

The Secret of Romero: Passion for God and Com-*passion* for the Poor.

The context

First let me share with you in a simple way what has happened to me in my encounter with El Salvador and with Oscar Romero.

When I first went to El Salvador I was a 40-year-old Austrian woman, a well-trained religious sister, a theologian with her beliefs, her convictions and, unconsciously, with something of a European superiority complex. But in the first encounter with El Salvador and its martyrs all this started to fall apart. El Salvador is a volcanic region constantly menaced by earthquakes. It was there that I found out for the first time what it feels like when the ground under your feet really starts to quiver fiercely. Experts tell us that the ground shakes this way when the continental plates collide in the depths of the ocean. This very physical experience became a symbol for me. Because that was exactly what also was happening inside me, to my intellect and to my mind, and I shall never forget it. It was an immensely powerful and shattering collision of totally different worlds in the depths of my consciousness. This happened to such an extent that a lot of things collapsed that had seemed only shortly beforehand to guarantee shelter and security. Yet precisely when the first crack appeared in my superficial convictions and self-assurance, and I realized how vulnerable I was, my experience of authentic encounter began. It was in such moments, I would say, that I began to sense something of the mystery of God and to discover another world that was so different from all I had known before.

My encounter with El Salvador is condensed into one specific experience during the Holy Week of 1999: I remember the Via Crucis, the way of the cross on that Good Friday in “La Chacra”, a slum area in the suburbs of San Salvador. For three hours in the throbbing heat we stumbled rather than walked through the district. The ‘main highway’ there is a railway line where a goods train thunders directly past people’s homes twice a day, and regularly claims its victims, usually children. But if you don’t live right by the railway you will be housed where the ‘river’ descends, and by that I mean the ‘agua negra’, the sewage of the entire city, which stinks so revoltingly as it flows by. On that morning of Holy Week there were more than three hundred people there, many of them children and young people, praying and singing together. This is not to forget the dogs - who also accompanied us loyally all the way. As I engaged in those very hot and sweaty hours of prayer, almost fainting sometimes, I began to recall earlier occasions when I had made the Stations of the Cross or meditated on the Passion of Jesus back in Europe. But what I remembered were experiences of profound individual meditation in a beautiful environment and peaceful surroundings, stimulated by the music of Bach and the

paintings of Grünewald. The contrast between those earlier times and what I was living through in El Salvador could not have been sharper. The stench and noise around me, and all that dust and heat – the more they affected me the more I became aware that in these conditions if I did not realize that Jesus' Cross and these people's crosses were related, I was lost. If I couldn't recognize Jesus' Cross in the crosses these people had to bear here and now, then the redemptive power of the cross would pass me by.

This was the very context in which Oscar Romero became meaningful to me. During the all-night vigil celebrated in La Chacra that same year on 24 March, the anniversary of the assassination of Romero, one family after another described how their relatives and friends had disappeared and had been tortured and murdered during the years of the civil war. That was a night of many tears and great distress, yet it also brought us into the 'real presence' of radiant humanity and the authentic experience that Romero's death was truly a source of life for us. The martyrs of El Salvador were present to testify to resurrection and as witnesses not only to God, who does not allow these victims to vanish in death, but also to a life that takes the risk of 'making a stand against death' here in this place and now in this time.

El Salvador and its martyrs, first of all Oscar Romero, taught me that nobody can seriously seek God without struggling for a more just world. *"To do justice for the poor and oppressed, this is truly to know God."* As the Prophet Jeremiah told us. Nobody can "know God" without being open to His presence in the vulnerable and the disadvantaged; an openness which leads inevitably to action - and then to conflict.

El Salvador and Oscar Romero taught me what it means to be a Christian

El Salvador, with its martyrs who sealed the gospel with their blood, became for me a "Holy Land". It became for me a privileged place where I was confronted with the drama of Jesus in a very current way and it was the first time in my life I understood what it truly means to be a Christian.

