

The Archbishop Romero Trust

Archbishop Romero Lecture 2015 by Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga SDB

'From Romero to Francis: The Joy & the Tensions of Becoming a Poor Church with the Poor'

Thank you, thank you very much, and good evening. I will talk from the heart not from the paper, and first of all I want to thank you, to thank the Archbishop Romero Trust for inviting me, because as Julian [Filochowski] said, this is a very particular year since one of the steps of the goals in the Romero Trust has been achieved by the beatification. We need the second step, and so that is why we must concentrate on that, and especially pray.

I recall in 2003, Pope John Paul II came to Guatemala, for the canonisation of Hermano Pedro de Betancourt, a lay man who was a missionary from the very beginning of the colonial times in Guatemala. We were at a massive Mass in an old field in Guatemala, and at a certain moment there was a banner raised that said, '¿Y Romero, cuando?', 'And Romero, when?' because that was in the heart of all the people. But the calendar of God is very different to our calendars. We live in a society where we would like everything as fast as possible, and we are not happy with the speed of our internet, we would like to have the fibre optic, and all the devices that will give us things immediately. One of the things we learn from the Gospel is that the time of God is different, but it is there. And it was this pope, in this year, the one that was chosen by Divine Providence, in order to achieve this goal we have been wishing for such a long time.

The title you gave me is 'From Romero to Francis: The Joy and Tensions of Becoming a Poor Church with the Poor'. I would like to change a little the itinerary, but it's the same. I would like to say 'From Francis to Romero'. Because on that unforgettable 13th March 2013, when Francis was elected, all of us were anxious in the Sistine Chapel, what name will he choose? Because no one of us had the smallest idea. And when he spoke and he said, answering to the Dean of the College, 'What name do you want to give yourself?' and he said 'Francis', there was an internal commotion. Nobody in eight centuries ever thought to be called as pope, Francis. And he immediately said, 'I will take the name Francis because of St Francis of Assisi, who made the option for the poor, and I want a poor church for the poor'.

Of course that was the beginning of another journey. Of a man that made his vows of poverty as a Jesuit, and lived like that all his life, and continued doing it with lessons we have to learn every day. Francis is a coherent man, and you know that we just heard that the time of Romero has come, and of course, it was like that. Because in the very beginning, I was asking the pope, 'Tell me, what do you think?' 'He has to be beatified', he told me. Now of course the process is a big process. I saw all the process in a book like this [gestures a large book], with all the kinds of testimonies and things that is undeniable, undeniable.

So, from Francis to Romero, gave the road from Romero to Francis. I only met [Romero] twice, very briefly. I was ordained as a bishop in December '78. In March '79 we were both in a big meeting in Santo Domingo about the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. He was deeply devoted of the Sacred Heart. And that meeting was as a consequence of the conference of Puebla. We wanted to give more soul and more practice to the popular religiosity of our people, and that was the reason for the seminar in Santo Domingo. But we couldn't talk, we were so many, I was only a young bishop, an auxiliary, so I was just another participant.

Then, one month before his killing, we were in Panama in a meeting with the seminarians. It was CELAM (the Conference of Bishops of Latin America) and the seminarians of Central America, and [Romero] passed by coming back from Belgium where he had received an honorary degree from the University of Leuven, and he

came and he passed by just to say hello to all of us. I had the occasion of greeting him but we couldn't talk. Then, one month after, we learned the news of his killing, and then my encounter with him began more deep[ly].

How? Because at that time after his killing there was a big movement, a violent movement and a persecution of the Church in El Salvador. I was assigned as apostolic administrator to a diocese in the border with Guatemala and El Salvador, the Diocese of Copan. That very day, on 24th March 1980, a big number of refugees of El Salvador came to Honduras, and I was assigned to that diocese and those were my first pupils and my first sons and daughters, because my first visit was to those camps, looking for help to support them. And they had Romero in their hearts, and in their lives, and so I was learning about Archbishop Romero from the people, from the poor that had just escaped.

I recall that was in 1981, the poor Diocese of Santa Rosa de Copan had to collect help to support 20,000 refugees because the UN was indifferent, until 1982 they started [their support]. The High Commissioner for Refugees started taking care, but we had to continue the service of these people, and it was under very difficult conditions, because you know there was a civil war in El Salvador, there was a guerrilla movement that was very active and crossed our borders, and our military were too tough. And of course they said that I was a subversive bishop because I was serving the refugees, and I said: the refugees are Christ who is suffering. So I was praying with this beautiful psalm you chose for our prayer tonight, Psalm 33, 'The Lord hears the cry of the poor'. But many people didn't want to listen to that cry.

