

PEOPLES' PERMANENT TRIBUNAL

INTERVIEW

Raul Vera

Marcial Godoy (MG): Bishop Raul Vera, many thanks for being with us. Welcome to New York, I want to ask you to introduce yourself and tell us why you are here, what is your relationship to the issues of migration, etc.

Raul Vera (RV): Well, I'm Raul Vera, I am bishop of the diocese of Saltillo, Mexico, which is in the north of the country. It is a diocese where, when I became bishop 14 years ago, the territory of the diocese reached the border with the U.S., with Texas. After I was there three years, a new diocese was created, the diocese of Piedras Negras, which took part of the border area with the U.S. I am a member of the guarantors' committee that is part of the platform in Mexico supported by the Peoples' Permanent Tribunal (TPP) to constitute the Mexico chapter. Among the key issues we chose, I will cite some of them: one is the dirty war, what we call dirty war, which is the intention of dismembering social movements and that's why we call it dirty war; it is the obstruction of social movements struggling for justice in Mexico. Two, the labor issue, the freedom for unions and justice for workers, the guarantee of a life with dignity for workers, we also hear workers' complaints. The Tribunal is a place where, as in all tribunals, people go to present complaints, denunciations, that is the tribunal. There are hearings that receive complaints. Another issue is the environmental devastation that is occurring in the environment. Another is the issue of migration, which is the reason why we came to New York. We came to hold a pre-hearing. The Tribunal functions through pre-hearings for each key issue that ends up in a final hearing, where all the pre-hearings are combined. Why do we work with pre-hearings? Because the TPP works with harmed persons, victims, who are the most disfavored, we could say, and we could not just receive complaints only in Mexico City, that is not the plan. The Tribunal holds sessions in different parts of the country because, for example, in the case of migrants, there is a pre-hearing that was carried out there in Saltillo, near the border, where migration is just a step away, migrants are passing through there to reach the U.S. Our Migrants' House has been in existence for ten years, working in the capacity we now have, we have received around 100,000 migrants only on this house. However, they are not the only migrants passing through Mexico annually, two years ago it was 350,000 and now it is over 400,000. So there are ten key issues (for the PPT), also the harm to journalists, femicide, and young people. We have, let's say we started with seven in 2012, and this year we are finishing... and one of the issues is migration. I am here precisely... as father Alejandro Solalinde, who has another more recent migrants' house. We were already helping migrants and now we are building a big house. There were two smaller shelters, one in Piedras Negras that I was in charge of starting, and a smaller house that was already there when I got there. But houses with projects for defending human rights and advocacy, we started the first in La Cuña, because I was bishop there with the help of father Pedro Pantoja. When they created the new diocese, Pedro Pantoja was in charge of social ministry, and before they created the new diocese, I told the minister, I'm going to bring my vicar for social ministry. And since Pedro Pantoja was already here in Saltillo -he was first in General Cepeda, very close to Saltillo- we were already growing as a Migrants' House and I told him, take charge of the project. And now we have a house with projects for defending

human rights, a shelter, we help them rest, give them food, clothes, shoes, health, also psychological and spiritual care, of course. And that is a project for shelter, for refuge. But we also have the project for defense of human rights and the advocacy project for migration issues. We do this on the inside with advocacy officials in Mexico, human rights advocacy, in addition we do international advocacy with the Inter-American Committee for Human Rights and we also have Church meetings at the level of the border zone with the bishops from the border area, especially from Texas. But we also participate in meetings with all Migrants' Houses. We promote the network of Migrants' Houses because they have grown. We are also present where there are no Houses and we express our concern and Houses have been generated there. So that is the reason I am here, for my work with the diocese, it's not mine, it's a team. Of course, I'm not at the Migrants' House, Pedro Pantoja is there, who is now in charge of the Migrants' House of Saltillo. But I'm always near, the center to defend the rights of migrants was born next to the Migrants' House. The team for defense of human rights in the House is already organized, and now our human rights team is working to care for victims of forced disappearance in a special way. Well, that is what I can say about myself and why I am here. I'm a bishop and this is my third diocese. I worked with Don Samuel Ruiz in Chiapas, and I worked in a very poor area in Guerrero where there was much violence.