It's not sophisticated, it's very simple: Christians are those people who follow Jesus, and who do what he did. They risk their own lives by taking sides - without any ifs or buts – alongside the vulnerable, those in danger and those excluded. But in spite of the simplicity of this message, we all know that we are unable to cope with this essential challenge of the Gospel. When it really happens, it is the irruption of the grace of God. With Archbishop Romero, God's grace irrupted in the midst of the cruel reality of El Salvador. So Ignacio Ellacuria, a theologian, far from reciting pious platitudes, declared in the moment of the assassination of Romero: *"With Archbishop Romero, God passed through El Salvador"*. Yes, Oscar Romero is a true incarnation of God's mercy and love in that historic moment, he is a "sacrament of Jesus

Christ”, the real presence of the whole drama of the life of Jesus. And Romero’s assassination confronts us again with the cross of Jesus – as a consequence of his Jesus-like way of living.

The people of El Salvador from the moment of his death recognized Romero as a saint, as a man of God and a true follower of Jesus – and when the Church now canonizes Romero, it will be the solemn confirmation: Romero’s life and Romero’s death – and the hope and the life that are rising out of both – that is, what it really means to be an authentic Christian. Romero’s life can guide and inspire all of us who would like to be true followers of Christ.

Romero taught me also what the true Church of Jesus Christ is

From the core of the Christian existence it is also clear what has to be the essence of the Church and what has to be her mission.

From its very beginnings there is only one basis from which the Church, as the community of those who follow Jesus, traces its right to exist: making the Gospel the liberating and redeeming reality in the midst of whatever is oppressing and enslaving people here and now. With the words of Romero himself:

“A Church that does not join the poor in order to speak out on behalf of the poor and against the injustices committed against them, is not the true Church of Jesus Christ.....The voice of the Church has always been the voice of the Gospel --- it can be nothing else. Many times this Gospel touches the open wounds of society and it is natural that it should sting and cause pain.”

The prophet denounces the sin

Oscar Romero can be considered in the same light as the great prophets of Israel. Actually he is one of Christianity’s outstanding prophets. He himself defines what it means to be a prophet:

“The prophet is the watchman who keeps vigil. When God tells the evildoers to be converted, the prophet has to sound the trumpet of God and tell the evildoers to repent. ...”

As a bishop, Romero considered himself as the guardian of his brothers and sisters, called to protect and defend them. Certainly it is a highly risky task to sound the trumpet, to bring to public light, that evildoers are threatening and damaging their lives, motivated by greed or other egocentric interests. Romero was no trumpet; by temperament he was a calm, peaceful and shy man. But he accepted the hazardous burden of confronting the oppressors with their crimes. Most of them had the benefit of great wealth or high office with political or military power behind them.

Even so he encouraged his priests, his fellow pastoral workers – and every one of us to take this risk. He said *“Do not be false in your service to this ministry. It is very easy to be servants of the word without disturbing the world: a very spiritualized word, a word without any commitment to history, a word that can sound in any part of the world because it belongs to no part of the world. A word like that creates no problems, starts no conflicts. What starts conflicts and persecutions, what marks the genuine Church is the word that, burning like the words of the prophets, proclaims and accuses: proclaims to the people God’s wonders to be believed and venerated, and accuses of sin those who oppose God’s kingdom.”*

Facing the cloud of murdered witnesses to the Gospel in his diocese Romero asked about the motivation of their assassins: “Why do they kill others? They kill them because they disturb.” Romero knew that the people he was denouncing would react fiercely and that they had the power to eliminate him. In a certain sense we can say, that Romero received his prophetic vocation in the wake of the murder of his friend Father Rutilio Grande; and he was fully aware that the consequences could be the same for himself, if he followed the same path.

The prophet announces the Good News to the poor

Oscar Romero had the prophetic charism and the genius to give voice to the suffering of the people. The people, sacrificed on the altar of wealth, were cut down in their struggle for a life of dignity and exposed to cruel and barbaric violence. They were expelled from their homes and their land, living in a nightmare of torture, of overnight escapes and separation from their loved ones. This same people understood, in an instinctive and unambiguous way, that Archbishop Romero was talking about them, about the reality that they suffered day-to-day in their flesh. They said: We are ‘the crucified people’, we are ‘the martyred people’. And not only is he talking about us, but he also affirms our dignity and applies to us the ultimate kind of hope: ‘You all are the body of Christ, crucified in history! You all are the martyred flesh – like the flesh of the poor guy from Nazareth, in whom God makes himself present in this world shaped by sin.’

