

Maria Exall, Romero Week 2023, St Martin-in-the-Fields, London 25 March 2023

RESPONDING TO THE CRY OF THE POOR TODAY

THE INSPIRATION OF ST OSCAR ROMERO AND THE MARTYRS OF EL SALVADOR

Address to the Ecumenical Service at St Martin in the Fields to mark the 43rd Anniversary of the martyrdom of Archbishop Romero, 25 March 2023

Maria Exall, President Trades Union Congress

Introduction - our Martyr

Romero is our Martyr. His life and death tell us about responding to the injustice of poverty. He is a saint for our times because he allowed himself to be open to the cry of the poor.

Today that cry is often dismissed/ covered up/ suppressed.

We live in a sophisticated society with ever more methods of communication but facts and truth are competing for our attention with conspiracy theories and post truth narratives. We live in a time of increasing authoritarian and reactionary national populism which would deny the interconnected world in which we live and set groups of people against each other. Deliberate misinformation about some of the most vulnerable in society is promoted by those in power, to keep their power. And those who are searching for more meaning than this are easily distracted. The lure of self realisations that are purely individual and self-referential has increased, and this takes us further away from developing our humanity through others and in relationship.

How can we go beyond what Dorothee Soelle has called the commotion in society, and in ourselves, to see what is real and true? ¹ What spiritual resources do we as individuals, and us as a 21st Churches need, to clearly hear the poor, to be Churches for the poor.

We can learn from Romero how to do this - from the example of his life and from his spirituality.

I would like to spend a little time dwelling on his example and his spiritual ideas before discussing his legacy and what it means for us as Christians in Britain today

1. The context of Romero's Conversion

Romero's time and place were very different to ours. He was born in an agricultural society, a society with a history of recent violence and repression of its own people.

¹ Dorothee Soelle 'The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance' Augsburg Fortress 2001 pg31 referring to Martin Buber's juxtaposition between commotion and oneness "The commotion lets us have things but closes itself to Unity"
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Once he was ordained he practiced his ministry amongst the people he had grown up with before moving up the Church hierarchy. He was a diligent if cautious priest.

But he experienced a transfiguration of his ministry and commitment to serving the people of El Salvador became something more

We know he went through a conversion, gradual but definite, in response to the deteriorating political situation around him, and that he was particularly affected by the killing of Rutilo Grande. He allowed himself to change.

And we see the results of that change in the ministry of the last three years of his life.

After decades of resisting he had a change of mind and heart to a deeper understanding of the Church as Church for the poor. To see that the poor are blessedness because they are the ones who need God. His conversion can be explained in political theology terms as a move to the model of the preferential option for the poor.

It was a conversion to an understanding of “Christ who is not distant from history” to a commitment to “Christ in the midst of the movement of people”,² recognising, as the theologian Edward Schillebeeckx described it, God’s action in salvation history.³

2. Spiritual Poverty

Romero’s early spiritual formation took place in a different Church than we have now. It was pre Vatican 2 with the dominance of a pre-modern sensibility (in the Catholic sense of pre modern)

However the spiritual tradition of the Church stretches back beyond the Modern beyond the Mediaeval, to pre modern in the historical sense. And key elements in our spiritual tradition persist over the centuries and are rediscovered for new times – *ressourcement*.

Relevant to Romero’s life is the concept of spiritual poverty. This is rooted in the New Testament idea of kenosis (self-emptying) understood in the context of the tradition of negative theology, of unknowing.⁴

Also in an understanding of the importance of the Cross - to take up our crosses because we follow Christ. Not as a morbid sacrifice but a true self denial that bears fruit.⁵ “Poverty is a

² ‘Through the Year with Oscar Romero: Daily Meditations’ trans Irene.B.Hodgson DLT 2006. Day 345

³ Edward Schillebeeckx ‘Jesus in our Western Culture: Mysticism ,Ethics and Politics’ SCM Press 1987 p 9 “The salvation from God comes about first of all in the secular reality of history and not primarily in the consciousness of believers who are aware of it”

⁴ Meditations 144

⁵ Meditations 129

spirituality” said Romero. “It is the willingness of a soul open to God.”⁶ And to reach out beyond the self to others “becoming poor to seek with others the truth”⁷

Transcendence and solidarity

In his Sermons and writings Romero speaks of transcendence. This is not to spiritualise or dematerialise poverty but to promote a transcendence of the self that is necessary for us to hear the poor and respond.

