

The Violence of Love

Working for Justice to Achieve Peace

The Life and Legacy of the Martyred Archbishop Oscar Romero¹

I feel truly honoured to be invited to be a programme participant in this magnificent enterprise which is Rothko Chapel. For this I thank you most sincerely.

Let me open with Romero's own words on the 'violence of love'.

***We have never preached violence,
except the violence of love, which left Christ nailed to a cross.
We have never preached violence,
except the violence that we must each do to ourselves
to overcome selfishness and such cruel inequalities that exist
among us.
The violence we preach is not the violence of the sword,
the violence of hatred.
It is the violence of love, of brotherhood,
the violence that chooses to beat weapons into sickles for work².***

The 'violence of love' or 'loving violence' is a provocative expression. It seems self-contradictory. But 'loving violence', the violence we must do to ourselves, if we are to work selflessly for justice to achieve peace, is hard, very hard - because the 'violence of love' equates with conversion, with metanoia, a change of heart. I could imagine that 'loving violence' might be inscribed on Romero's identification tag. And with this dialectical juxtaposition of 'unloving violence' and 'loving violence' Oscar Romero is putting down a serious challenge to us - to pursue not only personal conversion but also societal conversion if we are truly to overcome those "cruel inequalities that exist among us".

For me personally it has been the greatest grace of my life to have known and worked with Archbishop Romero and to have enjoyed his friendship³. It was a tiny glimpse, a fleeting snapshot, of God at work in the world that will stay with me forever.

Through his renowned preaching, his deep spirituality, his unambiguous option for the poor, his ceaseless strivings for peace, his courageous denunciation of economic exploitation and the violation of human rights, and above all his readiness to give his life for his people, Oscar Romero today evokes admiration, affection and real pride amongst Christians. Rothko Chapel's biennial Oscar Romero Award is a splendid expression of that esteem. Acclaimed and remembered in every continent, Romero is a truly credible witness to the gospel and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ

¹ This lecture draws on earlier presentations by Julian Filochowski delivered at De Paul University, Chicago; Notre Dame University Ind.; and Durban Cathedral, South Africa.

² Homily November 27 1977

³ See Feb. 7 1979 in 'Archbishop Oscar Romero – A Shepherd's Diary'. St Anthony Messenger Press.

for this sceptical age. As the popular adage goes, *'he talked the talk and he walked the walk'*.

Just before he died, in an interview with a Mexican newspaper⁴, Archbishop Romero reportedly said:-

"I have frequently been threatened with death. I ought to say that, as a Christian, I do not believe in death without resurrection. If they kill me I will rise again in the people of El Salvador. I am not boasting, I say it with the greatest humility.....Martyrdom is a grace from God which I do not believe I deserve. But if God accepts the sacrifice of my life, then may my blood be the seed of liberty, and a sign that hope will soon become a reality.Can you tell them, if they succeed in killing me, that I pardon and bless those who do it. But I wish that they could realise that they're wasting their time. A bishop may die, but the Church of God, which is the people, will never die."

Oscar Romero was assassinated at the altar on March 24th 1980. But his spirit is alive today not only in the Salvadoran people but in the bread-breaking, justice-seeking pilgrim people of God throughout the world. They see in him an icon of holiness, a model of a Christian, and a benchmark bishop for our times. They already seek his intercession in private prayer and devotion.

And so, every year now, March 24th is celebrated as Romero Day. On that day the Episcopal Church has a special Collect Prayer for 'Oscar Romero and the Martyrs of El Salvador'⁵. In 2010, explicitly in Romero's honour, the United Nations General Assembly, proclaimed March 24th to be marked every year worldwide as the 'International Day for the Right to Truth Concerning Gross Human Rights Violations and the Dignity of the Victims'⁶. The Christian Communities across Latin America saw Archbishop Romero as a prophet sent by God to witness to the truth and who was then cruelly slain; and long ago, they canonised him in their hearts – the people's saint. Brazilian Bishop Pedro Casaldaliga composed a beautiful poem entitled 'San Romero of America: Our Shepherd and Martyr'⁷ which I commend to you.

Yet in the Catholic Church he is acknowledged simply as 'Servant of God' Romero; despite the efforts of many fine pastoral leaders like your own emeritus archbishop Joseph Fiorenza, nevertheless Romero's canonisation file had been steadily gathering dust inside the Vatican for a good number of years, the formal process seemingly and inexplicably paralysed⁸.