With Archbishop Romero a new way of announcing the Gospel and denouncing sin made itself known in the world. This new way of speaking rejecting theological and pastoral ‘docetism’, words without flesh and empty of true reality. In this new language, *“the living and effective Word of God, sharper than any two-edged sword”* (Heb 4:12) takes root. This Word creates reality; it is *“liberating and saving, like the language of Jesus himself.”*¹

¹ D. Bonhoeffer. *Reflexiones en ocasión del bautizo de Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge, Widerstand und Ergebung*, en DBW 8, p. 428-436, aquí p. 435 y ss.

Archbishop Romero had the brilliant gift of putting into words the reality of the suffering of the people. But it is not only this that gives his language salvific and hope-giving power that speaks directly to the hearts of the most vulnerable and unprotected. It is also the absolute coherence of his life, the coherence of his words and his deeds. This coherence was sealed with his blood.

Remembering Archbishop Romero, remembering the martyrs, and celebrating them, is a dangerous thing to do. It obliges us, like them, to let ourselves be touched in our innermost being, by the anguish that the victims of exclusion and impoverishment suffer today. It obliges us to risk what seems like self-destructive insanity: to throw ourselves, with all of our existence, against those systems that crush and exclude the vulnerable. To remember the body and blood of the martyrs, among them, the proto-martyr Jesus of Nazareth, does not allow for any kind of diluted celebration. It either brings us to follow those martyrs, or the celebration is a lie, and carries with it *"its own judgment"* as Corinthians tells us.

To be faithful to the legacy of the martyrs of El Salvador, we are obliged to practice a patient exercise of contemplation, of paying close attention to the situation in which the crucified people live today. If we do it well, it will hurt. In good Salvadoran – and also Austrian – slang, it hurts us to the marrow of our bones. Only from such pain can a new pastoral word and action be born, pastoral action that is effective and hope-giving.

On June 19, 1979, in the town of Aguilares, hard-hit by the violence of the security forces, Archbishop Romero gave one of his most precious homilies. At the start of this homily he redefines his episcopal office in a tragic and accurate way: *"My job is to go around picking up the dead bodies of the victims of the persecution of the Church."* Then he addressed the suffering people of Aguilares:

"You all are the image of the Pierced Divine that presents Christ nailed to the cross and pierced by the spear. This is the image of all peoples who, like Aguilares will be pierced..."

With these words, in an audacious and courageous way, Archbishop Romero identifies the cross of Jesus Christ with the horror that the people of Aguilares lived through at that time. They were exposed to violence, cruelty, and humiliation. He affirms the "hypostatic union", that is the inseparable connection, between the crucified people and the crucified Christ, which are one single flesh and cannot be separated. And as a consequence, the crucified people are the presence of God and of God's salvific work in this world; it is the sacrament of our salvation in history.

With this solemn declaration, Archbishop Romero directs his attention to the immense majority

of human beings on our planet who tend to be made invisible by those, who declare themselves the only important ones, the only ones who matter. It is true, also, that in the first world, and in the condominiums of the wealthy in El Salvador, there is suffering; children die of cancer or young people die in tragic accidents. There is no human existence without suffering. But there is disproportionate suffering, which is the characteristic of the crucified people. The people are martyrs, for the very fact that they live such unjust suffering. Their lives look like the Stations of the Cross, a permanent Calvary. To those human beings is directed the promise: *“You are the Pierced Divine”*.

But can such an affirmation do more than give evidence of the tragic reality? How can it be that a large part of humanity continues to be “literally and historically crucified”? The Stations of the Cross continue on and on and on.

In the words of Jon Sobrino: *“Salvation comes from below!”* This means, first, that salvation does not come from above, not from the upper echelons of society, the upper classes, or from political parties, and not from NGO’s, and not from international development programs. This inversion of perspectives, which is in total harmony with the Gospel, causes scandal.

In the Stations of the Cross of my Austrian infancy, we prayed, *“In the Cross is salvation, in the Cross is life, in the Cross is hope.”* As a young person, this prayer provoked in me a crisis, understanding that the cross brings before us poor Jesus of Nazareth, cruelly tortured until death. How can we say that salvation, life and hope are present here? It is the same scandal, the same insanity, to kneel before the cross of Jesus that brings us salvation, as it is to kneel before the crucified people that bring us salvation. But this is our faith in Jesus Christ, incarnate, made of tortured human flesh.

