained. Conflict after conflict followed among left wing and right wing factions for many years**

### **Plight Of The Maya**

- **The unfortunate plight of Guatemalan Indians began in the early years of the Spanish conquest when the conquistadors were given land rights as a reward for their services.**
- **In addition to land, the Spanish were entitled to demand native labor without pay, and they could also tax them through enforced contributions of goods, such as cloth and salt.**
- **Well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was not uncommon to find peasants who were forced to work for their landowners as a means of repaying a loan. In reality the loan could never be repaid and the peasant remained a virtual slave.**
- **Even in the 1930's laws were passed obliging Indians to work on plantations.**

### **Social and Political Divisions**

- **In the 1960's Guatemala became violently divided socially and politically. Rapid decline in political expression, racism, structural injustices are some of the underlying causes of the armed conflict. One issue was land reform. 65% of the land was and still is owned by 2% of the people.**

- **One large landowner was the U.S. owned United Fruit Company. It was very powerful.**
- **During the 1950's, it was exporting 16 million bananas a year which were being produced near a small town named Bananera. The bananas were being exported all over the world.**
- **So lucrative was this business that virtually the entire Guatemalan economy was in its hands and depended on the company's support. Those that supported the United Fruit Company opposed those who wanted social reform one of which was to return some of the land to the poor.**
- **So powerful was the United Fruit Company that in 1954 the first elected Democratic government was overthrown and replaced by an unelected government because the democratic government attempted to take over unused Company land and give it to those without land.**
- **Conservative groups, especially business groups and the large landowners distrusted democracy believing it would weaken their economic power.**
- **They turned to the Government military to suppress political opposition.**
- **The need to take power by force in order to build a new social, political and economic order was seen as the only solution by the insurgents or Guerillas.**
- **Eventually, the Guerillas took to the Highlands where the Maya lived. Most of the violence took place in the Quiché Department where we will be going. Large numbers of Maya, catechists, lay activists, priests and missionaries became victims of the violence. because they were viewed by the government military as helping the guerillas.**

### **Roman Catholicism and the Conflict**

- **The Franciscan and Dominican friars came with the Spanish armies to Christianize the Mayas. The Mayas were forced into Catholicism but despite this, the traditional Maya beliefs were not eradicated.**

- **Often Indians managed to observe Catholic rituals, while actually practicing forms of pagan worship. The Christian cross, for instance, was readily accepted as it was already part of the Mayan religion as a symbol of the four directions, north, south, east, and west.**
- **Today, church ceremonies are often conducted in a way that fits in with traditional Mayan religious thought. This syntheses has been called Folk Catholicism and allows for an element of ancestor worship that is central to Mayan religion. For ex. All Saints Day, the Mayans honor their dead by bringing the favorite foods and drink of deceased family members to their grave sight. This may sound very strange to us but we have to remember, it is all in ones point of view.**

*The true story is told an American who once asked a Maya man, "Why do you bring your deceased food and drink? Don't you know they can't eat or drink it? The Maya man replied, "Yes, it is true we honor our dead by bringing them food and drink on All Souls Day. But in your country you honor your dead by bringing fresh flowers to their gravesite. Don't you know that they cannot smell the flowers?"*

- **In the 1950's Priests, religious and catechists began to speak up on behalf of the Mayas about the social inequality. They began teaching the Maya how to read and write and began helping to organize the people to speak up for their rights to regain land and be paid fairer wages. Later on in the 1970's and 1980's, the priests were ordered to leave the country. Those that didn't either disappeared or were killed if they were found.**
- **Because of the church's outward movement to promote social justice of the Mayas, the country's president in the late 1950's as part of a liberal movement against Catholicism, invited protestant missionaries to Guatemala.**

### **Evangelical Churches**

- **General Rios Montt, a Fundamentalist Christian who was only president for one year in the 1980's, decisively influenced the growth of Evangelicalism in Guatemala.**

- **Under his rule, rural villages were encouraged to form defense militias; those that did not participate became key targets for government retaliation.**
- **It became clear that one way to avoid becoming a victim of the military was to disassociate oneself from the Catholic Church. Many therefore joined evangelical church's.**
- **Today it is estimated that about 40%-50% of the country's population has converted to evangelical form of worship.**

### **Civil War - 1950's – Dec. 1996**

*“Let the history we lived be taught in the schools, so that it is never forgotten, so our children may know it.” Testimony Given to the Commission for Historical Clarification*