Finally, you know the story, I am not going to repeat it, finally the peace arrived. But the option for the poor didn't change. It's very old. It goes back to the times of the prophets in the Old Testament. It comes through the life of Our Lord Jesus Christ. They were different options for the poor. Even in the Gospel, we see the option for the poor without the poor. You remember the scene in the Gospel when that woman was cleansing the feet of Our Lord with her crying, and also anointing the feet of Our Lord with very costly perfume, and there was one of the apostles who made the option for the poor without Christ, because he said 'Too much money expended in this perfume! Why didn't you sell it in order to give the money for the poor?' And what was the comment? He said that because he didn't care for the poor, he was only looking for money, because he was the treasurer of the apostolic college and he was a thief!

The option for the poor without Christ! How many people in history have made this kind of option? We see it all the time that people in the name of the poor are stealing what belongs to the poor.

1981 was the year when CELAM, the Bishops' Council of Latin America was making the first compendium of social doctrine of the Church. It was ignored later on. I was then a member of the Commission for Social Action, it was called at that time; its president was an extraordinary bishop from Peru, Bishop Luis Bambarén, a Jesuit bishop who was our chief. And with him we were working on that with two very good Jesuits, one from France who worked in Chile, now he is dead already, Pierre Bigot, the founder of the Institute of Social Doctrine of the Church for Latin America, and another Jesuit from Brazil, Fernando Bastos de Ávila, who was the founder of IBRADES, Instituto Brasileiro de Desenvolvimento, in Portuguese.

Okay, these two big men were writing down all the efforts of CELAM, and that first compendium, *Fe Christiana y Compromiso Social*, Christian Faith and Social Engagement, was like a pioneer, then later it was ignored because it was uncomfortable. And now, with difficulties, you will find that book in book stores or in the libraries of seminaries. It was boycotted. Because those years were the years of the *doctrina de la seguridad nacional*, that was an ideology started by the military from Brazil in order to make terrible years of repression, killing and social injustice. But that book was inspired especially in the conferences of Medellín and Puebla, those big conferences of the episcopate of Latin America.

Medellín was after Vatican II, because the conference of Medellín was started in order to put Vatican II into the context of Latin America, and in Vatican II you find this clear option for the poor. Medellín was enhancing that preferential option for the poor. What big difficulties we had after Medellín! We were accused of being a Marxist Church, and there was a tough persecution, and we were ignored many times. But what was the origin of that? The big social injustices especially in our countries of Central America.

Then came Puebla. What a struggle in the conference of Puebla to preserve the preferential option for the poor. There was a big number of bishops who said 'This will be misinterpreted. We have to put only option for the poor'. There was a big struggle to preserve the 'preferential' option for the poor. Then came the Santo Domingo conference, and then, especially now, Aparecida.

Aparecida was the resurrection of this preferential option for the poor, and who was the chief of the Commission of Redaction of the document of Aparecida? Jorge Borgoglio, the Cardinal Archbishop of Buenos Aires. I had the privilege of working with him in that commission, and I can give the witness that this man was not redacting the document, he was putting his life into that document, because he had been like that all the time. He is not now, as Pope, doing something new. He is just in continuation, doing what he has been doing all his life.

I will give you two small examples that struck me very much. After the election of the Pope – by the way, I had a fracture in my right fibula one day before the conclave. I was in the Caritas office recording a message for Lent, we were in the chapel, and I didn't see a small step and I fell, wow! There was a fracture but I didn't know, and it didn't look like it had, so I continued working all day. In the evening I went to the clinic in the Vatican, and the x-ray department was closed. The doctor examined me, and touching me, saying, 'there is no fracture, we will put some plastic there very tight' and I spent 18 days pre-conclave and the conclave with a fracture. But that's only a small thing!

That Jorge Borgoglio three days after his election called me by telephone and he said, 'what are you doing on Sunday after the Angelus?' and I said 'Holy Father, whatever you tell me.' 'Come, come to have lunch with me'.

That very day he already he had the commission of the C8 Cardinals ready, and he was telling me 'I want to make a commission like this, this this...' and he had all the names there to coordinate the commission. I said 'Holy Father, you have thought in the least of this Cardinal' and he said 'No, no, I want you to be there'. Okay, thank you very much. And then all of a sudden there came a Bishop from Argentina who was coming to say farewell, and the pope said like this, 'Listen, this is the ring of my cardinalite, take it to the museum in Buenos Aires'. Then he took another one. 'This is the ring that John Paul II gave me when he made me a bishop. Give it to my successor.' 'And you, Holy Father?' 'I have this'. A simple one, from the very beginning.