“There is no salvation outside of the poor”. Making this affirmation concrete and giving it historic substance: there is no salvation outside of the victims of El Salvador and of all the world. The creative and redeeming love of God is present in their daily and heroic struggle for life. With them, God passes through this world. They are the ones who carry our sins. By their wounds we are saved (Is 53). They are the ones who can take our hearts of stone to give us hearts of flesh (Ez 36:26), in them is present a vital energy capable of converting us and humanizing us.

The inner secret of Oscar Romero: Passion for God and compassion for the poor

Like the farewell discourse in the Gospel of John on the eve of the death of Jesus, we have a precious document of Archbishop Romero. He wrote it during his last retreat, fully aware of the probability of his violent death.

"My other fear is for my life. It is not easy to accept a violent death, which in these circumstances is very possible. (...) The unknown circumstances can be faced with God's grace. ...I know that God assisted the martyrs and, if it comes to this, I shall feel God very close as I draw my last breath... But more valuable than the surrender in death is the surrender of one's whole life, a life lived for God."

Oscar Romero is a human being, with very human feelings. He isn't obsessed, but rather deeply frightened by the probability of his own violent death. But what is sustaining him is the confidence, that God is with him, even in the most extreme situation.

Romero continues in his notes: *"And I have confirmed that the only thing that matters is the radical nature of the Gospel, which not everyone can understand. This radicalness always has to bring contradictions and even painful divisions. ... I will give priority to my spiritual life. I will take care to live in contact with God. My main concern will be to identify with Jesus more and more, radicalizing myself in his Gospel. Toward this internal knowledge of Jesus, I will direct my devotion to the Virgin Mary and my specific moments of prayer: Meditation. Mass. Rosary. Reading. Examination of conscience. Retreat"*.

Romero never boasted about his relationship with God or his spiritual life. He was a very discreet man, certainly with respect to his inner life. In spite of this, in his homilies his intimacy with God shines through:

"The human person discovers their human dimension in the glory of God. Women and men do not truly know themselves until they have encountered God. ... My sisters and brothers, how I would like each one of us to say that the fruit of today's preaching is the following: we went out to encounter God and now we will live the joy of his majesty and the joy of our smallness...!"

These words are reflecting the inner experience of Oscar Romero; they are inviting us to risk the same: It takes great courage – and humility – to start to discover our real self in the encounter with God. This redeemed and liberated view of ourselves, going beyond vanity and self-deception, is the fruit of a long interior journey – and is pure grace. Set out on this journey, wake up to become fully alive - and awaken others to life. The glory of God shines forth from every human face, the face of every man, woman and child. Only those who are able to bear the sight of this glory will also be able to feel the unspeakable pain of lives threatened and destroyed. Let us come down from the ivory tower of our comfort zones, our personal worries and routines. Let us engage with people, become involved, find out what is oppressing people and driving them to despair. Let God use us as instruments of healing and liberation, as messengers of his tender and life-giving nearness.

Romero invites us to have the courage to obey and to serve. But this service and obedience have nothing to do with servility. To serve does not mean to cringe and obedience does not signify subjection or childish dependency. It is an essential part of service to challenge those who lord it over others. The truly obedient are free inside themselves and are capable of listening attentively to God's will. They are bold enough to face up to the powerful who often distort the image of God. We can't have any illusions: this will inevitably lead to conflict. The person who acts like this will pay the price.

"The glory of God is the human person fully alive", was the famous statement of St Irenaus. Oscar Romero loved that phrase and he reinterpreted it: "The glory of God is the poor person fully alive". Our world that is apparently so united and globalized is actually shattered and full of deadly tensions. Our world is full of refugees, driven from their homeland by violence, hunger, poverty and climate change. There is an ugly gap between the few who stand to gain and the many lacking the basic necessities of life, such as clean water, basic nourishment, education and health care. These excluded people are the beloved and the favorites of God. Oscar Romero invites us to make friends with them and take them to our heart. Then our life will be transformed, it will become simpler and more joyful – and we will find God.

Blessed Oscar Romero, servant of God, faithful follower of Jesus Christ, friend of the poor, voice of the voiceless.....Pray for us.

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