⁴ Telephone interview with Mexican journalist, José Calderón Salazar, the Guatemalan correspondent of Excelsior newspaper, two weeks before his death.

⁵ Almighty God, you called your servant Oscar Romero to be a voice for the voiceless poor, and to give his life as a seed of freedom and a sign of hope: Grant that, inspired by his sacrifice and the example of the martyrs of El Salvador, we may without fear or favour witness to your Word who abides, your Word who is Life, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be praise and glory now and for ever. Amen

⁶ December 21 2010. <http://www.un.org/en/events/righttotruthday/>

⁷ <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2006/casaldaliga240306.html>

⁸ See the 'Super Martyrio' blog entry for March 28 2012 at <http://polycarpi.blogspot.co.uk/>

But all that has changed with the coming of Pope Francis and the arrival of what can only be described as the Vatican Spring. There is already apparent a distinctly Romero flavour to this pontificate. The centrality of the poor, and justice for the poor, in the enterprise of evangelisation is being repeatedly reasserted - and without the usual qualifying ifs and buts. And of course, last May, Pope Francis dramatically "unblocked" Romero's canonisation process - which means it had indeed been blocked. And we anticipate formal recognition of Romero's martyrdom and his sanctity very soon.

Let me briefly tell you the story of Oscar Romero - but going backwards. First his death; then his life and ministry and finally his legacy for us today.

We have to go back 34 years. It was 6.25 on the evening of Monday March 24th 1980 in the capital city, San Salvador - with the country, El Salvador, on the edge of civil war. Archbishop Romero is celebrating a memorial Mass in the chapel of the Divine Providence cancer hospital where he lived⁹. His homily is a poignant reflection on John's gospel¹⁰ - *"Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains just a single grain; but if it dies it yields a rich harvest"*.

Romero stands and speaks at the altar. It's not a long homily by Romero's standards - just ten minutes. But I have the impression he is knowingly delivering his farewell homily.

He concludes and moves to the centre of the altar to pick up the chalice and the paten with the words *"may this body broken and this blood shed for human beings encourage us to give our body and blood up to suffering and pain as Christ did - not for self but to bring justice and peace for our people..."*

He is dedicating his life to justice and peace for his people - no less!

It's certain at that moment he saw the assassin take aim through the open door of the chapel. He'd known he was going to die and he'd prepared himself for the moment. He didn't shout out fearing that those around him in the congregation would be killed too. The marksman fired and the single bullet entered his body just above the heart. He slumped to the floor at the foot of a huge crucifix with blood pouring from his mouth, nostrils and ears. Lamentations and pandemonium followed - and then later as the hours passed, melancholy, the black hole, the bleak emptiness of the Saturday in Holy Week.

Amazingly a nun on the front bench had a tiny cassette tape recorder. And so this evening, here in this Hall in Houston, we are in a position to press the button and re-play the martyrdom of Oscar Romero. Listen

⁹ The Mass was for the first anniversary of the death of Doña Sara Meardi de Pinto, the mother of Jorge Pinto, publisher and editor of El Independiente, a weekly newspaper that was one of the few voices for justice and human rights in El Salvador.

¹⁰ John 12:23-26

carefully to these 40 seconds. They are the virtually inaudible last words of Archbishop Romero and then the execution shot.¹¹

Romero was loaded into the back of a pick-up truck that became his ambulance. But he was declared dead on arrival at the hospital.

It brought to an abrupt end three tumultuous years of Romero's ministry in San Salvador, what we might call his 'public ministry' - if we draw parallels with the life of Jesus Christ. But much more than that. In one of the most Catholic countries in the world, dedicated to Christ the Saviour, the metropolitan archbishop of the capital city was shot dead in the middle of the Eucharistic celebration. The interplay of the layers of words and the kaleidoscope of symbols coming together at that moment of the Offertory of the Mass becomes a poetic symphony confected in heaven. A liturgy within a liturgy. Such choreography would have been beyond Hollywood's or even Bunuel's imagination. And so they killed him. The Good Shepherd had laid down his life for his flock.

