

# THE LIFE, LOSS AND LEGACY OF ROMERO

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the anniversary of the canonisation of Oscar Romero in 2018

First, I would like to thank SCIAF, the Scottish Bishops' Justice and Peace Commission, the Romero Trust and the Edinburgh Jesuit Centre for your kind invitation. Second, I would like to apologize for my limitations in English and for all the harm I will do this evening to the wonderful language of Shakespeare.

Archbishop Romero has changed my life. He brought me to El Salvador and today he brought me to Edinburgh. What most deeply impressed me in his life was the change that took place in him. I will talk more about this later.

Let me start with a story Archbishop Romero told at the funeral mass of Fr Alfonso Navarro on 12 May 1977. Alfonso Navarro was the second priest assassinated in El Salvador. Romero started his homily with a story about a caravan that was traveling through the desert and being guided by a Bedouin:

*"They had become desperate and thirsty and were searching for water in the mirages of the desert. Their guide said: 'Not there, over there.' He had spoken these words so many times that the members of the caravan became frustrated, took out a gun and shot the guide. As the guide was dying, he extended his hand and said one last time: 'Not there, over there.'*

*He died pointing the way. This legend becomes a reality in our midst: a priest, Fr. Navarro, shot through the mouth, dies forgiving and praying for his assassins."*<sup>1</sup>

This legend becomes a reality also in our midst. We remember Oscar Romero: a bishop, shot through the heart during the celebration of the eucharist, giving up his life for his people and praying for his assassins. Oscar Romero points the way for us in the present situation of suffering and dismay, even here in Europe. He is a *Jesuanic martir*, as Jon Sobrino put it. He points the way to change, to a poor Church for the poor and to hope.

## 1. THE WAY TO CHANGE

Let me start with a brief sketch of Oscar Romero's life and a deeper analysis of his change.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.romerotrusted.org.uk/homilies-and-writings/homilies/ideal-never-dies>

Born on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1917, Oscar Arnulfo Romero y Galdámez was sent to study for the priesthood in Rome and was ordained in April 1942. He embraced a simple lifestyle; he was a popular preacher who responded with real compassion to the plight of the poor. He gave dedicated pastoral service to the diocese of San Miguel for 25 years – a greatly-admired workaholic in a cassock!

There followed seven years of pastoral famine in the capital city, San Salvador, as an ecclesiastical bureaucrat. Ordained Auxiliary Bishop in 1970, he gained a reputation as a stubborn and reactionary prelate. Seemingly unsympathetic to the new social justice thrust of the Latin American Church, he was suspicious of the clergy and the Base Christian Communities of the archdiocese working alongside the exploited rural poor, promoting social organisations and land reform.

A brief spell back in the countryside as Bishop of Santiago de Maria opened Romero's eyes as he reconnected to the semi-feudal misery and hardship of the campesinos and witnessed the murderous repression being suffered at the hands of the security forces. In February 1977 he was the surprising choice to be the new Archbishop of San Salvador.

A crucial moment in his process of change – some speak even of a conversion – was the assassination of the Jesuit, Fr Rutilio Grande, together with his two companions, Manuel Solórzano and Nelson Rutilio Lemus, on 12<sup>th</sup> March 1977. Rutilio Grande was assassinated by the rich landowners for his commitment to the poor and for social justice. It was tragic but also very significant that Rutilio did not die alone. His blood really mingled with the blood of the poor.