MG: A two-fold question: What in your view are the most urgent problems that migrants and transmigrants passing through Mexico have? And what are the structural causes?

RV: One of the most urgent problems, we started a campaign in 2011 in Saltillo with a workshop on migration without violence. We are seeking for migrants to receive a document. It is extremely urgent for migrants to have a document that would allow them to travel, not on The Beast, the train, not on train roofs, not in inhospitable solitary places because they are victims of all kinds of abuses. We are asking the Mexican government to provide them an identity document while they are passing, with the official permission for them to take buses, in which people travel. In Mexico the trains do not transport people, only merchandise, so the buses are the normal means for travel. And migrants have to have the right, but they don't do it because they don't have documents so they are detained. And in Mexico that is one of the achievements we work on with migrants, that it is no longer a misdemeanor, it is now only an administrative offense; they do not have to go to jail, they do not have to be criminally punished. But the issue is that they use them for extortion anyway, they kidnap them; the issue is all the insecurity. We have seen murders and that's why we have strengthened our Migrants' House, after three murders of migrants at the entrance to Saltillo, they got off the train and then murdered. **At that time what made them suffer the most were the railways' private security guards. Later the Maras Salvatruchas appeared, also murdering, robbing and raping, men and women. Then there's organized crime, which is enormous and terrible, now it's organized crime that does that, but again the maras [criminal gangs] are helping, in collaboration with the railways. Now the three are against migrants and what is really the most serious of all this is that it is a governmental policy so that Mexico is a wall of containment of migration so that they don't reach the U.S.** And this has especially increased with the fall of the towers, because all these strategies against terrorism and for terrorists not to come here, because they are labeled as possible terrorists. So all those migration processes get tougher, and Mexico also toughens their controls, following U.S. policies. But we know we are fighting against a huge problem. And the first are those here (the U.S.) that say, "Please do not give them documents, we don't know what to do with them here." **But since you asked me about structural causes, definitely, what is driving forced migration, migration itself has been a way the Earth has developed and has**

populated and it has been a benefit. This country is a country that was formed by migrants and we, our first settlers migrated from elsewhere, we know how Mexico was formed and also the migration of the Spanish, who came to conquer but it was a migration. So, in that sense, migration is how the planet has developed. It is forced migration that is not accepted, and the economic model is provoking it. It is the asymmetry, for example, of our free trade treaty between the U.S., Mexico and Canada, propagating inequality, why? Because multinationals come to our poor countries, even Central America, to pay miserable wages, because it is free trade. The free market is ferocious competition; let's see who finishes with whom. And all at the expense of increasingly abundant profits that accrue from decreasing the minimum wage and declining employment benefits. Not to mention, the current economic model is the main cause of this global imbalance between developed, powerful countries and poor countries that are increasingly poor because of unpaid money, labor exploitation from multinationals, which later bring their dividends to their corporate clients, which are usually super-developed countries. So this is criminal, definitely. And that's what keeps immigration laws from softening, control over people who migrate in search of work is becoming increasingly fierce. And well, one of the things that we are terribly learning here is the phenomenon that migrants are mistreated here and they live in a situation that is more difficult every day. This is one of the riches that this pre-hearing is giving the Tribunal.

MG: On the same subject, but changing the focus a bit, I want to ask you about Mexico more specifically and the context of violence, the bloodshed that has affected the country in the last six, ten years. And especially relating to the leadership role of faith, as you are part of the Church, and churches more broadly, and also with regards to the organization of pain. That is, the level and magnitude of violence, murders and disappearances, organized crime is astonishing. And now with Peña Nieto we hear less on the news but it continues to grow.

RV: The roles have changed; the ways in which organized crime continues to get money are with kidnaping, disappearances, extortion, corruption. Well, the most serious issue is government corruption. In addition there is the issue of seeing companies within organized crime that are mining in Michoacan, they are companies. **Crime has become organized thanks to corruption, the terrible infiltration inside the State, that is a very important part, organized crime totally depends on corruption of the State. Public policies to combat organized crime have the presence of the army, have the presence of the police, but they have no legal enforcement. Ninety-seven percent of crimes committed in Mexico do not get investigated, they are not solved; there is a 2 or 3% complaint rate, but the cases are not solved, dear God, they are not solved. So it is almost total impunity.** They are committed again quickly, they have everything established, the structure is so fierce, and there is so little action. They are not taking their money, no persecution of money laundering. A very clear example is the bank HSBC, which the U.S. denounced that there were 7,000 million dollars that was taken out of Mexico in less than a year through that bank. Are there white collars in prison? They fined them, which I figured out to be equal to less than 1% of the profit it represents. Because normally a money launderer, a company or bank that launders money, keeps 50% because they say "I'm running a huge risk." So taking that into account, through that launder, the white collars or that bank itself won what the fine of .5% or .7% of 300 million Mexican pesos represents, which is nothing given the 7,000 million dollars they laundered.