The public execution, which is what it was, brought shock and disbelief. It was carried out by a death squad linked to the country's armed forces, close allies of the Pentagon. It was an operation planned, approved and financed (not by atheists or communists or Islamist fanatics) but by wealthy and powerful Catholic and evangelical Christian members of the military and the oligarchy.¹²

Happily in 2010, Mauricio Funes, the current President of El Salvador with tears in his eyes, offered an official apology to Romero's family and to the people of El Salvador for the complicity of the state in the assassination and in the subsequent cover-up of what was no less than a crime against humanity.¹³

Archbishop Romero had known he was going to die and on the afternoon before his killing he'd unexpectedly visited his confessor¹⁴, saying "*I want to feel clean before God.*"¹⁵ He expressed his awful fears both to his confessor and in the notes of his last retreat;¹⁶ and yet he gave himself. His life was not snatched away: rather, like Jesus, he freely offered his life for his people. We could say he died 'Eucharistically' in the second movement of the celebration of the Eucharist, an unfinished Eucharist.

¹¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IM7MTfjVYwM>

¹² Material from so-called 'Saravia Diary' seized May 7 1980 during arrest of Major Roberto D'Aubuisson, intellectual author of Romero's assassination.

¹³ US Federal Judge Oliver Wagner, Fresno, California, Court Hearing, September 2004.

¹⁴ Fr Segundo Azcue SJ

¹⁵ 'Reviving the Truth, Making It Heard' Ricardo Urioste. *Commonweal* magazine. March 23, 1990.

¹⁶ Feb 25 1980. "I feel afraid of violence. I fear the weakness of my flesh, but I ask the Lord to give me serenity and perseverance." And again "It's hard for me to accept the violent death which, in these circumstances, seems very possible. The papal nuncio of Costa Rica has warned me about imminent dangers for this coming week. My disposition should be to give my life for God, however it should end. The grace of God will enable us to live through the unknown circumstances. He aided the martyrs and, if it should be necessary that I die as they did, I will feel him very close to me at the moment of breathing my last breath. But more important than the moment of death is to give him all my life and live for him and for my own mission." *Revista Latinoamericana de Teologia*, Vol. V, n. 13, 1988.

Let's now go back to the early Romero, 'the hidden years'. Oscar Arnulfo Romero was born on 15th August 1917 - the second of eight children. Off to junior seminary at the age of 13 he went on to study in Rome leading to priestly ordination there in 1942. Romero was quiet and shy and had a stammer. He was bookish, cultured, pious and deeply spiritual. He started a doctorate on ascetics but the intensification of World War II brought his premature return to El Salvador.

There followed 25 years dedicated and exemplary service to the rural diocese of San Miguel. We would say he was a zealous and energetic pastor; he became Chancellor of the diocese, Cathedral Administrator, a respected preacher, radio journalist and editor of the diocesan newspaper. He promoted the local equivalents of the Vincent de Paul Society and alcoholics anonymous; and he used to organise a regular breakfast for the shoeshine boys. He lived a simple and austere life; he fasted and used a discipline. He was close to the people and the people loved him.

In 1967 he was appointed to be Secretary to the Bishops Conference of El Salvador in the capital city. There followed his 'blue period', seven years of pastoral famine in San Salvador. Romero became a full-time ecclesiastical bureaucrat, then assistant bishop. But he was isolated and had few friends and little involvement in pastoral activity. A fish out of water. He lived in the seminary where, importantly, the Jesuit priest, Rutilio Grande, befriended him.

But by all accounts Romero was sullen, awkward, uncommunicative and pedantic. It sounds like a mid-life or mid-ministry crisis. As assistant bishop he rarely attended the senate of priests; as editor of the archdiocesan newspaper he removed its committed social thrust and he was responsible for some full-frontal attacks on progressive ideas - with the Jesuit High School accused of disseminating Marxist propaganda dressed up as liberating education.

We now know Romero was suffering at that time from obsessive compulsive disorder; but amazingly he overcame it through psychoanalysis and cognitive therapy which he identified as an experience of grace and conversion.¹⁷ It certainly required colossal courage. I suspect that that 'violence of love' was at work there.

At the end of 1974, he was sent off to the countryside as Bishop of Santiago de Maria. Back amongst the people he inserted himself once more into grassroots pastoral activity with a punishing schedule of preaching and visitations. Meeting the people, he was astonished to discover that the legal minimum wage for the coffee pickers and day labourers was a fiction even on the plantations of distinguished mass-going Catholics. A terrible massacre of peasants in the diocese at Tres Calles shocked him.¹⁸ '*I began to see things differently*' he said as his eyes were slowly opened to the appalling plight of the campesinos.

¹⁷ Damian Zynda 'Archbishop Oscar Romero: A Disciple Who revealed the Glory of God' (University of Scranton Press 2010) P.90.