When Romero stood that evening in front of the still bleeding corpses, something very profound and overwhelming was happening in him. Oscar Romero was a friend of Rutilio, but he had been critical about his pastoral commitment. He felt now that Rutilio was pointing him to a new way, which was the way of Jesus. Archbishop Arturo Rivera y Damas, his later successor, put it in these words: *“One martyr gave birth to another. Before the body of Father Rutilio Grande, Mons. Romero, on his twentieth day as Archbishop, felt the call of Christ to overcome his natural human shyness and become an intrepid apostle. From that moment, Mons. Romero left the pagan lands of Tyre and Sidon, and marched boldly towards Jerusalem.”*

And Pope Francis, in a meeting with Father Rodolfo Cardenal SJ in October 2015, said: *“Rutilio's great miracle is Mons. Romero.”* Here Pope Francis took up a popular tradition which attributes the fundamental change in Romero to the death of Rutilio Grande and his two companions. Where before he had been shy, even anxious, and more at home with books, so now Romero went out of his way to meet people. A

bishop always has a lot to learn from his people, he used to say, and set off for the parishes in the slums of San Salvador and in the countryside. This meant arduous journeys on foot to far-flung hamlets in tropical heat; it meant sharing the meagre food of the poor; suffering with them under the insecurity and constant threat from the military government. He set up a cafeteria in the Archbishop's offices, so that those who called could meet and talk with one another. Whenever he was able, he sat down with them and joined in their conversations. He was a bishop listening to people and in this sense also a forerunner of a synodal Church.

Before writing his third pastoral letter he distributed a questionnaire in the communities, inquiring about the sorrows and hopes of people, and even asking for criticism of his way of being bishop. In some way, Oscar Romero was a forerunner of a synodal Church listening to the People of God, as Pope Francis wants it.

Though he had never before quoted the documents from the Latin American Bishops' Conference in Medellín, where the bishops adopted the preferential option for the poor, now the texts of Medellín became one of the most important sources for his sermons and his pastoral letters. Where before he had sought advisers from highly reactionary circles, now he worked most closely with precisely those whom he had, a few years before, regarded as suspect and had reported them to Rome.

The rich, who before had been his friends, now, by and large, rejected him. We can read in his diary on 21<sup>st</sup> August 1979 after celebrating Mass: *"At this Mass, I had a difficult encounter with a lady who said I wasn't the same as I used to be, that I had betrayed her. I absolutely refused to respond. I fully realise that this slander comes from all those who do not like it when the Church begins to impact on their rotten concerns."*<sup>2</sup>

A first point I want to make is: change is possible. It is possible on a personal level, but it is also possible in the Church, in the society and in the world. With the universal synodal process Pope Francis wants a deep change in the Church. This change is intimately linked with the option for the poor. Saint Oscar Romero points the way to a poor Church for the poor.

## **2. THE WAY TO A POOR CHURCH FOR THE POOR**

Romero wanted a Church similar to Christ; a Church serving humankind and especially the poor and needy. So does Pope Francis. I am convinced that we can find much inspiration to build up a poor Church for the poor from Archbishop Romero. According to him, the Church has to continue the life and the work of Jesus. For this, she continually has to convert herself to the reign of God and the poor. This corresponds to Pope Francis' frequent call against ecclesial introversion

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.romerotrusted.org.uk/drupal/sites/default/files/diary/Ashepherdsdiary.pdf> p.311 / p.318 of pdf

and self-centredness: *“making the Church constantly go out from herself, keeping her mission focused on Jesus Christ, and her commitment to the poor.”*<sup>3</sup>

For Romero, the Church's outreach is first to the poor: *“I have tried to state that the proper theological and historical criterion of the Church's praxis must be the world of the poor. Depending on whether it benefits the poor, the Church should support this or that political project. We believe that the only way for the Church to retain its identity and transcendence is by participating in the socio-political processes in our country. In this it will be judged by the poor, in so much as it supports the process of liberation and brings justice and peace to the people....”*

In a very similar way, Pope Francis states: *“It is no longer possible to claim that religion should be restricted to the private sphere and that it exists only to prepare souls for heaven. We know that God wants his children to be happy in this world too, even though they are called to fulfilment in eternity.”*<sup>4</sup>

A Church faithful to the Gospel and to the way of Jesus enters into conflicts. This was Romero's experience: *“The Church is respected, praised, even granted privileges, so long as she preaches eternal salvation and does not involve herself in the real problems of our world. But if the Church is faithful to her mission of denouncing the sin that brings misery to many, and if she proclaims her hope for a more just, humane world, then she is persecuted and calumniated, she is branded as subversive and communist.”*

It is very interesting that from ultra-conservative people, Pope Francis, with his clear criticism of our dominating neoliberal economic system which kills, is also accused of being a Marxist.

