
Monoculture plantations where forests are burning, territories devastated: native peoples' "resistance" in the wake of Laudato Si

“Foreigners arrived and cut down our trees, a full deforestation, they set our forests on fire, our greatest wealth, and then planted aguacate crops everywhere. Ten years ago we responded by creating an indigenous self-government”, said **Laura Rosa Gutiérrez**, primary school teacher and catechist, contacted by SIR in the Mexican municipality of Cherán, located at the heart of the State of Michoacán, the world's main producer of aguacate, better known as avocado. *In Cherán, the town Council formed as a result of the local community's mobilisation enforced a strict regulation: not a single aguacate tree can be planted on its territory.* It's a unique case, like an island in the middle of the ocean, since avocado monoculture is now widespread throughout the “Meseta Purépecha.” Who knows if UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres had this scenario in mind when he declared 2021 the Year of Fruit and Vegetables, calling on the international community to use the year to rethink the way we produce and consume food including exotic produce like avocados. Half fruit and half vegetable (in European supermarkets it can be found in the fruit section, in Latin American supermarkets it is usually available on the vegetable display racks), it is now an expanding market in Europe and especially in the USA.



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[To meet this demand, aguacate is grown in monoculture in some parts of Mexico, notably in Michoacán, which is also one of the States with the highest crime rate. Since criminality permeates every aspect of Mexican society and this is a profitable crop, it's no surprise that the two phenomena are linked.](#)



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[anthropologist from Padua \(Italy\), professor at Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History \(INAH\), who lived a few years in the 'autonomous' municipality of Cherán, said in clear terms: "Criminal groups control all economic activities in Mexico. Every aspect of the supply chain is controlled by the gangs that cross or have crossed Michoacán, starting with the Caballeros Templarios cartel, now disbanded and splintered in some other groups. The price to be paid to the gangs for each tree is 1,500 pesos if destined for the domestic market, 3,000 if exported to the United States. This State has an agricultural tradition, starting from the Pacific coast. Crops range from strawberries and berries to coffee and aguacate in the Uruapan area and the Meseta Purépecha. The latter used to be a forest region and has since been systematically deforested, increasing from 13,000 hectares to 153 thousand in just a few years. Theoretically, tiny farms remain in many cases, in practice it is a form of landgrabbing." Professor Gasparello mentions two municipalities that stand as emblems of the rebellion against this model: Tancitaro, 'where vigilante groups known as autodefensas were set up by local farmers against the cartels, resulting in numerous deaths', and Cherán, "whose municipality managed to break away from this yoke." Not surprisingly, Tancitaro and Cherán are Michoacán municipalities included in a CIAS \(Centre for Investigation and Social Action\) programme - Jesuits for Peace, the Society of Jesus organisation that promotes peace and reconciliation projects throughout the country.](#)



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said: "Aguacate is not the cause of the violence in Michoacán; if anything, it is one of two phenomena. The violence affecting the rural territory of the State is rooted in events that took place decades ago, when communal agriculture was discontinued and privatisation drove many campesinos out of production processes, often forcing them to emigrate. *The gaps were filled by criminal cartels, which in many municipalities manage their activities in complicity with the local administration.* From 2006 to 2013, over three thousand people were kidnapped in Tancitaro. Those who could not afford to pay the ransom often offered land instead. The Jesuits are involved "in the reconstitution of the social fabric, in conjunction with the Church and local civil society, in the creation of cooperatives. Efforts bore fruit in schools and families at Tancitaro, the autodefensas were institutionalised. This is the only way they can operate without spiralling into violence. The forest rangers of Cherán are working as community guards." **The Church takes the side of the indigenous people.** Let's go back to Cherán. "Indeed", said Laura, the teacher mentioned at the beginning of this article, "ten years ago our people woke up. *Looking back today, it can be said that it was a constant struggle. If we succeeded so far it's because we managed to involve the entire community.* Ours is not a small municipality, we have almost 20,000 inhabitants, we live in a precious, humid territory, the forests are our greatest treasure, but so is the cultural identity of the Purépecha ethnic group. Their local language risked disappearing, and over the years we held courses to preserve it. But our challenge, concludes the teacher, who is also a catechist in the parish, is above all educational. In this respect, collaboration with the Church proved to be essential." **Father Sergio Guerra Lúa**, parish priest of the community dedicated to St Francis of Assisi, confirmed: "Our support to the community is not only of a strictly religious nature, but extends to this journey of life." Indeed, it all started with the desire to protect our forest, but it wasn't always simple, and there is a strong temptation to surrender to powerful groups. *Nevertheless, we believe in the value of the community, in the force of an alternative vision.* Our community has been pursuing this path for a long time, and Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'* has strengthened our commitment." **Chile: forests and water crisis.** Intensive avocado farming is not limited to Mexico. It spans the entire American continent, all the way to Chile. *There are no Mexican crime cartels there, but a liberalist economic system that favours large corporations.*



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[. professor of Environmental Sciences at the University of Chile. In the central part of the country, in many cases, the local vegetation has been replaced. Rivers have been diverted for irrigation purposes, in a country where water is not a public good and is frequently insufficient for the population.](#)



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[. explained Ezio Costa Cordella, attorney, executive director of Chilean NGO Fima: “The Supreme Court recently confirmed that the permits granted by CONAF - the National Forestry Corporation - to replace forests with this type of plantation, were illegal. That means that numerous legal actions to revoke the permits could well be undertaken, which in turn could help protect some of the forests that have not yet been affected, but for which permits have already been granted. *Without doubt, however, effective and long-term solutions require new legislation on land use and water rights, recognising that water is a common good.*” *Journalist, “La vita del popolo”?](#)

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