

## Archbishop Oscar Romero and Liberation Theology by Martin Maier

*This is an abridged version of the English translation of a talk in Spanish by German theologian, Martin Maier SJ, given at the Jesuit University (UCA) in San Salvador in August 2015. This version first appeared in Romero News, and was reproduced in the Catholic Times in August 2017.*

Some try to disassociate Monsignor Romero completely from liberation theology. Others say that Romero was a liberation theologian. Neither camp is right.

The issue is complicated - partly because Romero underwent a profound change in his attitude towards liberation theology during the course of his life. As director of the diocesan weekly bulletin *Orientación* from 1971 to 1974, when he was an auxiliary bishop in the archdiocese of San Salvador, Romero was a strong critic of liberation theology. He saw grave dangers in mixing religion and politics. The second Vatican Council and the Latin American Bishops' Conference in Medellin in 1968 had recognised that Christians have a responsibility to become politically engaged and to work for justice and human rights. But this had not been looked upon favourably by those in the Church who were comfortable with the status quo. They were opposed to any form of social or political change.

In November 1975, in a confidential memorandum for the Pontifical Commission for Latin America, Romero was critical of the activities of the Jesuits in El Salvador, particularly the theology being taught at the Central America University. As well as the "political theology" of Ignacio Ellacuría, Romero drew Rome's attention to the "new Christology" of Jon Sobrino. There was a swift response from the Vatican. For the first time, Sobrino and Ellacuría had to justify the orthodoxy of their theology.

In a homily in the cathedral in San Salvador on 6 August 1976, Romero spoke of Christ as the Saviour, but warned people not to think of liberation only in a material sense. He did not mention social conflicts. Rather, he attacked the so-called "new christologies". Without mentioning any names, it was clear that he was referring to Jon Sobrino. "I didn't go to the Mass," Sobrino later recalled, "but a few hours afterwards a priest brought me a

recording of [Romero's] homily. I listened and I froze ... It was a full-on attack on my Christology."

Yet just one year later Sobrino had become one of Romero's closest theological advisors. What had happened? In February 1977, the theologically cautious Romero was appointed archbishop of San Salvador. Monsignor Arturo Rivera y Damas, who was to succeed Romero as archbishop, agrees with those who speak of Romero's "conversion" on becoming archbishop, but he does not consider his conversion to have been sudden and spectacular, like that of Saint Paul on the road to Damascus. Though the murder of Father Rutilio Grande and his two companions on 12 March 1977, shortly after Romero's appointment as archbishop, was a decisive moment, Rivera believes his conversion was "a long and progressive process of maturity throughout his life." Rivera put it beautifully: "A martyr gave life to another martyr. 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 freely towards Jerusalem."

As Pope Francis has reportedly said, "Rutilio's great miracle is Mons. Romero."

There are still those who try to distance Archbishop Romero from liberation theology, as though liberation theology was something contagious and extremely dangerous. But they caricature and demonise liberation theology. They claim it is impregnated with Marxism and that it justifies and encourages violence. Ignacio Ellacuria has made it clear that the liberation theology represented by himself and Jon Sobrino is not influenced in any way by Marxism.

Let's look in more detail at Romero's relationship with liberation theology.

Liberation theology in my understanding has three basic principles. The first and most important is the option for the poor. The God of Israel is always seen in liberation theology as a God on the side of the oppressed, the weak, orphans and widows, the stranger. This is God in the image of Jesus, who proclaims the good news of the Kingdom of God for the poor.

The second principle is the attention that liberation theology always pays to the signs of the times. The history of salvation is seen as closely connected to the history of the people of the world. And the third principle is that liberation theology seeks to make a contribution to change the world, not just to understand it.

The option for the poor is rooted in the belief that every human being has been made in the image and likeness of God. And when talking about the terrible human rights violations in El Salvador, Archbishop Romero refers over and over again to man's likeness to God: "There is no dichotomy between the image of God and man. If you torture a fellow human, if you offend another human, if you destroy another human, you are offending the image of God and the Church feels that this is her martyrdom, her cross."

God shows his preference for the poor in his incarnation in Jesus Christ. The movement of the incarnation is from above downwards, from the glory of God to the limitations and poverty of humans. Theologians use the Greek work *kenosis* to describe this self-alienation of God. In one of his homilies, Romero compares the *kenosis* of God to a king who abandons his throne, shrugs off his royal vestments, dresses in the rags of the rural poor and lives among them undetected. So it was that Christ dressed himself as a human being, and appeared as an ordinary person. More, Christ was not content with being an ordinary person, he became a slave and suffered the death of a slave on the cross. Romero applies this divine movement, *kenosis*, to the Church: the Church must be poor and humble, it has to be a Church from below.

