

Feast of St Oscar Romero
Blessing and Dedication of the Diocesan Shrine to St Oscar
Romero, St George's Cathedral, Southwark Archdiocese
23 March 2019

Homily by Rt Rev Mgr Patrick Kilgarriff

It was a great joy to come into St Peter's Square on sunny October morning and see Oscar Romero's picture on the front of the basilica with Paul VI and five others. These included a young layman of 19 called Nunzio Sulprizio. He was an orphan, violently treated as a youngster, who died of bone cancer in 1836. He was a man of prayer and the way he bore his suffering in hospital impressed many.

After singing the 'Veni Creator Spiritus', Cardinal Giovanni Becciu asked Pope Francis to enrol these seven "into the catalogue of the saints". This he did by a solemn act and we sang the Litany of the Saints.

So, Oscar Romero is now declared one of those 'cloud of witnesses'. who can intercede for us. We can gain courage and inspiration from their lives and actions as we make our pilgrimage with our own difficulties and troubles. I believe certain saints appeal to us and become our friends.

Why would you and I look up to this Salvadorean priest, born 102 years ago, ordained in Rome during the Second World War in 1942 and gunned down by an army marksman while he was celebrating mass in 1980? I think he was a good priest and a good bishop. He did ordinary things we all do. He was a man of prayer, somewhat conventional. However, he lived in extra-ordinary times in El Salvador. He had to take extra-ordinary decisions, which put him on the path to martyrdom. He walked this heroic path with full knowledge and bravery.

Oscar Romero was gifted and determined. He would put all his energies into the job he was asked to do.

His personal life was very simple. He decided not to live in the leafier suburbs with the rich, instead he chose a cancer hospital. For a while he lived in the sacristy of the church, which had a shower and a loo. The small windows are at ceiling height. Later the sisters built him a three-roomed bungalow. Do you men, like me have a sock draw? Romero had three pairs of socks, one on his feet, one in the draw and one in the wash.

Faced with the frightful injustices in his small country, which were a daily occurrence, he became passionate for justice. Justice is a basic, God-given human right. He would speak up.

A small number of people held all the wealth and power in El Salvador. Since the 1930's there had been oppression and killings, with the armed forces and death squads carrying out summary executions.

The United States would support any right-wing regimes in Latin America, so long as they would combat a perceived communist threat. Any meetings were suspect, farmers

cooperatives, literacy classes, catechesis for preparation for the sacraments, self-help groups, all were potentially subversive.

Fr Rutilio Grande sj, was close friend and collaborator of Oscar Romero and he was master of ceremonies when he was ordained bishop in 1970 and was present when he took pastoral charge of the archdiocese of San Salvador in February 1977. Twenty days later, Fr Rutilio was assassinated as he was driving to mass at El Paisnal, along with an elderly sacristan and a 16 year-old altar server. There were other youngsters in the car as it overturned and one of them saw a local land-owner directing the gunmen.

Oscar Romero spent the rest of the night by the body of his friend. He decided that silence was no option. There was to be one funeral mass for Fr Rutilio Grande, in the entire diocese. The government was to be pressured to discover the culprits. The president had telephoned to say that the security forces knew that communist fighters were behind the attack, but the archbishop knew that this was untrue.

From now on, he had a strong determination to name what was happening in El Salvador and to speak out. He would sit with poor families, as they kept vigil over the mutilated bodies of their sons and brothers. He listened to their grief and named the names of those who had lost their lives. His preaching became prophetic and powerful.

His cathedral had a radio station and his powerful homilies were broadcast each week (incidentally, CAFOD helped with the funding for the radio station). He would list the names of the young men and women who had been killed. He would name the names of small villages where atrocities had been committed, where armoured cars had been used against a poor civilian population.

He was passionate about church teaching, especially “Gaudium et Spes” from the Second Vatican Council and the teaching of the local bishops in Latin America at Medellin and Puebla. The bishops had announced that there would be an “option for the poor”, therefore Romero spoke out fearlessly about those who were trampling on justice.

Whatever the people suffered, there was to be no violence. For him liberation meant one thing. Listen to this,

the liberation that Fr Rutilio Grande preached was inspired by faith, a faith that speaks to us about eternal life, that he with his faith raised towards heaven, accompanied by two campesinos, offered up in its totality and perfection. It is a liberation that culminates in happiness with God, liberation which begins with repentance for sin, liberation based on Christ the only saving power.

A little later in the same homily he says that we should try and see things from God's perspective, seeing our neighbours as our brothers and sisters.

