

“I MADE A COMMITMENT TO GOD”

By Néstor Curbelo

Church History Adviser, South America South Area

Virgilio Simarrón Salazar was a leader in his native Chachi community of northern Ecuador. To this day, the Chachi maintain their distinct way of life and their own system of justice with a communal council, governors, and judges. These leadership roles are typically positions of honor that families hold for generations and that are built on a deep foundation of community respect and esteem. Respect for the position was a trust to be cared for and passed on to the next generation.

But Virgilio Simarrón's plans for his life changed in 1996, when his son, Wilson, returned from studies in Quinindé with copies of the Book of Mormon and a firm testimony of his new religion. Filled with the faith and enthusiasm of one who has found the truth, Wilson shared the message of the gospel with his family, and they were soon baptized in the waters of the Canandé River.

As the Simarróns shared the gospel with Chachi friends and neighbors, however, a serious conflict developed. Some Chachis felt that Virgilio Simarrón's beliefs made him a heretic and even considered violence

The Church was established in Guayacana, Ecuador, thanks in large part to Virgilio Simarrón, who made a difficult decision in order to stay true to his testimony.

against him. Others felt that, as a governor, he should not participate in a new faith that might divide the people. With this concern, they took him to be tried by the communal council. It would be one of the most difficult experiences of Virgilio's life.



Following the missionary work of the Simarrón family, 60 people were baptized in the Canandé River in May 1999.

Wilson relates what happened: “The council, in full assembly, told my father, ‘You will remain as our governor if you renounce the Church of Jesus Christ; you must retract.’ My father said, ‘I made a commitment to God, and when a man makes a commitment to God, it is not retractable. I cannot give up the Church. If you think I’m a governor who has divided the Chachi people, then oh my people, choose you this day another one in my place.’ Then I saw the scene of my father crying. The council was in total silence for more than five minutes—nobody said anything. Then someone said, ‘Then Governor, leave.’ Slowly my father stood, so my mom, my sister, and I went down and left the council.”

After Brother Simarrón was removed from his office, difficult days followed for the family. Feeling contempt from many who had once respected them, the family turned to the faith they had embraced and preached the gospel with great fervor. Their stake president, Omar Intriago Cesar, explains: “They began to preach the gospel from house to house to each family of this community. The Guayacana Branch started with Virgilio Simarrón and his son, Wilson. The Church was established because of his faith, his strength, and his testimony.”

In just a few years, the efforts of the Simarrón family bore great fruit. May 30, 1999, became a day of celebration in Guayacana when a large baptismal service was held.

President Intriago recalls, “We arrived with Roberto Garcia, the mission president, and both participated in that glorious day, where on the beaches of the Canandé River, two missionaries baptized 60 people. Then, President Garcia on one side and I on another confirmed as members of the Church all who were baptized. It was a privilege that will never be erased from my life.”

Although Virgilio gave up his governorship to stay true to his testimony, he was able to pass on another legacy to the next generation: that of serving the people by establishing the gospel among them. He lived to see Wilson serve a full-time mission and then return to Guayacana to marry his wife, Ruth, and have children. Some years later, Virgilio died faithful in the Church. His wife, Maria Juana Apa, has lived to witness their son’s calling, in 2014, to serve as branch president in Guayacana.

Wilson is very aware of the heritage his father always wanted to give him. “My ancestors have always been governors, heads of soldiers, strong warriors,” he says. “I feel that all these ancestral roots still manifest in me. But now that I am a member of the Church, all that strength has helped me become a good soldier of Jesus Christ.” ■



Above: A new generation of leaders, Ruth and Wilson Simarrón of the Guayacana Branch (with branch members shown at left).