Then his secretary told me that he'd asked him to send him the other pair of shoes he had, because he only had two and only brought one to the conclave. And the secretary went, and when he saw the shoes, he said, 'I cannot send those shoes, they are in such a bad condition, but if I buy new ones for him he will not wear them'. So what did he do? He sent them to be repaired and that is the other pair of shoes he has. He didn't make the option for the poor only from the lips, he made it from the bottom of his heart because he has been like that all the time.

And so as the option for the poor we have been looking at many things. It would be long, we could take the whole night to talk about this, because his ordinary life is made like this, but not only, but especially in the option for the poor in Francis' attitudes are the people.

For instance, many people are angry on Wednesdays in his entourage, because all the audiences last one hour more than the ordinary audiences. Why? Because after the speeches, after greetings, after the blessings he goes until the end of the Via della Conciliazione to greet every single people he can greet. And this is option for the poor. This is really option for the people from the very beginning.

What was his first visit? Everybody thought he will go to Milan, he will go to Venice. He went to that little island where 300 people died in a boat trying to reach Lampedusa. That was his first visit, in order to see the poorest of the poor, from the very beginning. And I was thinking, you know, this is what the Church needed.

I was remembering the story of St Francis when he went to pray to San Damiano, and the image of Christ there was telling him 'repair my church'. At the beginning, St Francis understood it was a matter of repairing this chapel, he was looking for timber and other materials. But then he understood there was another kind of reparation. This is what Pope Francis took from the very beginning as his task. To repair not buildings, to repair the relationship as a shepherd with the sheep. And this is what he has been doing these two years.

In the reparations for my Church was the reparation for the cause of the beatification of Oscar Romero. Because this cause was started, was promoted, was going down the road, but then it was frozen. It was frozen, it was in a freezer. And so when the Pope came he called the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and said, 'I need this cause to go on'. Of course there was nothing against him in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, there were the letters and everything, so the process went to the Congregation of the Saints, and so we got 23rd May 2015, the big feast of faith in San Salvador.

I was there. All the bishops of Central America went, all of us came. There were two or three that for health reasons didn't come, but the rest, we were all there. I got the privilege to celebrate the vigil. We say in Spanish 'pasada por agua' because it was raining all evening, my goodness, but nobody was moving. They were just there the whole night, and then the day of the beatification was really a sign from heaven – there was a big ring around the sun with all the colours there, a rainbow, and people cannot deny that. There are a lot of photographs of that, and people cannot say that this is false, that this was a manipulation. I couldn't see it because I was in a place with a roof, but I saw everyone was looking to the sky, I thought my goodness, what's happening, I thought it was drones because TV companies now use drones; but no, it was that. These are signs of God for the humble people.

Romero was humiliated even after his death, humiliated, attacked, and well, with the process that was frozen; but with humility I'm going to quote a very beautiful testimony that shows from humility comes the grandeur of a person. From humility, from the very bottom, this is the same thing in Pope Francis. Everyone said he's too old to be elected, he would not be elected, he's too old; he was one of the favourites in the past conclave but not now, he's too old now. These are the answers of the Lord, the gifts of Divine Providence. The time of Francis was not in 2005, the time of Francis was 2015. And this is, I can tell you, a new hope for the option for the poor.

In our commission for the reformation of the curia, many people were saying 'Okay, this commission is asleep, we don't see results.' Okay, again, the same speed that people want and the calendar of our Lord is quite different. From the very beginning, we went to the Apostolic Palace, I have to tell you that on that lunch we had together on 17 March, he told me 'I went up to the apartment. I didn't like it. That's a prison,' he said. 'I need the people. That is like a funnel in reverse – people enter by drops. I need the people. I will live in Santa Marta, what do you think?' 'Holy Father, I've never thought about this, but I think it's going to be a good thing!' And it is indeed, because you go to Santa Marta and you see him at Mass in the morning with nearly 80 people, every single morning in the chapel at Santa Marta, and he gives a beautiful meditation. He wakes up at 4.30 in the morning, and after taking care of himself, from 5.15 to 7 o'clock he is in prayer, and then he goes to celebrate the Holy Mass, and then in the evening from 7 o'clock to 8 o'clock that is his sacred hour, he is in contemplation and prayer. That's where his words come from, from the Holy Spirit. I am convinced of that. He is a contemplative. When he preaches in Santa Marta, he doesn't have speeches, written speeches, no no, he lets his heart come out and that's why he understood clearly that it was necessary to revive the option for the poor, and he takes this everywhere.

