

# **“Archbishop Romero, An Icon for South Africa”**

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I am honoured to be with you all this evening, and I sincerely thank Father Robert Pelton CSC and his staff and co-workers for their invitation to present this lecture tonight. It is humbling for me to be part of the distinguished men and women who have explored the extraordinary legacy of Archbishop Romero, his contribution to an ever evolving history, and his impact on people in far flung corners of the globe. This week we are commemorating forty years of the Synod on Justice in the World, and thirty years of the Justice Education Center at Saint Mary's College. Congratulations to St. Mary's College and to everyone involved in study and ministry on this great campus.

It was 6.30 a.m. on a hot, humid morning in January 2002. The place? A United Nations airbase at Lockichoggio, in the far north of Kenya, just 10 kilometres from the southern Sudan border, a country which had been devastated by war for decades. In front of us a Cessna Caravan plane ready to take us on a long trip to the Nuba Mountains in Sudan – no radio, no air-traffic control, no beacons to guide the pilot, just his GPS co-ordinates. Three and a half hours later we touched down on a dirt strip near the mountains; we disembarked, and looked at an Antonov transport which had crashed there. We got into a 4x4 Land Cruiser for the journey to the Holy Cross parish compound in the village of Kauda.

Early next morning we walked up the side of a hill overlooking the parish compound. Around and below me everything spoke of simplicity and a struggle against inhuman odds.

On the side of that hill was a primary school – adobe brick walls covered by grass roofs, blending into the boulders and soil. Very obviously a camouflage to hide the school. Why? Because two years before this a vicious war had visited this place of tranquillity. The Khartoum military regime, in its single-minded commitment to maintain and extend political power and to “Arabize” the entire country through military conquest, was conducting a brutal campaign to terrorise and subjugate the African people of the south. The regime's forces used Antonov transport planes to fly over villages, and crude barrels of explosives mixed with shrapnel were rolled down the ramp at the back of the plane onto the innocent victims below.

One day an Antonov flew low, right over Holy Cross parish. The school children and their teachers were busy with classes in the shade of the trees, just down from the simple grass-covered church. Three barrels were rolled out of that Antonov. A simple shrine, a cross, marked the tragedy of that day. A barrel of explosive hit the ground a few feet from the class of 14 children and their teacher – all of them were killed.

After the time of mourning, the parents, priests, children and community walked up that hill to start again, and they built their camouflaged school. The teachers really struggled against immense odds and lack of resources to fulfil a dream, viz. to teach the children, many of them orphaned by the war, through the medium of English - because this was a means of liberation from the oppression of the forced “Arabization” of the people by the Khartoum Government.

This struck such a chord within me as I reflected on our history in South Africa and the uprising of the youth in Soweto in 1976 to protest against the apartheid regime's enforced use of Afrikaans, the language of the oppressor, instead of English, in their schooling. They were being subjected to an inferior education system and they had analyzed this and realized that unless there was equal

education for all and they were taught through English – well, their future would be seriously compromised. And for this ideal, they were prepared to die.

Everything about that encounter in the remote Nuba Mountains spoke to me of the need to work passionately for justice in Sudan in which I have been engaged since 1997. In response to the bombing strategy, Church leaders, support groups in Europe and the West, and peace and justice activists in the Sudan, began a campaign to meticulously document and verify every such atrocity of the Khartoum regime, followed up by relentless advocacy with the Governments of the world, including Africa. This led eventually to a cessation of the bombing. We also took up the cause of the people in the south of Sudan at an international conference of the Sudan Ecumenical Forum in London which adopted the slogan “Let my people decide”. Through our advocacy this eventually became part of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement hammered out in Naivasha, Kenya, which led to the referendum in the south and finally to a new state last year - the nation of South Sudan.

Such experiences reminded me of the struggle for justice of Oscar Romero. The new film: “Monseñor: the Last Journey of Oscar Romero”, which we viewed last night, recalled for me the moving week of theological reflection and witness in El Salvador in 2005 in which I participated to mark the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Monseñor’s assassination. Paradoxically, as several have remarked, the sniper’s bullet which killed Romero on 24 March, 1980, did not silence the prophetic witness and words of a modern day martyr. As Michael Campbell-Johnston SJ stated so succinctly: “Little did the authorities realize that, instead of silencing his voice, this would spread it to the four corners of the earth, and that his message would give hope and inspiration to thousands”.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, his voice has spread to the four corners of the earth, and Monseñor’s voice and witness touched my life in a little corner of South Africa in a very personal way. Biographical data often determines many of the personal contours in life, and two dominant bits of data have described my life. I am a white South African, born in the apartheid capital of Pretoria. I am also a bishop. Both bits of data in different ways describe contested terrains, and both signify a relationship with power which has been fundamentally challenged by prophetic visions of justice.