Because of his self transcendence he was able to see Christ is present in the little ones.⁸ He had the humility to be in solidarity with the humiliated.⁹ He said,

“The transcendence the Church preaches is not alienation, it is not going to heaven to think about eternal life and forget about problems on earth. It is a transcendence from the human heart. It is entering into the reality of a child, of the poor, of those wearing rags, of the sick of a hovel, of a shack. It is going to share with them. And from the very heart of misery, to transcend it, to elevate it, to promote it, to say to them ‘You aren’t trash. You aren’t marginalised. It is to say exactly the opposite, You are valuable.’”¹⁰

Romero believed that an intimate and sincere search for God will produce fruits of love justice and truth” That there is a link between transcendence and action for social justice.

As Meister Eckhart said we don’t search for God so when that we find God we wrap God up in a cloak and stuff God under a bench.

In the 2021 Kenneth Leech Memorial Lecture Rowan Williams spoke about the nature of the empathy and integrity we need to have effective solidarity with those who are poor and marginalised. He maintained it was key to respect the experiences of others, not to reinterpret or appropriate them. I think Romero would agree. As he said:

“We don’t serve the poor with paternalism, helping them as if we are reaching down from above to someone below. This is not what God wants, but rather he wants us to do this as one brother or sister to another. This is my brother or sister, this is Christ, and with Christ, I am not reaching down from above to someone below rather I am reaching up from below to serve him above.”¹¹

⁶ Meditations 326 and 327

⁷ Meditations 48

⁸ Meditations 250

⁹ Klaus Wengst ‘Humility: Solidarity of the humiliated’. SCM Press 1988

¹⁰ Meditations 246

¹¹ Meditations 238

3. The Legacy of Romero today

So what is the legacy of Romero for us 43 years after his martyrdom?

Put simply you in the Romero Trust keep the memory alive, maintaining relations with the Church in El Salvador and recent visit of John Wilson, Archbishop of Southwark, is a sign of that. And keeping an awareness of necessity of a global perspective and understanding the situation for El Salvador today.

But his legacy is something that is inside all of us who have been touched by Romero's life and death.

To get a bit personal: I was a student of 19 when Romero was martyred. It coincided with me starting to work through the ethical and hence political aspects of my faith.

The faith community I was part of at the time, the Catholic Chaplaincy at the University of Sheffield, was deeply affected by what happened to Romero and those in the Church in El Salvador standing for justice was our inspiration. We also developed our understanding of the situation in Central America because we lived in a city with a large Latin American diaspora.

The lesson of Romero's death for us was to look outwards and take responsibility for the society and world around us rather than just be submerged in the preoccupations of student life and subsequently post student life. To pray more, to think more, to do more.

The 1980s was a turbulent time with the riots in deindustrialised urban 'ghost towns' and the demonisation of striking miners as 'the enemy within'. But you can see these events differently to how they are presented. Instead as resistance to the indignities of unemployment and a collective response to harsh economic times.

Awareness of structural economic and political sins in the world are not only in the books on liberation theology but also read in our immediate time and place. I started to learn practical lessons. That things are better understood from the peripheries and margins. That there is an obligation to social solidarity for the poor and marginalised in the here and now.

Christian vocation to serve and Catholic Social Teaching

The context today in the UK is far from that of El Salvador in 1980 but the principles are the same. We are an advanced capitalist country (and I am using the word advanced in a descriptive rather than normative sense). Our political economy is different and many of us are from a global

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perspective privileged economically and socially. Nevertheless the poor and the marginalised are with us and we cannot ignore.