The option for the poor characterised Jesus' earthly life. He did not live in palaces; he was at home amongst simple people. The poor held the first place in his beatitudes. In the parable of the final judgement, he identifies with the most needy. "God purposely chose what the world considers nonsense in order to shame the wise; and he chose what the world considers weak in order to shame the powerful." (1 Cor 1:27).

The option for the poor runs through the Bible like a golden thread; it is at the heart of all Romero's preaching, and it is the secret to understanding him. Romero found God in the poor. This was the most joyous experience of

his life. In his homilies, he repeats over and over again the jubilant cry of Jesus: “Father, Lord of heaven and earth, I thank you because you have shown to the unlearned what you have hidden from the wise and learned. Yes, Father, this was how you wanted it to happen” (Matt. 11:25-26).

The 12-year-old child Jesus seeks God in the temple, in conversation with the scribes, the “wise and learned”. But the itinerant preacher of Galilee finds God amongst the poor, the children and the socially marginalised. Oscar Romero experienced this development too. One of his exclamations of the jubilant cry of Jesus is, “I have known God because I have known my people.” Romero knew very well the frightening reality of poverty. He did not romanticise it. It has to be fought, it has to be eradicated. He knew about the exploitation of women by men, he knew the destructive effect of alcoholism and violence.

A second essential dimension to Romero’s preaching was his constant search for the will of God in the changing circumstances of history. He believed that God shows himself in events, that God’s will can be read in the signs of the times. He gave a lot of attention to the “events of the week” in his homilies. In the context of a state-controlled press and deliberately pedalled lies, Romero simply reported the truth about what was happening. He dignified the victims by naming each of them. Whenever possible, he named the abusers. He rebutted accusations that the “events of the week” had nothing to do with the Church’s mission of evangelisation: “The task of someone who really reflects on the word of God is to illuminate the signs of the times with the word of God; so that history and the present day have a sense of unity with God and they may move towards God.”

St. Ignatius of Loyola says in his *Exercises* that love has to be expressed through actions more than through words. And a third essential dimension to Romero’s life and work is his insistence that the truth of the gospel has to be lived, made real. He practised what he preached. He was authentic. His life and death were in themselves a homily, a good news. In his famous poem, written in response to his assassination, Pedro Casaldáliga says of Romero, “No one will silence your last homily,”

A Church that is faithful to the Gospel and to the way of Christ will inevitably find itself in conflict. This was Romero's experience: "The Church is persecuted because she wants to be the true Church of Christ. If the Church preaches eternal salvation without getting involved in the real problems of the world, it is respected and appreciated, and even rewarded with privileges. But if its mission is to denounce the sins that force people into poverty, and if it proclaims the hope of a more just and humane world, then it suffers persecution and calumny and is called subversive and communist."

Pope Francis, too, is labelled a "Marxist" by ultra-conservatives because of his tough criticism of the dominant neo-liberal economic system.

So we can see how the three main principles of liberation theology run through Romero's homilies and pastoral letters and mark his whole life as a priest and archbishop.

Romero was inspired by liberation theology - but he also came to nourish theologians such as Ellacuria and Sobrino. His deepest and most creative spiritual and theological insight was to liken the passion of the Salvadoran people with the crucified Christ. In his homily for the first anniversary of the assassination of Rutilio Grande, he recalled that, as a Jesuit, Grande had searched for an encounter with Jesus in spiritual retreats. But the image of Christ, explained Romero, "is not discovered through spiritual retreats alone, but through entering into life here, where Christ is suffering flesh, where Christ is to be found in the persecution, where Christ is the men sleeping in the field because they cannot sleep in their homes, where Christ is in the illness caused by long exposure to the elements; here is Christ, carrying his cross on his shoulders, not in a chapel beside the stations of the cross, but alive in the people; this is Christ with his cross on the road to Calvary."

As Jon Sobrino says "Romero's theology was, in the most precise evangelical and historical sense, a theology of liberation; Christian theology, based on the revelation of God and the tradition and magisterium of the Church and Latin American theology, gathering up and responding always to the suffering and hopes of these crucified people."