

## *Feast of Blessed Oscar Romero 2018*

Homily given by Bishop John Rawsthorne

at St George's Cathedral, Southwark, Romero Week 2018: 24 March 2018

The Archbishop  
**Romero Trust**

In 1970, The Forty Martyrs of England and Wales were canonised. In 1975, Oliver Plunkett, the Archbishop of Armagh was canonised, and in 1976 John Ogilvie, the Scottish martyr, was canonised. These were moments of great joy and affirmation for the Catholics of these islands.

I grew up in England in the Church of the 40s, 50s and was ordained in the early 60s. Among the many factors that shaped that Church was the memory of our martyrs. John Fisher, Thomas More, Edmund Campion, Cuthbert Mayne, Robert Southwell, Edmund Arrowsmith, Margaret Clitherow, Ann Line, Mary Ward, Philip Howard, and a host of others. We all had our local martyrs, we dedicated churches and schools to their memory. We told their stories, we had libraries of books about them. They were great stories. These men and women were part of our lives. They helped shape us as Catholics. They were so familiar. True to their Lord, to the Church and the Pope, but very immediately, true to the persecuted communities of Catholics whom they served. They were 'Massing' priests and that was a capital offence. Margaret Clitherow, Ann Line and other laypeople were imprisoned or executed because they hid or protected their priests. And they died joyfully, praying for the Queen/King and for their country. They were faithful, brave and dedicated.

Growing up, that was the sort of priest I wanted to be, but without the gallows of Tyburn or York or Lancaster, or Derby, or wherever! They inspired us, gave us pride in ourselves as Catholics, gave us hope in our discipleship, not a word that we would have used in those days, and gave us examples of faithful service.

And Oscar Romero has joined that company of martyrs, not as a distant figure from a faraway country, but, in a world that grows ever smaller, as somebody who is familiar to us, whom our children meet in primary school, as somebody who is venerated by members of other Christian churches on our country; as somebody whose people's sufferings we know about, a country where people from our own country, laypeople, sisters, priests, have worked and still do. Where CAFOD has partners. A martyr who speaks to our age as the martyrs of England and Wales spoke to theirs. And his martyrdom and all that surrounded it spoke to the whole world, and continues to do so.

As the proclamation at his beatification proclaimed:

Oscar Romero

Bishop and Martyr

Pastor according to the heart of Christ

Evangelist and Father of the Poor

Heroic Witness to the Kingdom of God,

The Kingdom of Justice, of Brotherhood, of Peace.

His beatification was on the eve of Pentecost. The next day, Pentecost, the small group of us from this country who had attended the beatification celebrated Mass in the Hospitalito Chapel, at the very altar where he had been martyred. It was a lovely sunny day, full of rejoicing. It was a very special moment, and a penny dropping one. Everything that we had celebrated the previous day was about the presence of the Holy Spirit in our world, in the person of Oscar Romero, revealing God's love for the poor and the powerless, giving hope to the poor and the powerless, and continuing both through the memory of Oscar Romero.

In the footsteps of Jesus, Blessed Oscar engaged with the reality of his world, allowing himself to be touched by his people's suffering, suffering with them. Responding to them with deep empathy, faithfulness, patience, generosity and utter dedication, with all his heart, but with a thoughtful heart that accepted the consequences of loving in the way he did, knowing that it could and probably would lead to his death, and, as with Jesus in Gethsemane, fearing that death. But remaining faithful.

I only recently discovered that it is accepted that canonisation confers a sevenfold honour on the recipient:

- their name is inscribed in the catalogue of saints
- the new Saint is invoked in the public prayers of the Church
- churches may be dedicated to God in the saint's memory
- the Mass and Office are publicly offered to God in the saint's honour
- festival days are celebrated in the saint's memory
- personal representations are made in which the Saint is surrounded by a heavenly light of glory
- the saint's relics are enclosed in precious vessels

The final, lovely story, in *Memories in Mosaic* speaks volumes about the impact of this good and holy man of our times:

*One morning in a rainy season, when the skies were heavy with the day's rain, a man in rags, with a shirt full of holes and hair made curly by dust, was cleaning the tomb carefully with one of his rags. The sun had just come up but he was active and awake. And even though the rag was dirty with grease and time, it left the tombstone clean and shiny.*

*When he was done, he smiled with satisfaction. At that hour in the morning he had not seen anyone, and no one had seen him. Except for me. I had seen him.*

*When he left to go out, I felt I needed to talk to him.*

*Why do you do that?*

*Do what?*

*Clean Monseñor's tomb.*

*Because he was my father.*

*What do you mean....?*

*It's like this. I am just a poor man, you know? Sometimes I make some money, carrying things for people in the market, in a little cart. Other times I beg for alms. And sometimes I spend it all on liquor and end up lying hungover on the streets.....But I never get too discouraged. I had a father! I did! He made me feel like a person. Because he loved people like me and he didn't act like we made him sick. He talked to us, he touched us. He asked us questions . He had confidence in us.*

*You could see in his eyes that he cared about me. Like parents love their children. That's why I clean off his tomb.*