As long as our hearts are not converted, as long as our lives are not based on this doctrine, that is enlightened by faith to help us harmonize our hearts with the heart of God, then everything will be feeble, revolutionary, passing and violent. None of these things are Christian

Oscar Romero was somewhat isolated in his stand; other bishops might have sought accommodation with the government. His outspoken views made enemies within the Roman Curia and his visits to Rome were not easy. He valued his honorary doctorate from Leuven University as a sign of understanding from a wider world. He greatly welcomed the warm letter of support from Basil Hume and the cardinals from Paris and Brussels. He agonised over his weekly homilies and poured his energies into them. As he heard of new atrocities each week, his closeness to the poor convinced him. There was only himself to act as a voice for those who suffered continually. He was called to be a voice for the voiceless.

He knew he had made enemies in the ruling party in El Salvador. He knew they would call him a Marxist sympathizer. He knew he had to speak out against unjust systems, the repression of the armed forces; the death squads and the night time raids. He was the only one who could speak out. In prayer he knew that speak out he must.

His final Sunday homily was very long. He welcomed a human rights group from the United States by their names. He analysed, at length, the three readings in the Liturgy of the Word. He then outlined the Cathedral programme for Palm Sunday Holy Week. Only then did he mention the terrible week that has just passed. In village after village he enumerated over 200 killings by the National Guard including rape and torture on 17th-20th March 1980. It was perhaps the worst week of his life and it was to be his last. Let me read you a passage from the end of this final Sunday Homily.

I would like to make an appeal, especially to the men of the army and concretely to the National Guard, the police and the troops. Brothers, you are part of our own people, you are killing you own brothers and sisters campesinos. Against any order a man may give to kill. God's law must prevail, "You shall not kill" No soldier is obliged to obey any order against the law of God, No one has to observe an immoral law. (This sentence was interrupted by applause three times).

The church defends the rights of God, the Law of God, the dignity of the human person and therefore cannot remain silent before such great abominations.

In the name of God then, and in the name of this suffering people, whose laments rise up each day, more tumultuously towards heaven, I beg you, I beseech you, I order you in the name of God, stop the repression.

The following evening, Oscar Romero was celebrating mass in the church of the cancer hospital. He had just finished his homily, when a marksman got out of a red car, entered the church and shot the archbishop through the heart.

This is a homily at mass. It is not a lecture. Its purpose is to bring the preacher and the gathered people closer to the Lord Jesus. In what way is St Oscar Romero an example for us as we come to bless the English and Welsh national shrine here in St George's Cathedral?

- He was efficient and hard-working: he used his natural gifts

- He was a spiritual man, centred on the “transcendental” Like the disciples on their way to Emmaus, he followed the risen Lord.
- Every human person, no matter how poor, must be respected.
- Justice is a basic human right
- Like Oscar Romero, we must stand up for the voiceless. In Britain that means homeless asylum seeker; the victims of torture and trafficking; men and women in over-crowded and dangerous prisons; vulnerable young people; men and women looking for answers after the Grenfell disaster: people suffering humiliation or violence because of their ethnicity or sexuality.
- We must pressure our politicians to maintain our level of development aid.
- As a country we should get rid of the threat and the burden of nuclear arms’
- As individual women and men, we should not be afraid to voice our opinions on these matters, even when these opinions are not welcome.

Christ calls everyone, but he calls them to conversion. Conversion means orienting oneself. Conversion is necessary to bring about the liberation people hope for. Therefore, the church must point out the kingdom that is opposed to the kingdom of God, namely the kingdom of sin. Preaching that does not denounce sin is not preaching the gospel. Preaching that makes sinners feel good and entrenches them in their sinful state is a betrayal of the Gospel’s call. Preaching that causes sinners no discomfort, but lulls them deeper into sin is the shadow of death. Preaching that awakens and enlightens people is like a light turned on. If some people are asleep, naturally they are disturbed, but they wake up! That is the preaching of Christ - Wake up and be converted!

This is a homily at mass. It is not a lecture. Its purpose is to bring the preacher and the gathered people closer to Jesus. In what was is St Oscar Romero an example for us as we come to bless the shrine, here in St George’s Cathedral?

- He was very efficient and worked hard with his natural gifts
- He was a spiritual mass focused on the “transcendental”, like the disciples on their way to Emmaus. He followed the crucified and risen Jesus.
- Every human person, no matter how poor, is to be respected.
- Justice is a basic human right
- All violence, especially violent language, leads only to more violence.
- Like Oscar Romero, we must stand up for the voiceless
- In Britain this means homeless asylum seekers, especially those being detained.
- Victims of torture and trafficking
- Men and women in over-crowded and dangerous prisons
- Vulnerable young people
- Men and women looking to answers after the Grenfell disaster

- People suffering humiliation or violence because of their ethnicity or sexual orientation
- As individual men and women, we should not be afraid to voice our opinions, even if these opinions are not welcome.

Christ calls everyone, but he calls them to conversion. Conversion means orientating oneself. Conversion is necessary to bring them to about the conversion people hope for. Therefore, the church must point out the kingdom that is OPPOSED to the kingdom of God, namely the kingdom of sin.

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