History, nonetheless, has been kind to me, and in both of these contested areas it has provided me with icons to inspire me - Nelson Mandela as an icon of reconciliation *through justice* in my life as a South African, and Romero in my ministry as a bishop and my profound grappling with what a fundamental option for the poor and for justice actually means. While both have brought me significant inspiration, I have also searched elsewhere to find the discourse and the praxis for holding and sustaining the challenges that both these icons present. Among others, Vatican II’s *Gaudium et Spes* (The Church in the Modern World) and the Synod on Justice in the World has offered me a vocabulary and also inspiration and paradigms to respond to these challenges.

When I was called to my ministry as bishop, I returned to South Africa from Rome where I had been serving on the Redemptorist International leadership team. I returned to a country which was extremely fragile. This was January, 1991, Nelson Mandela had been released, but there was still appalling violence, deaths, fear and misery. I came into such a situation in the diocese which was in one of the apartheid homelands with a very oppressive leader. My eyes and heart turned to Oscar Romero as my mentor as I faced a situation of serious injustices and human rights violations, but also my own church community which for the most part was fearful and would struggle to understand the option I tried to make for justice, human rights, and the transformation of the lot of the poor and the victims. On 21 March, 1991, I led a protest march with some 6000 people. I looked behind me, and there stood a young woman at the end of the first line with a simple banner: “Police, do not shoot, we are unarmed”. They did indeed shoot, I narrowly missed being severely injured, if not killed, by projectiles; a student near me was killed by a bullet, another took a bullet in the shoulder, there was utter mayhem as the police and soldiers beat up the people.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Campbell-Johnstone SJ, Romero: ‘The voice of those who had no voice’ 23 March, 2011, *Thinking Faith*, pg. 1.

During the following 4 years until the first democratic elections in 1994, I opened the Church compound on which I lived, and every weekend the trade unions, liberation movements, and civic organizations used to meet on the church property because they were banned from holding meetings by this homeland government. On one particular weekend in November 1992 there was to be a mass meeting on the football field below the church. A few days before the meeting, I was visited by the security police and army chief who demanded that I cancel the meeting. I refused, and kept on refusing even though they pressurized me for over an hour. The day before the meeting the church next to the field where the meeting was to take place was blown up by a powerful bomb at 4 o'clock in the morning. As I stood next to the severely damaged church later that day, one of the religious of the diocese remonstrated with me in front of people and the TV news team for putting the work and ministry of the religious and priests of the diocese in danger by my opposition to the homeland government.

That day I think I felt something of the personal struggles of my brother Romero. On occasions when I faced danger, questioning and rejection, and when I encountered suffering, broken people, his witness was an inspiration to me. In 1997 I was called by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to testify about these two incidents. I was so humbled as I sat next to women who had been brutally raped by the security forces in police cells because they opposed the regime – and were still so broken and traumatized. We were bound together in spirit on that day. Yes, Monseñor was and is my icon; he showed me the way I, as a bishop, could be faithful to Jesus and find God *in* the life and suffering of the poor and oppressed of South Africa and elsewhere. My journey with him has continued particularly in my engagement with the systemic justice issues related to poverty and the HIV/Aids pandemic in South Africa and Africa, and my passionate concern for the vulnerable and impoverished women migrants and single mothers who are so deeply affected by poverty and Aids. This has led to misunderstandings and to being questioned about my motivations and ministry choices....but I learned from Romero that there is always a cost in trying to make relevant responses to the many faces of suffering in our world.