¹⁸ June 21 1975. See section 1.1.10 in Thomas Greenan's work

<http://www.romerotrust.org.uk/documents/books/pensamiento%20teologico%20mons.pdf>

But just two years later, in February 1977, he was back in San Salvador, as archbishop. It brought dismay to the clergy and the base communities of the diocese who felt sure he would halt the Church's pastoral engagement alongside the rural poor as they organised to secure social justice and, most critically, land reform. On all sides Romero was thought to be a highly conservative prelate and intolerant of the new social commitment of the clergy. He was appointed at the behest of the wealthy landed elite basically to throw the diocese into reverse gear. But they had made a serious miscalculation. Over and over again, (Is it not true?), God writes straight with crooked lines!

Simply speaking, a Church taking the side of the poor was anathema to the plantation owners and the military class who ruled El Salvador. And they were absolutely determined to hold on to their wealth, power and privileges, unchallenged by either the Church or the rural populace. They steadfastly maintained structures of exploitation on the coffee, sugar and cotton estates that were being described by the Church as 'institutionalised violence', a land tenure system where 2% of the population owned 60% of the land and where just 14 families had overwhelming dominance; where tens of thousands of landless campesinos scoured the countryside in search of a day's paid labour; where rural trade unions and peasant associations were simply outlawed; and where a flourishing agricultural export economy brought to the growing numbers of the rural poor only ever-increasing hardship, malnutrition and real hunger; where the opposition parties generally won the elections but they always lost the count; and it was nothing to do with 'hanging chads' of the Florida variety – it was systematic fraud. The response to the ensuing unrest and popular demonstrations was violent repression and the emergence of death squads which in turn provoked the birth of left wing guerrilla movements.

This was the El Salvador that Romero, as archbishop, had to come to terms with in 1977: a land of massacres and cruel killings which had a long history going back to 1932; a nation pregnant with 'civil war'; a country that was like an abscess filling up with the poison of spiralling violence; an abscess which after Romero's death burst - into bloody war. Colossal 'unloving violence'!

But the shy, orthodox, self-deprecating Romero, the man they presumed they could co-opt to embrace their reactionary and repressive agenda, he changed and was changed. He was never going to be a political pawn of coffee barons nor indeed of any grouping, be it on the right or the left.

Romero's installation as archbishop, in 1977, coincided with a massive presidential electoral fraud, followed by killings and unprecedented national tension. Romero had scarcely moved in when his Jesuit friend, Rutilio Grande, now parish priest in the town of Aguilares at the very epicentre of the social conflict in the countryside, was murdered by a

death squad, as he drove to celebrate mass in an outlying hamlet.¹⁹ His body was riddled with bullets – police bullets.

Rutilio was the first priest to be killed. There was nationwide outrage. Rutilio had preached fearlessly the fundamental rights of the sugar cane cutters. He had given hope and solace to the peasant organisations. He had said that if Jesus Christ returned to preach the gospel in El Salvador he would be expelled from the country as a foreign agitator and a subversive rabble-rouser. Rutilio Grande was Romero's precursor, his John the Baptist.

It's clear to me now after studying Romero's whole life, his papers and writings that this murder was not, as we first thought, a Damascus experience, a blinding flash which turned Romero round 180 degrees. Rather, as he knelt and prayed over Rutilio's body, it was Romero's Gethsemane moment. In this Gethsemane he saw in his mind's eye where it would inevitably lead him, if he followed this through to its logical conclusion – and he assented.

Romero was changed. It was his option for the poor, his fundamental commitment, the place from which henceforward he would view and pray and judge the suffering reality of El Salvador, the place where he would "do" his theology and live a spirituality which recognised Christ, the suffering servant, the pierced one, there amongst the poor campesinos. Ten days after this epiphany he wrote with great foresight that "my new post has put me on the road to Calvary".²⁰

Romero's initial disbelief at Rutilio's killing became prophetic determination. He closed the Catholic high schools for three days. He suspended all participation in official government ceremonies until the assassins would be brought to justice. He opened a diocesan legal aid office to document all the killings and disappearances, the rapes and the assaults, and to give pastoral support to the families and communities affected. But crucially he decreed that, the following Sunday, the churches of the diocese be closed and all the masses cancelled. He summoned his priests and the people to a single mass, the 'misa unica', which he would celebrate in front of the Cathedral.