Now you were maybe following the latest trip to the United States. There was a lot of fear in many people, there was a lot of fear in lay people and in bishops and priests. 'This visit will be very difficult. This visit will be polemic. This visit here, this visit that.' I was asking the Holy Father in June when we had the meeting of the Commission, 'what do you think about the visit?' 'I am very much at peace because I will take the Gospel there'. That was all. And you saw him speaking with difficulty in English, because he has not the gift of languages, but telling the truth in a way that nobody could reject it, and with a lot of wisdom but insisting in this theme [of the preferential option for the poor].

I can tell you one part of my preferential option for the poor which was the most difficult one. When I was General Secretary of CELAM I got a commission from the General Assembly, it was 1991. We are not prepared for the conference of Santo Domingo because the church in Latin America has no dialogue with the world of finances and economy. We started searching for an economic institution in Latin America that would be willing to have a dialogue with the bishops. Nobody wanted to! They said 'the bishops know nothing about economy'. I said 'but we know about humanity. And economy is for human beings, not human beings for economy'. Well at one time I decided I will study economics by myself, and I did it. And next time when they told me that bishops

do not know about economy, I said yes, we do, we know. And this was how I was able to enter into the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the Interamerican Development Bank. That was difficult, you know. In Italian they say, *puno de ferro*, because the commission was to try to have alleviation of the external debt of the poorest countries, because John Paul II, when he started the letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, he wrote there that in the spirit of the jubilee year in the Bible, why not the international institutions of finance could pardon or alleviate the external debt. Those were ten very difficult years, I can tell you. It's easier to go and start a project among the poor than it is to talk to these people in the cathedral of money in Washington. But after ten years we got it, in the summit of the G8 at Gleneagles, Scotland, the external debt of 27 poor countries was cancelled.

This is also the option for the poor, and the speeches of Pope Francis are clearly option for the poor. For the forgotten ones of society, for those who are misplaced, for those who are discarded as he says, and all the time he was seriously attacked by some economists. And I will give you a very good witness of Joseph Stiglitz, who was the former big economist of the World Bank, who says that Pope Francis is right. In the United States there were publications that said he's a communist. Some were asking is Francis truly a Catholic pope? Can you imagine that? Because, of course, it's the story of the golden calf, again, the same story. Those who are worshipping gold and money cannot accept any option for the poor. But we have to continue because the option for the poor is not only making what we did as Caritas, and Caritas continues, and what CAFOD does here in Great Britain. I have to publicly thank Clare (Dixon) and Julian because they have worked hard in CAFOD, but CAFOD needs support. We decided at the last Caritas assembly to hold it in Jordan and we were strongly criticised. Why? Because it's the option for the poor. In Jordan we found more than one million refugees from Syria, more than one million refugees from Iraq, people suffering terribly. Treated in a very good way, I have to say that the Jordanian government has been very respectful with their refugee camps, but suffering because they could not work, they could not even drive a car. You found engineers, you found architects, you found doctors who were there. 'We don't want to be parasites, we want to work,' they say. And we found a United Nations that was founded in order to support the poor, and nothing happens with this terrible war. Pope Francis has been raising his voice, as Romero did, in order to be near to this. He told us, and the document of Aparecida said that... by the way, could I make a maybe improper question? Do you know the document of Aparecida? You should. It's not only related to a church far away from the ocean in Latin America. It's a very good opportunity to give more life to the church everywhere. You know what Pope Francis is doing? He got the document to be translated into many languages, and when he has visits from the chiefs of states, he gives it to them to read.

In the Aparecida document he says we need a Church that goes out, not closed down inside its own walls, even if they are stone walls. We need a Church 'in exit' that will go out and look for its people who are far away. Of course we have the people in the flock, it's very well, but as well as taking care of the people who are here, we need to go out. We need a Samaritan church, and I love this term because the church of the Pharisees what not a Samaritan church, the church of the Levites was not a Samaritan church. The Samaritan church was of a man who was the stranger, who was far away from the cult of the Hebrews, but was a man with heart who was feeling compassion for that poor man who was assaulted and dying. We need a Samaritan church as necessary to go out. The church should be, Pope Francis said, like a field hospital, a beautiful image. Because what is a field hospital? It is not a big construction in the middle of the big cities. A field hospital is a very simple thing. But amidst those who are suffering, those who are crying, those who have wounds. And our people in our Church have a lot of wounds that have not been healed and so we need to be that kind of hospital, to be near to the people who suffer, try to help them heal from their wounds.