For me, Monseñor's life and ministry as a bishop was/is a reflection of the powerful, prophetic and inspirational words of the Synod on Justice in the World: ".....Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation".<sup>2</sup> This mirrors Jesus' own vision of his mission in the world in Luke 4: "The Spirit of the Lord has been given to me....he has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free...."<sup>3</sup>

The 1971 Synod document reflects the "reaching out" of Vatican Council II and its visionary statements for the Church and all disciples of Christ – particularly the words of *Gaudium et Spes*: "The joy and hope, the grief and anguish, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well".<sup>4</sup> Archbishop Romero embodied every word of that declaration; his witness and personal commitment to justice is a model for the whole Church. As Julian Filochowski, director of the Romero Trust in England, affirmed: Romero was "*a Gaudium et Spes* bishop to his core and patron-saint-in-waiting of our justice and peace movement".<sup>5</sup>

These texts from the Synod and *Gaudium et Spes* are a clear call to our Church leadership in every age to discern and analyze the "signs of the times" *with* the People of God in view of pastoral action whose goal is to transform the real world of suffering people – something which is integral to the Church's mission of evangelization. I think there will always be a challenge to the Church not to be preoccupied with its internal life and praxis only, and so risk consigning the 1971 Synod's call to work

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<sup>2</sup> Synod on Justice in the World, # 6.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 4:18-19.

<sup>4</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, # 1.

<sup>5</sup> "Archbishop Romero, bishop, martyr and patron of justice and peace" – a talk given by Julian Filochowski during the Peace Pilgrimage at Aylesford Priory on 25th September 2005.

for justice and the transformation of the world to the margins of its programmes of evangelization. As Romero said: “The Church’s task in each country is to make of each country’s individual history a history of salvation”.<sup>6</sup>

Jesus, *Gaudium et Spes*, the Synod on Justice in the World, and Oscar Romero – an interplay of inspiration, discernment, spirituality, and engagement in a suffering world that everything may be transformed and so mirror the dream of God for humankind. I have used the words: “transform the real world of suffering people”....and...”the dream of God for humankind”! Has this happened yet in the poorest countries and regions of the world, e.g. in South Africa? What about El Salvador 32 years after Romero’s death? Michael Campbell-Johnston again:

“The present situation in El Salvador has hardly changed in this respect and, though open hostilities have ceased and a new government more open to justice issues been put in place, the suffering of the poor and discrimination against them continue. And on the whole they are the same people and their situation has not improved”.<sup>7</sup>

In 1985, Ignacio Ellacuría, the Jesuit martyr at the University of Central America in San Salvador, said: “It remains an urgent task in El Salvador to give sight to the blind and to set free the oppressed in a global process of liberation which continues to have the poorest and those most in need as the first ones to whom all good news is addressed”.<sup>8</sup> As Fr. Dean Brackley SJ noted: “Ellacuría was calling for a transformation of ‘our civilization of capital into a civilization based on work, solidarity and participation’”.<sup>9</sup>

Yes, a transformation in view of “a civilization based on work, solidarity and participation”. So much needs to change before the poor and oppressed of the world will truly be free to live a life which reflects their dignity as those created in God’s image. All over the world, the pilgrimage of the martyrs still continues as it did in El Salvador. But what we also face today is a subtle and sophisticated oppression, and this oppression is in the hands of those who shape the economic systems of the world, with the support of the powerful political and economic elites who control the present and the future. We see the modern-day “gods” before us each day - the “strategic interests” of the developed nations, and the global economic policies and market philosophy which determine the fate of millions. As Michael Campbell Johnston remarked: “Globally, wealthy countries continue to impose harsh structural adjustment programmes on debt-ridden and defenceless nations, who have no option but to accept and endeavour to implement them, knowing full well that most of their own citizens will be the first to suffer”.<sup>10</sup>

These structural adjustment programs have created terrible debt burdens, and some of the poorest countries are struggling to pay back merely the interest on their debt which exceeds the amount they can spend on health, education, and social services together. Secondly, unfair trading systems make it very difficult for poorer countries to compete with the rich and developed world. Thirdly, the agricultural subsidies paid to First World farmers by their Governments, mean that smaller farmers in the under-developed world struggle to participate in the global system. The speculative transactions on the

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<sup>6</sup> Romero, *Homilias*, 11 December, 1977, “Romero, The Violence of Love”, pg. 21. The Plough Publishing House, Farmington PA.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Campbell-Johnston SJ, Romero: ‘The voice of those who had no voice’ 23 March, 2011, *Thinking Faith*, pg. 4.

<sup>8</sup> I. Ellacuría, “Los retos del país a la UCA en su vigésimo aniversario”, Conference delivered on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas (UCA), September, 1985. In *Planteamiento universitario 1989* (San Salvador: UCA, 1989), p. 164.