Once Romero described his duty as a bishop as *“going around picking up dead bodies”*. This fits with Pope Francis' vision: *“The thing the Church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the Church as a field hospital after the battle. ... to heal wounds. ... I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.”*<sup>5</sup>

For Romero, the option for the poor has to be the guiding principle for the necessary changes in the Church: *“Incarnation and conversion is to get closer to the world of the poor. The most important changes in the Church in pastoral care and*

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<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel), 97

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 182

<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis, reported in “A Big Heart Open to God,” *America* magazine Sept. 19, 2013

*teaching, in religious and priestly life and in the lay movements will not come through introspection, but by turning to the world of the poor."*

Pope Francis almost literally confirms this: *"It is important for the whole Church that welcoming the poor and promoting justice not be entrusted solely to 'experts' but be a focus of all pastoral care, of the formation of future priests and religious, and of the ordinary work of all parishes, movements and ecclesial groups."*<sup>6</sup>

For Romero, the Church is always a Church of sinners, and he acknowledges himself to be the foremost of them. In his second pastoral letter he spoke, too, about "sinfulness in the Church itself", which also needed repentance. The cardinal sin of the Church consisted for him in the times when its teaching was contradicted by its actions.

It is a fundamental temptation for the Church to come to an understanding with the powerful. When necessary, she has to be ready to lose all her privileges: *"It is no honour for the Church to be on good terms with the powerful. The honour of the Church consists in this, that the poor feel at home in her, that she fulfils her mission on earth, that she challenges everyone, the rich as well, to repent and work out their salvation, but starting from the world of the poor, for they, they alone are the ones who are blessed."*

An essential dimension of Oscar Romero's conversion was his constant search for the will of God in the changing circumstances of history. Added to this is his belief and conviction that God shows himself in events today, he is at work in them. He believed this divine will could be read in the signs of the times. This is why in his second pastoral letter he says, *"The changes in the world today are a sign of the times for the Church to grow in her own understanding. She knows that it is God who is interceding in current events in the world and that she must be conscious of these events in order to respond to the Word of God and act for and in the world."*<sup>7</sup>

This again fits with the synodal process Pope Francis wishes for the universal Church.

Romero often said: "The Word of God has to become incarnate in reality." For example, he applied the texts of the Old Testament prophets denouncing injustice and exploitation in Israel in the name of God, to the situation of injustice in El Salvador: *"There are those amongst us who sell to a just person for money and to a poor person for a pair of sandals; there are those who accumulate violence and waste in their palaces; who tread down the poor; who work to bring about a kingdom of violence as they lie on their marble beds; and those who join up one house with another and annex*

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<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis, Address to the "Astalli Centre", the Jesuit Refugee Service in Rome, 10 September 2013

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.romerotrust.org.uk/sites/default/files/second%20pastoral%20letter.pdf>

*field after field, until they own the whole area and are left as the only ones in the country."*

Through the prophets, God demands the situation be transformed.

The reference point for any Church reform must be the Gospel. Reform essentially means bringing the Church closer to the Gospel. As Jesus didn't preach *himself* but *the Kingdom of God*, the Church must be at the service of the Kingdom, she is the sacrament of the Kingdom. The first addressees of the Good News of the Kingdom of God are the poor. Therefore there is an intrinsic relationship between the Church and the poor.

You find this in paragraph 8 of the dogmatic constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, of Vatican II: "Just as Christ carried out the work of redemption in poverty and persecution, so the Church is called to follow the same route that it might communicate the fruits of salvation to men."