On the day, Romero preached²¹ eloquently to a crowd of over 100,000, a passionate witness to the ugly truth. "*Anyone who touches one of my priests touches me*", he said. This single Eucharist of the diocese, gathered round its pastor, was a spectacular sign of communion and Church; solidarity at a time of great sorrow - the largest demonstration of church unity in living memory.

Afterwards the anger of the land-owning and commercial class, the military and the Nuncio became palpable. They felt betrayed. Their newly recruited gamekeeper had metamorphosed into a poacher. And, like with

¹⁹ Travelling in his VW vehicle from the parish in Aguilares to El Paisnal. Killed together with 72 year-old Manuel Solorzano and 16 year-old Nelson Lemus

²⁰ Letter to Bishop Alfonso Lopez Trujillo, March 23 1977 in reply to his of 4 March.

²¹ <http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/index.php?nuc=homilies&item=14&func=view&id=19>

Jesus so early in his public ministry,²² from that moment on, they began to plot against him.

For his part Romero visited dozens of different communities and parishes and heard their stories, their joys and their sorrows. People queued up to see him in his office and he listened till late into the night. Repression intensified and was documented; as too the kidnappings, church occupations and strikes organised on the left. No real dialogue proved possible with the government. Statements after meetings that did take place sought to manipulate Romero. The national press belonged to the same wealthy families and they censored out his concerns but they did carry pages of advertisements from ghost or fake organisations (like the Companions of Christ the King, the Association of Loyal Catholic Women) denouncing the clergy and the Church and insulting Romero with the same contemptible arrogance that characterises some of our nastier Catholic bloggers in Britain and the United States today.

In case there is any doubt about the reality of the persecution of the Church by El Salvador's military let's turn to the occupation of Aguilares, which came months after the killing of Fr Rutilio. The church was taken over as a barracks and desecrated - with the tabernacle destroyed, the profanation of the Blessed Sacrament and the sacred vessels used as urinals. Romero was barred from entering when he tried to reclaim the church and was not allowed in for weeks. But he finally got back to re-consecrate the Church; and to mark the return of the sacrament he fearlessly organised Mass, followed by a Corpus Christi procession round the town square. His way was blocked by a fully armed and threatening military presence but he refused to halt. And the population watched from the sidewalk - terrified for him and for themselves! It was an extraordinary Eucharistic event that brought spiritual nourishment, physical protection and new hope to a people in despair²³.

Romero's own space was his cathedral; and with other channels closed to him, from his pulpit, there at the Sunday mass, he spoke the truth and denounced the evil taking place, week in week out, and he thereby brought hope and consolation to all his people.

The homilies were legendary - and the whole country listened by radio. Romero's preaching and teaching ministry was centred on these weekly homilies, often lasting more than an hour. They were major occasions to interweave catechesis and communication of the social reality. He carefully almost surgically unpacked the scripture readings and interpreted them in the context of El Salvador.

*We cannot segregate God's word from the historical reality in which it is proclaimed. It would not then be God's word. It would be history, it would be a pious book, a Bible that is just a book in our library. It becomes God's word because it vivifies, enlightens, contrasts, repudiates, praises what is going on today in this society.*²⁴

²² Mark 3:6

²³ There is a poignant dramatization of this event in the 1989 'Romero' movie, starring Raul Julia.

²⁴ Homily November 27 1977

In the second part of the homily he applied that Word of God to the specific and complex circumstances of the time, reviewing the most important events of the week and giving a prophetic judgement on them. First came the good news of the week – the gatherings and meetings, the celebrations and patronal feasts, and the visitors and letters of solidarity. Then the bad news. Incident by incident, atrocity by atrocity, he named the victims, all the victims, what had happened, where and when and who was responsible. He sought justice, supported recompense and offered pastoral care. This methodology was the forerunner of Truth Commissions that would emerge in future years around the world.

He was the voice of the voiceless, a word that accuses and generates hope, seeking reconciliation, inviting a change of heart, a faithful witness to truth in a society of cover-up and lies. And the thunderous applause which frequently punctuated the homilies was the people's '**Amen**'.

But alongside his preaching and his exhortations for peace and the renunciation of violence, he offered the services of the archdiocese for efforts of mediation especially in the case of labour or land disputes or in the case of kidnappings. He strived to promote meaningful dialogue as the alternative to the cacophony of vile diatribe; and most important of all he responded pastorally and compassionately to the victims of terror and violence, whomsoever had been the perpetrators.

Confronted with an avalanche of human rights violations, in the midst of horrific conflict and impending civil war, Romero struggled, ceaselessly, for peace through justice in El Salvador. Loving violence constantly wrestling with unloving violence.