<sup>9</sup> “Crosses and Resurrections: Good News from Central America”; The 2009 Romero Lecture Fr. Dean Brackley, S.J. pg. 5, cf. Romero Trust UK, [www.romerotruster.org.uk](http://www.romerotruster.org.uk).

<sup>10</sup> Michael Campbell-Johnston SJ, Romero: ‘The voice of those who had no voice’ 23 March, 2011, *Thinking Faith*, pg. 4.

world's stock exchanges with billions changing hands each day do nothing for real development or the transformation of poverty in our very unequal world.

These are the economic systems which still keep the poorest nations *impoverished*, and pave the way towards the potential for violence. It is systemic injustice, sophisticated and very difficult to challenge. But there is also another side. The painful truth is that Africa's precarious position, to take one example, is predicated on the fact that its leadership was unsuccessful in providing strategic vision and effective governance conducive to development and growth, especially for its most needy people. Instead, governance in Africa has been marked by authoritarianism, military and corrupt regimes which failed to adopt appropriate institutions and policies that can maintain political stability and ensure national development. This has led to a style of leadership that undermines a state's capacity to deliver its basic functions, such as security, food, shelter, and health care for its people. Corruption and maladministration by the politically powerful in several countries has led to exploitation, inequality, polarization and even greater social exclusion of the poor – and all this has been one cause among others of revolutions, civil wars, and mindless violence breaking out in Africa and other parts of the world.

Archbishop Romero, in his context, succinctly analyzed violence in our world: “The Church does not approve or justify bloody revolution and cries of hatred. But neither can it condemn them while it sees no attempt to remove the causes that produce that ailment in our society....”<sup>11</sup> .... “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 management of the country, repression. All this is what constitutes the primal cause, from which the rest flows naturally”.<sup>12</sup>

## **Violence**

This leads me to an important theme in my reflection tonight, viz. the use of violence as a last resort to overcome structural or systemic injustice, i.e. injustice against an entire people or nation, or groups or classes of people.

In El Salvador, in the face of massacres, assassinations and unspeakable atrocities against the people, there arose a coalition of guerrilla groups called the Farabundo Martí Liberation Front (FMLN) which engaged in an armed struggle against the government in a 12 year civil war from 1979 to 1992. We have seen something similar to this on several occasions and in different contexts in Africa, e.g. the uprising of the people in South Sudan against decades of oppression by the north, and eventually the waging of a liberation war against the north by the Sudan People's Liberation Army and Movement.

It was also the reluctant decision of our icon, Nelson Mandela, and the leadership of the African National Congress in South Africa to resort to an armed struggle for the liberation of the people after exhausting all peaceful methods of protest and civic action. His magnificent address from the dock in the infamous Rivonia trial after his arrest, clearly outlines the situation which drove him and his co-leaders to reluctantly take that option:

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<sup>11</sup> Romero, *Homilias*, 12 February, 1978, “Romero, The Violence of Love”, pg. 36-37. The Plough Publishing House, Farmington PA.

<sup>12</sup> Romero, *Homilias*, 23 September, 1979, “Romero, The Violence of Love”, pg. 166. The Plough Publishing House, Farmington PA.

"I must deal immediately and at some length with the question of violence.....I do not....deny that I planned sabotage. I did not plan it in a spirit of recklessness, nor because I have any love of violence. I planned it as a result of a calm and sober assessment of the political situation that had arisen after many years of tyranny, exploitation, and oppression of my people by the Whites....."

I, and the others who started the organization, did so for two reasons. Firstly, we believed that as a result of Government policy, violence by the African people had become inevitable, and that unless responsible leadership was given to canalize and control the feelings of our people, there would be outbreaks of terrorism which would produce an intensity of bitterness and hostility between the various races of this country which is not produced even by war. Secondly, we felt that without violence there would be no way open to the African people to succeed in their struggle against the principle of white supremacy. All lawful modes of expressing opposition to this principle had been closed by legislation, and we were placed in a position in which we had either to accept a permanent state of inferiority, or to defy the Government. We chose to defy the law. We first broke the law in a way which avoided any recourse to violence; when this form was legislated against, and when the Government resorted to a show of force to crush opposition to its policies, only then did we decide to answer violence with violence.....

During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die."

Can we juxtapose Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Romero? I think so. Here we have two icons who were prepared to die for their deeply held beliefs which were discerned in the actual historical context and reality of those who suffered most from structural injustice and oppression.