Church reform means, therefore, that the Church becomes more similar to Jesus Christ: A Church serving humankind and especially the poor, the needy, the marginalized. Church reform must always be *a conversion to the Kingdom of God* – to use the title of a book by Ignacio Ellacuría SJ. A deep intuition of Pope Francis since the very beginning of his pontificate is that a reform of the Church necessarily goes through the poor.

It seems that a model and a major reference for Pope Francis in his project of a Church reform is Saint Oscar Romero. Already a few weeks after his election he had a meeting with Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia who was in charge of the canonization cause of Romero. The Pope told him that this cause should be "unblocked" and move swiftly. In fact, Oscar Romero's beatification was celebrated in El Salvador in May 2015 and I was privileged to participate in the historic event together with Julian Filochowski and more than 300,000 more. I also participated in the celebration of Romero's canonization four years ago today in Rome.

Pope Francis sees Oscar Romero as a model of a bishop who smells like his sheep and who was fully committed to a poor Church for the poor. *They are brothers in the spirit and allies in the option for the poor.*

Romero gave a lot of attention to the "events of the week" in his homilies. In a context of a controlled press and pedalled lies, he simply spoke the truth about what was happening in the country. He named the victims, dignifying them by using their names. Whenever possible, he named the abusers. Romero didn't consider the events of the week as news items, but as signs of the times in which God's

presence and design were revealed through the concrete circumstances of El Salvador.

Romero was firmly convinced that God chose to communicate through historical events, and that the Bible is the Word of God in its fullest sense only when considered alongside history.

In his second pastoral letter he speaks of the many things that have changed in the Church in recent years for example in the liturgy, in the role of the laity and in the formation of priests. But the fundamental change which explains all the others is, for him, the new relationship between the Church and the world: *“The Church looks upon the world with new eyes. It will raise questions about what is sinful in the world, and it will also allow itself to be questioned by the world as to what is sinful in the Church.”*

In this same pastoral letter, Romero speaks also of the need for a conversion of the Church and he underlines: *“This awareness of her own need for conversion is, historically, something very new, though it was said of the Church in the past that she always had to be reformed (semper reformanda).”*

He continues, quoting Lumen Gentium: *“The same Council guides us in this examination of our consciences when it states frankly, and with all humility, that the Church, embracing sinners in her bosom, is at the same time holy and always in need of being purified, and incessantly pursues the path of penance and renewal (Lumen Gentium, 8). The Church has regained the basic attitude for conversion, which is to turn toward those who are especially lowly, poor, and weak.”*

Romero rejects a “non-evolving traditionalism”: *“To remain anchored in a non-evolving traditionalism, whether out of ignorance or selfishness, is to close one’s eyes to what is meant by authentic Christian tradition. For the tradition that Christ entrusted to his Church is not a museum of souvenirs to be protected.”* The changes *“make the Church even more faithful and better identify her with Jesus Christ”*. *“Her mission will be authentic only so long as it is the mission of Jesus in the new situations, the new circumstances, of history... She is a community of faith whose primary obligation, whose raison d’être, is to continue the life and work of Jesus.”*

Despite his respect for the poor, Romero had a distinct understanding of poverty formed by reality. For him, “sinful poverty” is the product of injustice which denies human beings the right to a life with dignity. This poverty is an indictment of society and situations of vulnerability. In his great homily of 17<sup>th</sup> February 1980<sup>8</sup> on the

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.romerotruster.org.uk/homilies-and-writings/homilies/poverty-beatitudes-force-true-liberation-people>

poverty of the Beatitudes, he calls it evil-poverty. It has to be fought; it has to be eradicated. Romero did not romanticise poverty. He knew very well the frightening reality of poverty. He knew about the exploitation of women by men, the Latin American "*machismo*"; he knew the destructive effect of alcoholism and violence. The poor are also sinners and need conversion.