*Let us not tire of preaching love, it is the force that will overcome the world. Though we see that waves of violence succeed in drowning the fire of Christian love, love must win out: it is the only thing that can*²⁵

*A civilisation of love is not sentimentality, it is justice and truth. A civilisation of love that did not demand justice for people would not be true civilisation.....Because of this, it is only a caricature of love when we try to patch up with charity what is owed in justice, when we cover with an appearance of benevolence what we are failing in social justice. True love means demanding what is just*²⁶.

*I will not tire of declaring that if we really want an effective end to violence we must remove the violence that lies at the root of all violence: structural violence, social injustice, exclusion of citizens from the governance of the country, and repression. All this is what constitutes the primal cause, from which the rest flows naturally*²⁷.

Romero's messages were "no" to the killings of the right; "no" to the violence of the left;

*'This is what we preach; No to vengeance, No to class struggle, No to violence'*²⁸

²⁵ Homily September 25 1977

²⁶ Homily April 12 1979

²⁷ Homily September 23 1979

²⁸ Homily May 8 1977

'Violence is produced not only by those who kill but by those who urge to kill. Violence is criminal, even in those who merely do not do whatever is possible to uncover its origins. They are sinners as much as those who point the weapons to kill'.

Bringing about peace among the warring factions in El Salvador was not a simple matter. A centuries-long history of repression and exploitation was at long last being questioned and resisted. The only way to avoid violence, he insisted, was by means of sustained, brutally honest dialogue on the part of government, private capital, trade unions, popular organisations, and rebels.

But the violence intensified - remorselessly; and Romero devoted a substantial part of both his 3rd and 4th Pastoral Letters to an examination of violence – distinguishing between the arbitrary or repressive violence of the state which uses brute force, and the structural or institutional violence that works through mechanisms that are legal but just as brutal in their effects on the people; and then the terrorist violence of the right and the left; which is different again from insurrectional violence and from the violence of legitimate defence.

Inspired by the gospel, he said, the church feels itself driven to seek peace before all else. But the peace that the church urges is the work of justice. Therefore its judgments on the violence that disturbs the peace cannot ignore the demands of justice. There are many different judgments, just as there are many different forms of violence. The church cannot just state, in a simplistic fashion, that it condemns every kind of violence²⁹.

And when the church decries revolutionary violence, it cannot forget that institutionalized violence also exists, and that the desperate violence of oppressed persons is not overcome with one-sided laws, with weapons, or with superior force. Instead, as the pope says, revolutionary violence must be prevented by courageous self-sacrifice, by giving up many comforts.³⁰ In fact by the violence of love.

Whilst rejecting violence time after time: 'Violence is not Christian, violence is not human, nothing violent can long endure' Romero doggedly pressed for profound, urgent, but non-violent changes. He said "yes" to political organisation; "yes" to dialogue; "yes" to social justice for the poor; "yes" to human rights for all Salvadorans; and "yes" to the practice of compassion.

But let's stand back and just think about all that Archbishop Romero had to confront over those three years. Here is a list that I've made.

He faced and sought to respond

- to pervasive and extreme poverty;
- to paramilitary killings of community leaders;
- to peasant massacres and the indiscriminate shooting of urban demonstrators by the security forces;
- to the torture and disappearance of political prisoners;
- to the decapitation and mutilation of death squad victims;
- to the assassination of six of his priests and dozens of catechists;

²⁹ Fourth Pastoral Letter, part 3.

³⁰ Homily February 12 1978

- to the deportation of foreign clergy;
- to the desecration of churches and their tabernacles;
- to the threat from the White Warriors Union to exterminate all the Jesuits in the country;
- to the bombings of the diocesan radio station and printing press;
- to the discovery of a suitcase of dynamite placed behind the altar at his Sunday mass;
- to the corruption of the supreme court and the judiciary;
- to the suspension of habeas corpus and constitutional guarantees through a so-called 'Law of Public Order';
- to a military-civilian junta installed by military coup;
- to the kidnapping and execution by armed leftist groups of local and foreign businessmen; and of government ministers;
- to the occupations of churches, the cathedral, embassies and government ministries by popular movements;
- to conflictive and paralysing strikes;
- to continuous campaigns of slander and defamation in the press;
- & to death threats from both the right and the left.