Clearly, Romero fiercely condemned all forms of violence and oppression against innocent people. His inspiration came from the Gospel, the pastoral analysis and vision of Medellin and Puebla, and the integration into his thinking of Catholic Social Teaching principles like the common good, justice and the preferential option for the poor. He also affirmed the right of people to oppose a regime which caused untold destruction and suffering to ordinary citizens. In his Fourth Pastoral Letter, he wrote:

"The church condemns *structural or institutionalized violence, the result of an unjust situation in which the majority of men, women, and children in our country find themselves deprived of the necessities of life* (cf. Third Pastoral Letter). The church condemns this violence not only because it is unjust in itself, and the objective expression of personal and collective sin, but also because it is the cause of other innumerable cruelties and more obvious acts of violence".

"On the other hand, Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, quoted at the Medellin assembly, takes up again the classic teaching of Catholic theology, according to which insurrection is legitimate *in the very exceptional circumstances of an evident, prolonged tyranny that seriously works against fundamental human rights and seriously damages the common good of the country, whether it proceeds from one person or from clearly unjust structures* (cf. Third Pastoral Letter)".<sup>13</sup>

I sense from what Romero said that he was aware of the potential in revolutionary violence and armed struggle to degenerate into the use of violence to achieve power as an end in itself, or that armed struggle could itself bring about new forms of injustice, violence and destruction. But I also think it would have pained him in the depths of his being that people and communities were "driven", as it were, to take an option for violence because of overwhelming violence against them and a despair that anything would change; in other words, he would have been understanding towards them and what they chose to do, while never being part of that option for violence.

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<sup>13</sup> Romero, Fourth Pastoral Letter, # 70 and # 74.

His stance, I think, was one of active and constructive non-violence in view of promoting the common good. On November 27, 1977, he said: “We have never preached violence, except the violence of love, which left Christ nailed to a cross, the violence that we must each do to ourselves to overcome our selfishness and such cruel inequalities 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 wills to beat weapons into sickles for work”.<sup>14</sup>

In many ways, we as Church in South Africa during the struggle against apartheid, and especially when it became an armed struggle, tried to tread that difficult and challenging path of Monseñor – being constructively supportive through our solidarity and action with the poor, the suffering and oppressed; and actively engaging in the protection/promotion of human rights and the rights of the people’s movements and organizations on the ground. We did not always succeed, and the bishops were sometimes slow to take a courageous stance and to act decisively, especially during the earlier years of apartheid – which really began as a formal system in 1948. In a situation which was always so volatile and unpredictable it was not easy for the bishops to maintain a consistent and thought-through prophetic stance, especially since we were still very much a missionary Church. But as the oppression became more brutal especially in the late 1970s and 1980s, the bishops took an increasingly principled and prophetic stand - their call for justice and change became ever clearer.

We had our prophet in the person of Archbishop Denis Hurley who always moved our Church leadership towards more conscious and committed involvement in the struggle for justice, human rights and freedom both in the dioceses and at national level. He was one of the great prophetic Church leaders who walked side by side with the people in protest marches and courageous witness and action. He, together with Archbishop Desmond Tutu and many other Christian and religious leaders inspired and participated in the struggle of hundreds of thousands of ordinary people who sacrificed so much so that we could hope for a different future. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission called the Churches in South Africa to testify before it on their role in the apartheid struggle. Archbishop Buti Tlhagale of Johannesburg and I testified before the Commissioners, led by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. In addition to sharing all we actually did as Bishops and as a Church - which was significant - we also confessed our failures and asked forgiveness of those who had suffered so much.

Church leaders, I think, need to always *learn* from history. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Church leadership in El Salvador was aligned to the rich, the powerful and the military – that had *consequences!* Church leaders in every age, therefore, need to humbly reflect on the call of the Synod on Justice in the World: “While the Church is bound to give witness to justice, she recognizes that anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes. Hence we must undertake an examination of the modes of acting and of the possessions and life style found within the Church herself...”<sup>15</sup> ..... “The examination of conscience which we have made together, regarding the Church’s involvement in action for justice, will remain ineffective if it is not given flesh in the life of our local Churches at all their levels.....”<sup>16</sup>

But, sometimes an even more difficult challenge follows the end of violence or the signing of peace agreements: how to address and redress the suffering of the victims of violence and oppression *after* wars, crimes against humanity and human rights atrocities. This will demand post-conflict resolution and the healing of traumatized people; the reconstruction of society; justice for the victims and the perpetrators, and confronting other issues/needs - and, if possible, forgiveness and reconciliation when

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<sup>14</sup> Romero, *Homilias*, 27 November, 1977, “Romero, The Violence of Love”, pg. 12. The Plough Publishing House, Farmington PA.