Pope Francis has reminded us in *Fratelli Tutti* of the two poles of universality and social friendship. We have an obligation to global justice (being part of the larger human family) and to work for justice in our own country.¹²

There is something in the experience of growing up Christian, and indeed in other religious traditions, that does predispose you to see we are here to serve others. An instinctive understanding of the importance of the collective values of solidarity worldwide, in our own society and our own immediate situation. And this includes defending peoples' dignity in the workplace and worker's rights cross the globe.

Certainly the British Trade Union movement has a disproportionate number of leaders and activists who are from a Catholic background - the TUC General Council is full of them!

And the values of social solidarity exist in movements within secular society including the labour movement, as well as in our faith tradition. Catholic Social Teaching represents the weaving together of these [as Anna Rowlands has explained].¹³

The modern phase of the Catholic Social Teaching started with *Rerum Novarum*, written at the end of the 19th when mass industrialisation was accelerating in Europe. It explicitly says working people have a right to organise themselves in Unions, and this was reaffirmed in Encyclicals that follow. The aspiration to workplace justice and dignity at work is right.

In our times, capitalism's exploitation of working people is hegemonic – it pervades our economic systems and has social and political consequences.

The services we all rely on to have a decent life such as affordable housing provision, utilities such as water energy and comms are not provided to enhance our human dignity. Instead they are cash cows for shareholders to make more profits. And as we have seen over the past year – ordinary workers are expected to accept cuts in pay but not those at the top.

¹² *Fratelli Tutti* 149. Also 145 " We need to sink our roots deeper into the fertile soil and history of our native place, which is a gift of God. We can work on a small scale, in our own neighbourhood, but with a larger perspective"

¹³ Anna Rowlands 'Towards a Politics of Communion; Catholic Social Teaching in Dark Times' Bloomsbury 2021. "The theologised social principle of solidarity in Catholic Social Teaching represents a weaving together of something as ancient as the Church itself – together with things borrowed - to make something new which exists in a relationship of critical affinity with a range of contemporary movements" Pg 242-3
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In the most recent egregious example, the CEO of Centrica (who own British Gas) was awarded a package worth £ 4.5 million when we are all paying double for our energy bills. There is something very wrong with our political economy.

Swathes of our society are subject to market mechanisms that exploit working people of all backgrounds for profit whether they be university lecturers or care assistants. There is an absolute exploitation of cheap and precarious labour but also a relative exploitation of those who may be paid more but are only valued for their productivity or profitability.

Important institutions such as schools and hospitals are increasingly subject to financial disciplines that fail to take account of the whole person whether they be the pupil or the patient or the teacher or the health worker.

In the unprecedented industrial action for a generation that has taken place this year many of the striking workers have been those who deliver key services to the public. They and their Union leaderships have made clear that a motivation of their action is pay, yes, but also to protect the quality, viability and integrity of the services they provide to us all, especially the most vulnerable.

Poverty in Britain today

In Britain today you can do a fair days work but not get a fair days pay. Nearly two thirds of all poverty in the UK is in work poverty. As well as low pay, issues of precarity of work and job insecurity undermine family and home life and community involvement.

Child poverty has quadrupled since 2010 to over 4 million, 29% of all UK children. That is 9 in a classroom of 30. And over 70% of children growing up in poverty live in a household where at least one person works.

Call it class society or just call it inequality and unfairness, we know that there is systematic problem that is both objective and subjective. There is an economic inequality with experiences of exclusion which trap people and deny them the ability to flourish layered on top.

Trade Unionists are concerned about the low pay that means millions are in poverty but we are also concerned about the systematic exclusion of poorer people from British society whether that be economic or political decision making, access to education and culture, as well as to decent incomes.

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Richer people think they know better than others how to run our society. But really, really, really, they don't. Wealth inequality in the UK is rising and it has been for the majority of the last four decades. At present the escalation of food and energy prices and cost of living crisis is driven by war and climate change and Brexit. But the poorest have been suffering well before this.