- **In the 1960's the military began a visible campaign of terrorism and slaughter. During this time, the Maya were caught in the middle of the conflict. The govt. accused the Maya of helping the guerrillas and the guerillas accused the Maya of helping the Govt. military. Thus the Maya as a collective group were identified by the Army as guerrilla allies.**
- **The massacres, scorched earth operations, forced disappearances and executions of Mayan authorities, leaders, and spiritual guides, were not only an attempt to destroy the social base of the guerrillas, but above all, to destroy the cultural values, cohesion and community action in Mayan communities**
- **The Government military brutally punished the Maya. During the height of the war, over 200,000 Mayas were killed, 400 villages destroyed and over 100,000 disappeared. The U.N Human Rights Group called it genocide – a deliberate attempt to eliminate the Mayan people.**
- **The late 1970's and early 1980's was the height of the killings that continued into the 90's. Throughout the long period of violence, extreme brutality became an Army strategy used intentionally to produce and maintain a climate of terror in the population. Arbitrary executions were committed before relatives and neighbors. Witnesses to these acts lived for years in tombs of silence and horror not daring to speak to anyone, not even to family members of what they had seen, or experienced.**

- **Frequently, the Army would force members of the male population at gun point, especially in the Mayan communities, to participate in the violent acts. This was to cause more social disintegration.**
- **Anyone who was trying to better the people, to organize them, to teach them to read or write, was a potential target. The killings frequently took place in the Catholic churches or convents. Catholic Church in particular was viewed as ‘the enemy’ because it was known to stand with the poor in their rights for social justice.**
- **Bishop of Quiche during that time was in Rome and could not gain entry back into the country. He made an attempt to gain world attention to what was happening to the Maya and to the persecution of the Church by closing down the Diocese and telling all priests and religious sisters, to leave the country or go into hiding. But his plan backfired because the world didn’t react as the Bishop had hoped for and worst of all the Maya perceived that the Church had abandoned them in their darkest hour.**
- **Thus SOS formed a Ministry of Presence with the mission to ‘be with’ the Maya so as to be a visible sign that their faith family has not abandoned them.**

#### **Peace Accord Signed**

- **In December of 1996, the Peace Accords were signed and amnesty was granted for the guerillas. They turned in their weapons.**

#### **Period of Healing**

- **Eventually, but with much trepidation for fear of reprisals, mass graves began being exhumed and bones of loved ones brought home for proper burial and ceremony. This is still taking place as new graves are being found and unearthed- and there have been reprisals toward anyone trying to expose the truth.**
- **To help the healing process for the people and to give dignity to all those who died, the Catholic Church in collaboration with other faith denominations organized a ‘Truth Commission’.**
- **It sought an official count and recording of the names of all the victims of the violence. This required the laborious task of visiting all Maya communities that experienced the violence and through interviewing members in each community; it recorded the names of**

the victims as well as the date of occurrence and who the perpetrators were.

- In 2001, two days before the Bishop of Guatemala, Bishop Giaradi, was to release the findings of the Ramie Report to the public, his life was threatened. If he released the findings he would die. Why?
- Because the number of victims that died at the hands of the Army, were vastly higher than what was reported by the Guatemalan government. Well, the Bishop released the information and in two days he was bludgeoned to death in his garage. To this date, it has not been determined who killed him. This is typical of the justice system. No one sees or knows anything.

#### Post War Impact On Maya Communities

- The whole socio-economic system and spiritual life was disintegrated.
- There is not a family in the Quiche area that has not been affected by the violence. Every family has its memories of the violence and dead or lost family members.
- Because of the frequent tactic of raping the women, there is a sense of Community shame.
- In some communities there are many widows, orphans, and many landless because those that fled and returned found their land occupied by others. Since there were no land titles for the Maya, they could not prove the land was theirs
- Because of the forced inscription into the Army and forced participation in atrocities against members of their own villages, there are ill feelings between villages. Forgiveness and healing is slow.

***‘Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion, is to take off our shoes – for the ground we are approaching is Holy.’***

*Columban Fathers*

#### Additional Resources:

No summary can capture the causes and impact of the 36 year civil war upon the Maya. Additional resources below will give further insight and understanding.

Guatemala *Never Again!* Human Rights Office of Archdiocese of Guatemala  
Guatemala Memory of Silence *Commission for Historical Clarification*