<sup>15</sup> Synod on Justice in the World, # 40.

<sup>16</sup> Synod on Justice in the World, # 72.

those who have suffered come to the point where this can be offered freely to the perpetrators. All this can be brought together under the concept of Transitional Justice, the last facet of my address tonight.

## **Transitional Justice - Truth, Justice and Restitution**

The concept of “Transitional Justice” emerged from approaches which were developed to contribute to transitions from authoritarianism towards democracy in Latin American States in the 1980’s. I would like to briefly reflect on three key aspects of Transitional Justice in post-conflict situations, whether in Latin and South America, the former Yugoslavia, or in Africa and South Africa.

The first challenge is to ensure that the outcomes of any Transitional Justice process benefit the *victims*. It must redress past wrongs. It is often said that for Transitional Justice to be just, it should follow the phases of our sacramental confession with full disclosure of sins (injustices) committed, in other words, the recovery of truth; then, contrition (sorrow and asking forgiveness for the wrongs done - restoration); and penance (restitution) by those responsible for the injustices and wrongs.

### **Recovery of the Truth**

Romero had his own methodology for dealing with atrocities: enabling the victims to share the truth of what had happened to them and their loved ones, which he and his legal team documented with great care; calling for justice for the victims and recompense for those who had suffered; opposed to revenge, and always calling for a change of heart, for conversion!

One of the crucial needs of victims who desire justice in post-conflict situations has been to discover the truth about killings and disappearances of loved ones, and one of the mechanisms to discover the truth which has been adopted in several countries has been some form of a Truth Commission. There have been at least 25 Truth Commissions or Commissions of Inquiry into human rights abuses in the world. In South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) constituted the key public Transitional Justice mechanism. In some countries, a different process was followed such as prosecution of individual perpetrators of human rights violations, reparations, lustration (i.e., banning of perpetrators from public office) and the use of traditional or cultural justice mechanisms such as *gacaca* in Rwanda and *mato oput* in Uganda.

Most of these Truth Commissions were only partially successful, even though there were some significant achievements. But sometimes it may not be possible to achieve an inclusive commitment to a Truth Commission by all role-players from civil and political structures, including the Churches. Is there still something which can be done to recover the truth?

As with Romero and his documentation centre in San Salvador, one of the great achievements by civil society and the Churches in Zimbabwe, for example, has been the documentation of atrocities and human rights violations over several years in that country. This kind of documentation has also achieved notable success in countries like Brazil, Colombia, and Guatemala, e.g. the famous *Nunca Mais* report of 1985 in Brazil by lawyers and church activists, and the *Nunca Mas* report in Guatemala with thousands of interviews conducted by the Catholic Church. So, the recovery of truth as a precursor to enabling victims to find justice.

### **Retributive *vis a vis* Restorative Justice**

For states in transition, Transitional Justice emphasises the centrality of *justice* as the cornerstone of both the process and its outcomes. In the search for justice, the voice of the victims has to be



recognized during such a process. In this way their testimony is given public recognition, affirmation and acknowledgement. It calls for a reading of history and reality as *the victims experienced it*, and what they desire for the future. Through this the victims may begin to feel that their dignity is being respected and restored. The restoration of personal dignity is at the heart of Catholic Social Teaching flowing from the *imago dei* tradition, i.e. that each person is made in the image and likeness of God.