MG: Well, and we are here about two kilometers from the great laundry called Wall Street.

RV: That's the worst; that all that speculative money is already in current accounts, all of it.

MG: And perhaps to conclude, I want to ask you how you see the next ten years in terms of the migration issue, in terms of the political-social issue in Mexico, and also in terms of the U.S. and the presence of migrants?

RV: Well, we don't know where it's going. The world is really being taken as a time bomb. The degree of corruption, let's put it that way, the terrible organization of the world of money, this voracious neoliberal capitalism that wants to wipe out everything. But there are really many gaps in all this. There's the crack of the stock market in New York, Wall Street; it is very fragile. But it is a time bomb that will explode anywhere. We have the most serious issue of global warming, so worrying and it's another thing they don't want to deal with because they have to change all the processes of industrial transformation. You have to invest and they don't want to invest, they want profit any way possible. The issue of speculative capital is another terrible issue; it is a false economy, which is causing thunder, it is impoverishing people. What will they live from? They want to eliminate them, but the people will not stand for that. Then, let's put it this way, the only hope... the very illogical way they have made the world function, using false wheels; the lack of ethics it is generating is more cynical every day, because here, in the face of all this, we have seen the energy these people bring, positive energy to confront the future, seek justice, to seek their right to a life with dignity. And the great values of the poor; **I know the indigenous world and their values are remarkable. So those who are controlling things are extremely weak, fragile structures, they are very weak people, I see it when the poor confront them with very strong words, when the knowledge of the poor is before them, and you see that they are people with no response for them.** I have seen them; I have seen migrants in Mexico confront a governor of Coahuila with such force, "We are sick of what you do to us, we want free transit through this country!" The Migrant's Global Letter is an efficient, very efficient argument for their right to live on Earth with full dignity, for universal citizenship, of the borders that don't have to exist; it is very smooth, very beautiful. So the signs of the times in which we live equally happen in the Church: there is much more strength in the foundation of our churches, in the faithful, than in us, who are used to established power. This is seen in, the future is in the mind and heart of the poor, in the knowledge of people who are seemingly weak but are really very strong. **So there are some fabulous signs of hope in the poor and in the people who are victims today and they are organizing to become subjects of transformation. And there is great weakness in the structures of power at this time,** speculative capital and the power that stock markets apparently have to define the life of the world is a false power, terrible, 2008 already showed that, 1929 already showed that. Then, the lack of ethics, the inconsistencies of politicians are so great and also in the meanings that they want to give the Earth, the terrible moral corruption that exists among those who control money and among those who make political decisions. So that for me as a moralist, and for me who reads the psalms every day, which say "You who established Earth on the right to justice," so you say, they are going to fall. Now, how is the world going to resist and how is it going to rise up, I say again: the exploitation of Earth, the lack of ethics of those who are making decisions about the world and their inconsistency; the false foundation of the global economy, which political organization has because of its lack of ethics. So we have to prepare, that's why I bet on the poor, we have to prepare the future in those people. Because the people in control don't think about the day after next, they're not interested in sustainable development, they're not interested in a sustainable Earth with respect for ecology, they are not interested. It is an immediacy of here, where your nose ends; those who are controlling the world are not interested beyond that.

Maybe they are developing their artificial climate in Mars, I don't know, but since we don't know... I sincerely work with hope, and I work among the poor, I believe in them, in their values, and the children, young people are also showing very interesting signs of response. **So I think we don't have to focus on those who are making decisions today, because if we focus on them, they are going to destroy the planet. But if we focus on those who do understand, we have to bet on them, and migrants are among them.**

MG: Thank you very much, Bishop Vera.