

## **The Jesuit Cultural Centers of Tarahumara. By Fr. Rodrigo Espinoza S.J.**

Since 2014, in the Tarahumara mission we began the project of Cultural Centers in rarámuri communities of the Parish of San Miguel de Guaguachique, based in Samachique. We have opened four cultural centers in the towns of La Gavilana, Pamachi, Guaguachique and Samachique. The focus of our work is to strengthen the rarámuri cultural identity in children and, secondarily, we complement the training given in schools. The Cultural Centers are a response to the cultural deterioration caused by various actors that have gained strength over time, such as drug trafficking, Protestant churches and the ideology of consumption. The Centers try to safeguard the good and evangelical present in the rarámuri world in a tone of openness to dialogue and intercultural work. We believe, above all, that the fruit of our work comes from the encounter between cultures, which interact constantly and permanently. With joy I have witnessed the evolution of the Cultural Centers in these five years of work. Sometimes I like to understand Cultural Centers as Community Centers, a pretext and space for the meeting of the rarámuri brothers, one of so many vulnerable populations and marginalized by the powers of our times. Although we work with children, I think the impact of the Centers is more extensive. First of all, there is the team of teachers, young rarámuri musicians that we guide and train to work in the Centers; in the end it is they, rarámuri, who support the Centers and the ideal agents for teaching and transmitting customs and traditions to children. In addition, the adult community benefits. Teachers, for example, make home visits, accompany parties (animating traditional dances with their music), distribute support that gets the parish, and organize activities that involve the whole community, such as showing movies or playing volleyball or basketball. . Our job as Jesuits has been to create the space and the Spirit (or the “Santo iwigá,” as they say here) has done the rest. In the current context of the pandemic, we decided to continue with the work of the Centers (at least in three), since the educational deterioration, already great, intensified with the closure of the schools. For the moment, we stopped work at the Samachique Center, while the others continued with reduced attendance. We wanted to see the good side of the coin, educating and raising awareness about the diseases that, since ancient years, the rarámuri have been victims. How to move forward in times of crisis and difficulty? A people that have traditionally resisted attacks of all kinds, since colonial times, undoubtedly know the fundamental keys to answer a question of this type. Curiously, one of these keys is to continue dancing to God and celebrating the traditional rite, the center of the rarámuri liturgy, known as Yúmari. Opposed to the discourse of the medical authorities (of which, by the way, I have no doubt), the rarámuri wisdom continues to proclaim that survival is given not by isolation, but by community life. What a great paradox! I believe that the theological conviction that salvation is given by the earthly and material means of our daily existence (like a little bread and wine, for example) animates our work in Tarahumara and in the Cultural Centers. Activities and simple meeting spaces become in the basis of social reconstruction. In other words, the Centers are meeting places that reinforce the sense of community belonging. There is still a long way to go, but at the same time it would be naive to think that our work is an inert act. In the Guaguachique Center, for example, a group was formed that we call “chiveros” (a name that the students themselves use with enthusiasm); These are rarámuri children who never had the opportunity to attend school because of their work in the fields tending sheep. In the Gavilana Center, the community meets with excitement every Monday afternoon to watch a movie or any other day around the basketball court to play whatever comes to their mind. At the Pamachi Center, the teachers once organized a very large Yúmari in which the entire community participated. Every year, teachers also organize ball races (a traditional sport) that bring together children and adults from different communities. In short: the excuse is educational work, but in the end the fruit is community strengthening. And community unity, now more than ever, is necessary for the subsistence and renewal of life in our indigenous peoples.

The missionary ideal that inspired the creation of the Centers was that of the “active stay” among the rarámuri, which in short is the double Ignatian value of contemplation and action. Or in other words: it is the same balance, which always comes out imperfect, illustrated with Martha and Mary in the Gospel of Luke (the first does, the second is). We not only want to learn and contemplate the good that is in our indigenous communities, but also to seek the construction of the Kingdom through the seeds of the Gospel present in the cultures of the world. This implies an understanding of evangelization that is intercultural, that is one of dialogue and not of imposition of some forms on others. We learn with enthusiasm the religious synthesis and integration that the rarámuri culture has achieved through the centuries, built on an authentically indigenous church; and at the same time we want to share the good news of the God of life that Jesus proclaims. Little by little, slowly and discreetly, our work generates a little hope in a broken and marginal indigenous world. 2020 has been a tremendously difficult year. It seems that the pandemic and collective neurosis of the coronavirus somehow drove the rain from the mountains. While some places suffer from devastating floods, in the sierra we lack water. Global warming is affecting rural communities that depend on the storm have been the first to suffer. At Samachique, we ration and manage water with extreme care, taking care of every last drop. People are sad because the corn did not grow and dried up. During this crisis, the rarámuri people continue to resist and celebrate life, confident that God is with us. The Cultural Centers are a community meeting space and a “grain of sand” (among many others) to continue keeping hope alive in the hearts of indigenous peoples. On the difficulties, although strong, life continues to emerge. The Spirit animates and sustains everything that is good in our communities; and calls us to go in this direction.



Working with children in the Cultural Centers