The poverty that Jesus refers to in the Beatitudes is distinct from "sinful poverty". Whilst it may have something to do with material poverty, Jesus refers more to an internal disposition, a tendency of the heart: blessed are the poor because they put all their trust in God. Romero unpacks this understanding of poverty in a meeting with some priests: *"For my part, I said that it seemed to me that it all had to do with conversion; he who is converted to God and puts all his trust in God is poor, and the rich person who has not been converted to the Lord puts his trust in idols of wealth, power and earthly things. All our efforts should be directed towards our own conversion and converting everyone to this authentic poverty. Christ gives us a clue in saying that you cannot serve two masters, God and money."*

Romero also became aware that charity was not sufficient but that you also have to tackle the structures and the system. This is what Archbishop Helder Câmara from Brazil expressed in the words: *"When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist."* Pope Francis takes exactly this line: *"Charity that leaves the poor person as he or she is, is not sufficient. True mercy, the mercy God gives to us and teaches us, demands justice; it demands that the poor find the way to be poor no longer."*<sup>9</sup>

### 3. THE WAY TO HOPE

As were the prophets of the Old Testament, Oscar Romero was an outstanding prophet of hope. The theme of his homily on the 20<sup>th</sup> January 1980 was "Christ shows his glory in happiness"<sup>10</sup>. He pronounced this homily in the midst of a situation of violence and turmoil: *"It can almost sound sarcastic to proclaim such words when we, in El Salvador, experience so much affliction and fear and live with so many different forms of psychosis. Nevertheless, I believe that no other call is more important for our country, for the people of El Salvador, than the call of this morning's liturgy: a call to the joy of hope. ... God is not a God of sadness but a God of celebrations and feasts, a God of happiness. Therefore, in the heart of people who have faith, there is no room for despair."*

What made Romero especially happy and joyful was his experience of God in the poor. How can this be explained? Simply by the words of Jesus that he is present in

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<sup>9</sup> Pope Francis, Address to the "Astalli Centre", the Jesuit Refugee Service in Rome, 10 September 2013

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/homilies-and-writings/homilies/christ-manifests-his-glory-happiness-human-beings>



the poor, the hungry, the suffering and the marginalized. And that the one who sees him sees the Father. So Romero could say: "I came to know God because I came to know my people." And "A bishop always has to learn a lot from his people." And "The people is my prophet." "I have to listen to the Spirit who speaks to me through his people." And again "With this people it is not difficult to be a good shepherd."

"Raising someone to the altar" can bring the risk of making him remote and idealised – Jesus himself pointed out the ambiguities surrounding the tombs of the prophets. We can only fittingly venerate Saint Oscar Romero when we walk his way; when we speak the truth about this world, a world of victims; when we ask the question about the reasons for poverty and injustice; when we call the idols of our age by name and resist them; when we are prepared for danger and conflict; when we are carried by the conviction that self-giving is more powerful than egoism and that love is stronger than death.

The clearest indicator of the humanity of a society is how it deals with its weakest members. Pope Paul VI, canonized with Romero, in his address to the United Nations in New York in 1965, described the Church as "an expert in humanity". Therein lies the task for the Church in today's world, the claim by which she must also allow herself to be judged, in nations of the South as in the nations of the North. Everywhere, she has to take the part of the weakest.

In Europe that means quite specifically the refugees, the jobless, the homeless, the victims of sexual violence and exploitation, the unborn children and those who are born and neglected, the abandoned elderly. To venerate Romero means to walk his way: to call injustice by its true name and to promote justice. "Raising Romero to the altar" has to go with raising the poor and the marginalised of this world to "a life worthy of a human being". Then, in his words, "The glory of God is the *poor* person, fully alive"<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> In his speech accepting a Doctorate from Louvain, Oscar Romero adds the word 'poor' to the famous quotation by St Irenaeus.