He preached and he spoke out trying to find the words to convey the horror of what was happening in a deeply Catholic country which he said had come to resemble the dominion of hell³¹. His statements in retrospect seem mild.

*My job is to go around picking up the dead bodies of the victims of the persecution of the Church.*³²

*I do not understand Mr President how you can declare yourself before the nation, Catholic by upbringing and by conviction; and yet allow these unspeakable outrages on the part of the security forces in a country we call civilised and Christian.*³³

In February 1980 Romero sent an Open Letter to President Jimmy Carter asking for a halt to US military assistance to El Salvador which he said was being used to kill innocent campesinos – in other words it was directly aiding and abetting the repressive violence of the state.³⁴ This was a momentous letter, a wake-up call to the US churches to intensify their solidarity, their lobbying and their campaigning to block military aid to the Salvadoran regime.

In those last weeks of his life, El Salvador was teetering on the brink of civil war. The threats and insults against Romero became so intense a fever existed; Romero sensed his death was imminent. He overcame his deep-seated fears. He accepted it with great equanimity. He prepared himself and went like a lamb to the slaughter.

He was not simply caught in the cross-fire; nor was he some kind of mad episcopal suicide bomber. It was a given-life – a free gift with consequences – not a taken-life with fearfulness of victimhood. No

³¹ Homily July 1 1979

³² <http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/index.php?nuc=homilies&item=28&func=view&id=19>

³³ Romero letter to Molina, May 23 1977

³⁴ Read out in the homily on February 17 1980

wonder he is placed alongside Gandhi and Martin Luther King as one of the 20th century's greatest apostles of peace.

Many people had anticipated his violent demise– but especially so after his penultimate homily on March 23rd.³⁵ At the Mass that Sunday, the day before he died, in an extraordinary sermon, he tackled the most difficult question that was insistently being put to him - how should the ordinary soldiers respond when put under orders to kill and massacre? At this desperate crisis juncture Romero felt he could not evade the issue - however outrageous his intervention might seem to the military. He concluded the homily with these words:-

*"I would like to appeal in a special way to the army's enlisted men, and in particular to the ranks of the National Guard and the police. Brothers:You kill your own campesino brothers and sisters. Before an order to kill that a man may give, God's law must prevail: Thou shalt not kill! No soldier is obliged to obey an order against the law of God....It is time to obey your consciences rather than the orders of sin. The Church....cannot remain silent before such abominations....In the name of God, therefore and in the name of this suffering people, whose cries reach up to heaven, I beg you, I beseech you, I order you in the name of God: **Stop the repression!**"*

He had pronounced his own death sentence. This homily was arguably as provocative to the political establishment as Jesus' action in overturning the tables of the buyers and sellers in the Temple. And Romero knew it; he had discussed it at length with his closest circle of advisers; all else had failed to stop the inexorable slaughter and the march to war. It was virtually his last card.

The military high command read it as incitement to mutiny and an already-existing plan for Romero's assassination was activated. On the Monday evening, the turbulent priest fell. In the wealthy suburbs of San Salvador champagne and fireworks greeted the news. It was their 'Te Deum'. They had felt under siege. They had convinced themselves that international communism through landless peasants and urban slum dwellers, enrolled in popular organisations, were out to destroy their world. They were ready to use any and every conceivable violence to protect themselves and their material assets. They'd never ever accepted that action for justice is a constitutive dimension of living the gospel – that was pure Marxist heresy! The violence of love – garbage! So they killed him.

.....

However, as the Psalmist tells us, 'The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone'. Or more fittingly "the bishop whom the oligarchy rejected has become the 'spiritual guide of the nation'," And, with apologies to Shakespeare's Julius Caesar he was the 'noblest Salvadoran of them all'.

³⁵ Full text in 'Voice of the Voiceless' Orbis Books, 1985. English text plus audio also accessible on <http://www.romerotrust.org.uk/index.php?nuc=homilies&item=162&func=view&id=22>

Archbishop Romero inhabited the Word of God; he savoured it, he came to love it, and he allowed himself to be inhabited by that Word of God. At the same time he inhabited the world of the poor, he listened to their stories, he saw their suffering up close and he shared their joy, he smelt their fear and he was moved to the very core of his being as he allowed himself to be inhabited by that world of the poor. So he inhabited and was inhabited by the Word of God and simultaneously he inhabited and was inhabited by the world of the poor. It was a beautiful synthesis. He preached the Word of God and made it real; he gave it legs in the unremitting pursuit of justice, reconciliation and peace in the world of his poor. It was a ministry of 'loving violence' to respond to a world of overwhelming 'unloving violence'. That, for me, is the essence of Oscar Romero, the spirit of Romero.