Another outcome in the transition process should be to create and nurture an environment where the past pathologies and atrocities will not be repeated, and the ways to achieve this. But, increasingly the discussion around justice is focussing on *restorative justice* as distinct from retributive justice. Retributive justice has a primary focus: retribution against the perpetrators, punishing the perpetrators for the crimes committed, e.g. at the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

Restorative justice holds together a three-fold commitment: firstly, to affirm and restore the dignity of those whose human rights have been violated, as we have just noted; secondly, to hold perpetrators accountable, emphasising the harm they have done to other individual human beings and communities, and the need for restitution by them to those people; and, thirdly, to create conditions in which human rights will be respected in the future and a minimally decent society can be promoted. Archbishop Desmond Tutu said that restorative justice “is concerned not so much with punishment as with correcting imbalances, restoring broken relationships with healing, harmony and reconciliation”.<sup>17</sup> In Africa, there has been a recovery of traditional and cultural methods of bringing about healing and reconciliation in communities torn apart by atrocities, which involve perpetrators meeting victims and being made accountable to them, and the same is true elsewhere. Much can be learnt from such experiences. But, crucially, restorative justice must also promote economic transformation in favour of the victims and the impoverished people in societies, so that there can indeed be a better future for them all. This brings me to the last point, the issue of restitution and reparations to victims.

### **Restitution, Reparations to Victims, Economic Transformation**

Catholic Social Teaching would add to the Biblical understanding of justice the notion of *distributive justice*, the equitable sharing of the goods of creation. *Gaudium et Spes* talks about “paying attention to the universal destination of earthly goods. The right of having a share of earthly goods sufficient for oneself and one’s family belongs to everyone. The fathers and doctors of the church held this opinion, teaching that everyone is obliged to come to the relief of the poor, and to do so not merely out of their superfluous goods”.<sup>18</sup>

Accepting accountability, reparation and restitution by the perpetrators of atrocities is central to the goal that justice be “seen to be done” in states in transition. But such restitution should also include the past *beneficiaries* of injustice and human rights violations perpetrated by the primary agents. For example, at the Truth Commission hearings in South Africa, Archbishop Thagale and I highlighted the role played by big business and corporations, including international corporations, in supporting the apartheid system, and in so doing becoming beneficiaries of the system and making huge profits at the expense of the victims and the poor. We made a proposal, based on the CST principle of Solidarity, that a once-off solidarity tax be required of all these corporations and entities. The billions collected could be held in a special Trust managed by independent Trustees, and then disbursed through programmes and development projects in which the victims would participate. The goal? To *transform* the reality of the victims and the poor - thus providing for meaningful restitution. Our proposal was not accepted.

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<sup>17</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report. Chapter 1 #36.

<sup>18</sup> *Gaudium et Spes* #69.

And so, it is very important to ensure that the justice process does not only discover the truth however imperfectly, nor only give recognition and affirmation to the victims – vitally important as these are. In line with the “option for the poor”, justice must ensure that the poor and the victims benefit directly from the resources of the earth or nation as called for in *Gaudium et Spes* – so that they can live a life of dignity and at least an adequate level of economic well-being. The question of economic development after war and conflict is critical, therefore. This includes empowering victims and the poor to become *agents* in the transformation of their own situation so that they can participate in creating a better quality of life for all the disadvantaged. As the Synod stated so clearly: “The right to development must be seen as a dynamic interpenetration of all those fundamental human rights upon which the aspirations of individuals and nations are based.”<sup>19</sup>

For me this sums up Oscar Romero: in him one sees the continual interplay of an unending struggle for justice which is rooted in the actual historical reality of suffering people, and integral human development to ensure the common good. As he said so clearly: “Social justice and a redistribution of wealth are measures of our hope. We must be creative, with audacious hope, to fashion a world without the structural violence of poverty, without cultures which exclude people.”<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

Romero – an icon for Africa and South Africa? Most definitely – his struggle has been mirrored and validated countless times in our struggles, and in the struggle of our own icon Nelson Mandela. Both of them lived in situations marked by extreme injustices and the abuse of power; both of them faced the wrath of powerful oligarchies. But both Romero and Mandela named and exposed the evil for what it was and is. What this asks of us today, wherever we are, is to discern and analyze what are the defining injustices, indeed sins, that oppress people anywhere now, that take away the destinies of people; and the sins that the dominant nations perpetrate. Romero and Mandela insisted on restoring to public discourse the centrality of values such as justice, solidarity, sacrifice. Both give substance to the meaning of witness because both men by their actions on behalf of justice offer hope to people everywhere when so few today see any reason to hope.

What characterizes so much of Africa and South Africa at present is the dearth of *true leadership* – or a values-based leadership - at all levels of government. Both Romero and Mandela came into a public arena where there was a serious lack of meaningful leadership; yet they revealed a personal quality of leadership which we can only regard as prophetic, and both validate a genre of leadership that has as its content a deeply transformational agenda. The hope that flows from such leadership is measurable in terms of social justice, and how social justice is actually experienced by the disadvantaged in society.