Taking the last 12 years as a yardstick – from the onset of austerity - we have seen hundreds of billions taken from Government public finances over this time and redistributed to those who are richer. And it goes on. The headline announcement of the Budget last week was that the richest will receive the biggest subsidy of all – £28 billion [given in tax relief] – to make their pensions even bigger.

Debt Justice estimate that over 13 million people in the UK now live in relative poverty. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation estimates that for people to afford essential household items, utility bills and food the basic rate of Universal Credit is £35 short a week for a single person and £66 short for a couple.

For those on low pay but not on means tested benefits there is a gap of £3,500 a year. And this does not take account of rises in housing costs, childcare costs and the specific experiences of those with disabilities and in lone parent families, or families with 3 or more children.

On top of this central Government financial support for public services run by local authorities on which many poor people rely has halved since 2010. And in many working class areas support has been cut by more than this. There is an apparent crisis in Government funding of the national public services but there is mass private affluence.

The politics of the mean society

What we are prepared to do about this? What we contribute together in taxes ends up as a calculation based on a lowest common denominator of self-interest.

We may (rightly) critique our political representatives for failing to lead of matters on matters of moral value in our society including fair taxation and redistribution of wealth. But sadly, all the polling shows that we as UK citizens are overall much less sympathetic in response to the plight of the poorest in our society than we were in 1980.

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What we are prepared to give to help others is much less. Support for 'austerity', that is cuts to public services for the most vulnerable, has been socialised over many years as has admiration for the wealthy.¹⁴ This constrains our political democracy and makes us a meaner society.

The treatment of those who are poor and on benefits in Britain today is callous and brutal. The benefits system has become punitive with one in twelve claimants now facing sanctions and that is before the announcements in this year's Budget which will make things even worse.

The way we treat those in our society who rely on welfare is only matched by the inhumanity of how as a country treat immigrants and asylum seekers. We all lose out when poorer people are excluded from human flourishing. We are meant to live as sisters and brothers and friends and care for each other. We all lose when the collective aspect of our humanity is denied.

Conclusion - The challenge to us as Church

How can Romero's example guide us as Christians today to respond to the cry of the poor in our own country?

As Christians we know the difficult sayings of the Sermon on the Mount are true. Blessed are the poor. And we know we must take on the cause of the poor as if they were Christ himself

But are we, the prophetic Church of Romero, a Church that "cannot remain silent when it sees injustices of an economic nature, of a political nature, of a social nature"? A Church that "if it remains silent is complicit"¹⁵?

The final thing I want to speak about today is an aspect of Romero's death.

The responsibility for his death was down to Christians – reactionary Catholics and reactionary Evangelical Christians who supported an oppressive out of control violent political establishment.

Sometimes we as Christians are asked to reject the values of secular society in the name of our faith - and sometimes this is correct. However, equally, and perhaps more significantly at the present time, we should reject 'Christian values' when we see them as oblivious to the injustice of poverty and promoting hate that leads to violence.

¹⁴ New Economic Foundation blog 28th February 2023

¹⁵ Meditations 14

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And following the Jesus of the gospels we must call out hypocrisy – admit that non-Christians can follow Christ more closely than many who call ourselves Christians.

We need to be as honest as Romero was when he said “The Church does not have a monopoly on the Kingdom of God” that “Outside the Church, anyone who struggles for justice, anyone who makes demands in an unjust atmosphere, is working for the Kingdom of God. This person may not be a Christian.”¹⁶

If this makes us Church goers feel uncomfortable, if our complacency is challenged by this, that too is in the spirit of Romero.

“This is what the Church wants – to bother your conscience to provoke a crisis in the times we are living in. A Church that doesn’t stir up a crisis, a gospel that doesn’t make us uncomfortable... a word of God that doesn’t touch on the specific sins of the society in which it is spoken, what kind of gospel is that?”

With Romero we need to recognise that it is through the poor that God is making history,¹⁷ it is through the poor that we are saved.¹⁸

St Oscar Romero, pray for us.

¹⁶ Meditations 166

¹⁷ Meditations 258

¹⁸ Meditations 334