Okay, what about Romero? His prophetic message was that our duty as Christians is to bring the values of the Gospel to life. We have to put our principles into practice, he said. After 30 years from his death and after his recent beatification, Romero's life and murder is a challenge to us, a challenge to all believers. And I would ask whether we are prepared to actually put that power, the one that comes from following the Lord's way of life, at the service of others? And to fight for justice for the world's poor and marginalised, whatever the cost is for our Church? In this particular time that we live in, it is so important to understand and follow what he once said. Romero on 27th November 1977: '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 wills to turn weapons into sickles for work.' A couple of months before, on September 25th 1977, he said 'Let us not tire of preaching love. It is the force that will overcome the world. Let us not tire of preaching love, though we see waves of violence at sea drowning the fire of Christian love, love must win out, it is the only thing that can.'

The only thing that can win out, are not just words since Romero was a man of God always, and not only when circumstances required it. And his humility and confidence, his sense of God in God's will is calling us to conversion, but also to action.

And here I would like to quote, *Laudato Si* because it is one of the best options for the poor that our Pope Francis has ever written. I am witness that from the very beginning of his papacy he wanted this encyclical letter, and I recall telling him, 'Holy Father, when are you going to publish the synodal exhortation?' after the Synod on Evangelisation, you will remember. And he said, 'Listen, if there is something new, I will publish it, and if not we have *Evangelii Nuntiandi*' and it was true, and he didn't publish an exhortation of the synod, he made a new one totally, including some of the propositions of the last synod, but it was like a programme of government in this papacy, *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Joy of the Gospel. And then of course there was an encyclical letter on the desk. He said 'I need to publish it' because it was the trilogy of Pope Benedict – love, hope, and faith was missing. But anyway, he published that encyclical letter that was an encyclical of four hands, as we play on the piano, it's beautiful to play four hands. But truly his own first encyclical letter is *Laudato Si*. I am witness to the great criticism that the Pope had before the encyclical was published – I said 'How dare these people criticise what they don't know?' But they were attacking. What is the Pope saying about this sort of global warming? This is just some scientists. What does the Pope know about science?

I can tell you, in this encyclical letter, more than 200 highly qualified people were consulted. I myself brought the biggest expert of the UN in matters of the environment, Professor Otmar Edenhofer. I brought him to the Holy Father and he said, 'Okay, I can give him 15 minutes'. They spoke for an hour and a half, because people cannot say this encyclical has not soul. My goodness, this is a letter about spirituality, getting us to the bottom of the real problems. The problem is not the warming of the Earth, the problem is the misuse of our common home, which is the creation. And all of us, not a single one is exempted from the responsibility, the co-responsibility. All of us are co-responsible for our home. And he's so clear, so please try to study this encyclical letter. It's not only a matter of reading.

I am so happy because I learned that CAFOD has made special materials on the encyclical, even to go to the children, and that is the way, that's the way. We have to be re-educated in how to take care for our common house, and this is a task for the new evangelisation. We need to try to change the way we treat our sister, Creation. We need to, otherwise the world will not have a future. This is clear. We cannot be irresponsible, as the king of France when he said 'Après moi, le déluge' ('After me, the big flood'). No! We can say with great responsibility we have to leave a better world for the new generations than the one we found. Of course, this is a big commitment where Pope Francis has led us to, this new era of new evangelisation.

Henri Nouwen said about Oscar Romero that humility was the fruitful ground of his confidence, he was a man *cum fide*, with trust, an unlimited trust in Jesus Christ. He was a man who had fixed his eyes on Jesus Christ and thus could walk safely amidst the pain and suffering of his people.

So, I could say Archbishop Romero and Pope Francis seem to follow parallel spiritual and pastoral tracks. Both men share an understanding of the practical implications of seeking God in all things. A sense of openness to the presence of God in history and the world, including in struggle and discourse. For many of his biographers, Romero's favourite subject coming from the Gospel was the incarnation of Our Lord. Christ is the Word that became flesh in history and continues doing that. And since that real faith leads to engagement, then some want to keep the gospel so disembodied that it doesn't get involved at all in the world, it is safe. Christ is now in history, Christ is in the womb of the people, Christ is now bringing about the new heaven and the new earth, Romero wrote.

And if we believe truly in the incarnation of the Word of God, we have to make ours the real and true option for the poor. Thank you very much.