

An Experience of Regency among the Tarahumara Juan Pablo Romero SJ

This first year of regency has provided me with a great contrast to my experience in the four years I spent studying philosophy. In the Mexican province, the philosophy years are a time when the young Jesuit in formation develops his ability to organise the many different daily activities which make up his life (including studies, apostolate, community responsibilities and discernment groups just to name a few). During this time, the study of philosophy helps to develop and expand the ability of the student to think about the world in all its complexity, such as the role of education in the formation of theoretical ideas or the influence of economic interests in political decisions.

I believe that if we as Jesuits want to contribute to an indigenous culture, then we must understand it well and be able to analyse our reality from the perspective of that culture. This is certainly the reason the mission given me by my Provincial for these two years was to learn the Tarahumara (or Raramuri) language and become familiar with the culture.

I have not had an easy time attempting to immerse myself in the daily life of the Raramuri families. This year I have not tried to organise any meetings, teach any classes or conduct any interviews. Coming to live in Samachiki has meant organising my life in a different manner. This has been a time of learning to accompany the people and to do so effectively. After spending four years in a university environment, systematically seeking important insights into the nature of reality, it is not easy to become the person who walks more slowly than the others, the one who has to chop much harder to split a log or the one who listens without understanding to what others are saying in Raramuri.

It has not been easy either to distinguish between indigenous thought and the Western thought in which I have been trained all my life. Visiting the Rawiwachi community,¹ we inevitably project our own definitions of a good life. It is not necessary to pay many visits there to become aware of the acuteness of people's needs: the corn they harvest is insufficient, they drink too much, their hygiene is poor and their formal education is inadequate. Since we are ignorant of their culture, we immediately make judgments and try to tell the people what they really need and how they should do things. But if we seriously want to be cultural bridges instead of new colonisers, then we have no recourse but to delve deeply into the culture, so that, having understood it, we can give our opinion from the perspective of the Raramuri culture itself. That is to say, do they really need what we feel they need?

I am slowly learning how important it is to understand what the Raramuri dream of for their children. For many years the Western world thought that

¹Rawiwachi, which means "the Hawk," is the community I am assigned to accompany.

what the Raramuri needed was to have things given to them, clothing, zinc roofing, corn and so on. What the church, the government and welfare organisations have done in many Raramuri communities has effectively debased the dignity of these indigenous people, since they are considered to be incapable of providing for themselves and in need of hand-outs. It is easier for others to tell them what they need than to ask them what they dream about for their children. It is easier to give them things than to accompany them in the process of community development and organisation.

This slow process of getting to know their indigenous culture has been opening up my mind and heart to a different way of living the faith. The Raramuri have for generations lived on extremely rugged land and have thrived in a raw, austere climate. Since they have had to struggle with adverse natural conditions just to survive, the Raramuri have developed a close relationship with nature and ways of relating to God that have given me a completely fresh experience of faith. Two particular aspects of Raramuri culture that have most definitely enriched my own faith are the physical way in which they express their faith and the constancy of their relation to God present in nature.

One of the most significant experiences for me during this time has been the feeling of ever greater confidence and closeness with the families of *Rawiwachi*. I would like to say that this sense of familiarity has been the result of my attitude on arriving in the community, but as I look back over the year as a whole, I find it has really been the fruit of time and the way in which “the hawks” have progressively involved me in their daily activities, inviting me to walk along the same paths as them, harvest their corn with them and dance to the *Onorúame*.²

On the one hand, this time of insertion in *Rawiwachi* is a way of accompanying people in their lives and being a presence that reaffirms the values of their culture, the source of the community’s life. On the other hand, this experience is an attempt to discover ways to build bridges between the Raramuri culture and modern Western culture. Thirty years ago, the people of *Rawiwachi* were capable of dealing with what was happening there just by using their own resources. Nowadays, traditional *Rawiwachi* knowledge is insufficient to explain what is happening there. Climate change, tourism projects and drug cultivation are transforming the lives of the families living on the Sierra.

I believe it is necessary to build intellectual bridges, but before we can do that, we need to acquire a profound knowledge of the culture of the people and carry out serious intercultural reflection. In this sense, I am moved strongly by two desires as I enter my second year of regency. First, there is the desire to let myself be touched by Raramuri culture; and this will be done concretely by immersing myself in *Rawiwachi*, studying the language and taking part in our attempts to dialogue with Raramuri theology. My second desire is to think about the world as a whole from the perspective of *Rawiwachi*, and not simply within the framework of our own structures. This desire is taking shape among

²*Onorúame*: He who is Father.

the many questions that besiege me, and also in the ventures that we as a team are attempting to develop, such as the Food Bank, the literacy programme, the child nutrition programme and the meetings of the Raramuri governors.

After a year working on the project, after a year of friendship with “the hawks,” I recognise that this is a place that stimulates me to dream, to dream about how best to be a Jesuit in these indigenous lands, hoping always to be able to dream, one day, the dreams the Raramuri have for their children.

Juan Pablo Romero SJ
Mexico

Original Spanish
Translation by Joseph Owens SJ