But, beyond the challenge to develop new forms of leadership to sustain a process of transformation and development, Romero reminds us of an uncomfortable truth – and this is that change, if it does not reach to the very *roots* of our social pathologies, is at best partial, possibly superficial and seldom in the real interest of transforming the lot of the poor. Change demands real *conversion* – a constant call of Romero. “As long as one does not live a conversion in one’s heart, a teaching enlightened by faith to organize life according to the heart of God, all will be feeble, revolutionary, passing, violent.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> 1971 Synod on Justice in the World, # 15.

<sup>20</sup> ‘Oscar Romero: Reflections on his life and writings’, ed Marie Dennis, Renny Golden and Scott Wright, p. 119. Orbis Publications, NY 2000.

<sup>21</sup> Romero, *Homilias*, 14 March, 1977; “Romero, The Violence of Love”, pg. 1. The Plough Publishing House, Farmington PA.

And so, the future for South Africa? South Africa is not the abstract “rainbow nation” which sounds so nice. It is a nation that is trapped in many contradictions in which the poor are again the losers, as they so often are. South Africa together with Brazil has the highest Gini Co-efficient in the world – this measures inequality in income distribution in a population. In addition, in South Africa we have a very high rate of murder, assault and rape, and one of highest indices of strikes and protest action which often turns violent – pointing to our violent past, a violence which still visits us today because millions of our poor and disadvantaged people feel hopeless, that they still do not share in what the country can provide for all - and not just for the privileged few. So much remains to be done; we still carry so much baggage from our past. We have come a long way, but we have an even longer way to go. And the Church has a role to play in turning people and communities into agents of change. Romero’s word and witness, if it can be made known and reflected upon, can be an inspiration and support as we continue our journey to transform Africa and South Africa so that there can be life and hope for the “little ones”. And so, I conclude with reflections from our two icons.

Nelson Mandela wrote the following in the last two paragraphs of his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*: “When I walked out of prison, that was my mission, to liberate the oppressed and the oppressor both. Some say that has now been achieved. But I know that that is not the case. The truth is that we are not yet free; we have merely achieved the freedom to be free, the right not to be oppressed. We have not taken the final step of our journey, but the first step on a longer and even more difficult road. For to be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.....

I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter; I have made missteps along the way. But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom come responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not yet ended”.<sup>22</sup> (*Long Walk to Freedom*, page 617). A powerful ending – political liberation, freedom, is just a first step towards achieving real human and economic transformation for people to be able to live in dignity.

Mandela’s words are so reminiscent of Oscar Romero’s inner passion and his prophetic journey as bishop with his people – for just 3 short years.....and, so, I end with one of my favourite quotations from Monseñor, his magnificent challenge to me, to South Africa, and to the kind of Church we should be in our suffering world:

“The poor masses of our land find in the church the voice of Israel’s prophets. There are among us those who sell the just for money and the poor for a pair of sandals, as the prophets said. There are those who pile up spoils and plunder in their palaces, who crush the poor, who bring on a reign of violence while reclining on beds of ivory, who join house to house and field to field so as to take up all there is and remain alone in the land. (cf. Amos 6:3-4; Isaiah 5:8). These texts of the prophets are not distant voices that we read with reverence in our liturgy. They are daily realities, whose cruelty and vehemence we live each day. And therefore.....the church suffers the fate of the poor, which is persecution..... Because it disquiets, it is slandered, and its voice crying against injustice is disregarded.....

The church’s good name is not a matter of being on good terms with the powerful. The church’s good name is a matter of knowing that the poor regard the church as their own, of knowing that the church’s

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<sup>22</sup> Nelson Mandela, “Long Walk to Freedom”, page 617.

life on earth is to call on all, on the rich as well, to be converted and to be saved alongside the poor, for they are the only ones called blessed".<sup>23</sup>

That was just 35 days before he was assassinated. Dom Pedro Casadaliga's words fill my heart this evening as I close: "Saint Romero of the Americas, our shepherd and our martyr. No one can ever silence your last homily." Thank you.

Bishop Kevin Dowling C.Ss.R.  
Notre Dame University and St. Mary's College, 28 March 2012

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<sup>23</sup> Romero, *Homilias*, 17 February, 1980; "Romero, The Violence of Love", pg. 190-191. The Plough Publishing House, Farmington PA.