And Romero's spirit is alive in the Church today. He is recalled and remembered in a whole series of Homeric epithets (similar to those when you describe Texas as 'The Lone Star State' or 'The Buckle of the Bible Belt'). Those epithets, those titles, articulate Romero's living legacy and in a way they help us understand it. They can be used as a litany to salute our putative Saint Romero - each followed by the response 'Presente' meaning 'Here Among Us'. So let's try it now: I'll proclaim the title and then we all respond 'Presente!' OK?

Oscar Arnulfo Romero y Galdames
Bishop, Prophet and Martyr
Icon of Holiness
Microphone of God
Homily of Jesus Christ
Option for the Poor Incarnate
Ecumenical Companion
Scourge of Injustice
Apostle of Peace
Zealous Pastor for the Little People
Unflinching Courage
Word of Truth amidst Cover-up and Lies
Beacon of Solidarity
Defender of Human Rights
Evangeliser for All Seasons
Voice of the Voiceless in Life
Named of the Nameless in Death
The Greatest Salvadoran of Them All
Spiritual Guide of the Nation
Father of the Latin American Church
Credible Witness of the Resurrection
San Romero de Las Americas

But of course there are many ways to undermine Romero's legacy³⁶. Some try to domesticate the challenges posed by his pastoral ministry by

³⁶ I am indebted to Barbara E. Reid O.P. and her paper, 'Romero the Preacher', which I have drawn on in this section on Romero's legacy.

describing him as 'a good man', a sort of male version of Mother Theresa, and thereby taming his radically prophetic word and obscuring its true impact. Others have suggested he was 'a saint for his day' - but a day long behind us and therefore we can safely ignore his challenge to incarnate the gospel today. Still others raise him on high as a sort of 'superman' beyond anything we could possibly imitate today. An effective way to kill the prophet. But Romero was simply an ordinary man who did extraordinary things. A man who changed and bravely allowed himself to change. A man who was utterly radical and yet utterly orthodox.

So perhaps we should ask ourselves what remembering Archbishop Romero really means and should mean today in my country and yours. The fundamental Christian model of remembering is 'Do this in memory of me'. For the Church to remember Archbishop Romero must first mean, within this twenty-first century context, to continue his work not only loving the poor but actually defending the poor; pursuing justice for the crucified peoples of our world; and taking risks for peace and the kingdom of God.

And so Oscar Romero lives today in the prophetic peoples of today's church - in those who allow themselves to embrace and to be embraced by those who are made poor and who then strive diligently for their justice cause. I think of Catholic Worker houses like Casa Juan Diego in Houston, the many Jean Vanier-inspired L'Arche communities, and those churches, chapels and NGOs that dare to set up shelters for trafficked people, for refugees and undocumented migrants. That moving film, 'Twelve Years a Slave', as it collects its Oscar awards and receives our tearful approbation, should goad us to throw light on (and then stamp out) the dark and dirty trade in people - human beings who have become indebted then enslaved, abused and exploited in prostitution, domestic servitude and other demeaning labour - even now in 2014. And many find no escape even after 12 years. 18,000 humans are trafficked to the US each and every year³⁷ - many from Central America and many through Texas.

Romero has shown us all that the 'preferential option for the poor' (taking the side of the poor) is not just some meaningless rhetoric from the late 20th century. He lived it. And so he challenges us - and if we truly commit ourselves then this gospel option for the poor is do-able, but it requires conversion, the 'violence of love'!

Let us pray that in our societies experiencing growing inequality, with gaping holes in our welfare safety nets; and in this globalised world too often characterised by globalised superficiality and globalised indifference to the plight of the crucified peoples, Oscar Romero may inspire us and guide us. So that, with discernment, courage and wisdom, we too, like him, may become genuine apostles of peace, effective advocates for the excluded, and credible witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Many thanks.

³⁷ According to US State Department figures in the Trafficking in Persons Report.

Post script:

This evening, as always, I have drawn on earlier presentations on Romero that I have delivered elsewhere. It is salutary therefore at the close of my presentation to quote a review attributed to the great 18th century man of letters, Dr Samuel Johnson: He wrote: 'Your manuscript is both good and original. Unfortunately the part that is good is not original, and the part that is original is not good!'

Julian Filochowski.

February 27th 2014.