

THE CRUCIFIED PEOPLE

Óscar Romero and Martyrdom

Ambrose Mong

EL SALVADOR WAS THE NAME given to the city, and future nation, by the Spanish conquistador Pedro de Alvarado in honour of Jesus, the Saviour of the World. Mirroring the life and death of Jesus, many people in this country, especially the poor and indigenous populations, have been cruelly treated and died under the weight of colonial exploitation, social injustice and despotic rule. These victims who lived in poverty and died by violence are the ‘crucified people’. Ignacio Ellacuría, one of the Jesuits murdered by the Salvadoran regime in 1989, taught that:

This crucified people are the historical continuation of the servant of Yahweh, whom the sin of the world continues to deprive of any human features, which the powers of this world continue stripping of everything, wresting his life from him as long as he lives.¹

Archbishop Óscar Romero (1917–1980) was the voice of the crucified people. In a nation torn by conflict and violence, Romero preached forgiveness and reconciliation, convinced that peace can only exist when there is justice and truth. Thus his death inspired the Church to redefine its understanding of martyrdom in modern times.

Be a Patriot. Kill a Priest

In the 1970s, groups of teachers, students, workers, priests, and religious brothers and sisters in El Salvador began to organize themselves and

A version of this article appears as chapter 5, ‘The Crucified People: State Oppression in El Salvador’, in Ambrose Mong, *Forgiveness but Not Forgotten: The Past Is Not Past* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2020).

¹ Quoted in Jon Sobrino, ‘Our World: Cruelty and Compassion’, in *Rethinking Martyrdom*, edited by Teresa Okure, Jon Sobrino and Felix Wilfred (London: SCM, 2003), 18. For a comprehensive study of the violence and its agents, see Americas Watch Committee, *El Salvador’s Decade of Terror: Human Rights since the Assassination of Archbishop Romero* (New Haven: Yale U, 1991). See also José Lucia, ‘The Anthropological Function of Dialogue in Political Reconciliation Processes: Ethical Analysis of Ignacio Ellacuría’s Thought on the 25th Anniversary of His Death (1989–2014)’, *Ramon Llull Journal of Applied Ethics*, 5 (2014), 125–141.

demand a more equitable sharing of wealth and resources in the nation. In the rural areas, peasants demanded fairer wages and land distribution, and better living conditions. The main peasant groups, led by Catholic activists, were the Christian Peasants' Federation and the Union of Farmworkers. Fighting for social justice, they established bases for Christian communities, and pastoral and education programmes. Quite a few priests and sisters actively encouraged their flock to participate in these popular movements.

Progressive candidates were elected as president in 1972 and 1977, but they were unfairly disqualified by the existing regime amid substantial electoral fraud. Government-backed right-wing death squads began to assassinate opposition activists, and community and church leaders. These death squads consisted of heavily armed soldiers, police and national guardsmen in civilian clothes. Some of them were members of ORDEN, a paramilitary group founded by national guardsmen, and the notorious White Warriors Union. One of their slogans was: 'Be a Patriot. Kill a Priest', an assignment which they carried out frequently. These death squads sought to repress activists, divide the opposition, and create a 'culture of fear' by their random killings.²



Guerrillas in Perquin, El Salvador, 1990

² Anna L. Peterson, *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion: Progressive Catholicism in El Salvador's Civil War* (New York: SUNY, 1996), 63, 33.

The Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN), composed of students, teachers, factory and farm workers, and former government officials, was established in 1980 to fight against the regime by armed resistance. It was named after a militant attorney who led Salvadoran peasants during the 1920s and was killed in the *Matanza* ('Slaughter'), an uprising that was brutally suppressed by the military. The FMLN wanted to establish a democratic government which was inclusive and willing to accept the cooperation of different political organizations. They demanded that the perpetrators involved in kidnapping and murder be prosecuted and convicted before they would lay down their arms. In addition, the FMLN advocated land reform and a mixed economy.

Sadly, increased resistance from the FMLN followed by intensified state repression led to a fully fledged civil war. The El Salvador military was determined to eliminate the FMLN's sphere of influence with large-scale bombing, resulting in the displacement of a quarter of the nation's population. The civil war divided the country geographically into three different kinds of territory: government controlled, mostly in the cities; conflict zones, where the FMLN and the government army fought for control; and 'liberated zones', in the mountains and coastal areas, controlled by the FMLN.³

The United States government considered the FMLN a 'terrorist organization', because they were financially supported by the Soviet Union and had close connections to the socialist governments in Cuba and Nicaragua. In spite of documented gross human rights abuses, including the killing of US citizens, the Reagan and Bush administrations supported the government of El Salvador throughout the 1980s in the hope of eliminating the 'communist' FMLN.⁴ Between 1980 and 1990, the Salvadoran government received over four billion dollars in US aid, military training and advice, which enabled the army to launch a brutal counter-insurgency war on the rural areas controlled by the FMLN. Aerial bombings and mortar attacks in the 1980s killed more civilians than guerrillas.⁵ Óscar Romero wrote to President Carter pleading with him to stop supporting the murderous regime in his country.⁶

³ Peterson, *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion*, 36.

⁴ The Reagan and Bush administrations called the military regime in El Salvador the 'good guys'. See 'Truth or Consequences in El Salvador, United Nations Truth Commission Human Rights Report, (Editorial)', *America*, 168/11 (1993), 3.

⁵ Peterson, *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion*, 35–36.

⁶ See James R. Brockman, *Romero: A Life* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989), 227.

Nonetheless, with around 13,000 regular fighters in addition to some 40,000 part-time militia members, mostly in the rural areas, the FMLN had developed into a formidable force. Widely supported by the civilian population and with good military strategies, the FMLN were able to maintain a stalemate with the government forces. Though relatively small in numbers and with inferior arms, the guerrillas were highly motivated compared with the government forces.

On 11 November 1989, the FMLN launched a nationwide assault and held the capital city, San Salvador, for weeks. Determined to crush the insurgency at all costs, the government ordered aerial bombing of urban areas and arrested scores of activists. Entering the campus of Central American University (UCA), the military killed six Jesuit priests, leading intellectuals in El Salvador who were vocal critics of the government, along with their two housekeepers.

The 1989 offensive proved to be a turning point in the history of El Salvador. The killing of the Jesuits and their two helpers at UCA sparked off international outrage and prompted the US government to support peaceful negotiation rather than training the Salvadoran army. Criticizing the US assistance to the military in El Salvador, Joseph A. O'Hare SJ, president of Fordham University in 1989, asked this question, 'Can we hand weapons to butchers and remain unstained by the blood of their innocent victims?'⁷ The killing of the Jesuits underlines the Roman Catholic Church's deep involvement in the struggle for justice and peace on behalf of the poor in the nation. This was already evident from the brutal murder of Óscar Romero, which made a deep impact on the people and on the Jesuits who worked at UCA at that time.

Óscar Arnulfo Romero

Born on 15 August 1917 in Ciudad Barrios, El Salvador, Óscar Romero came from a humble family. Since his parents could not afford to send him to school after the age of twelve, he worked as an apprentice carpenter. Determined to become a priest, Romero entered the seminary at the age of fourteen and was ordained in 1942 when he was 25 years old. Realising the power of transistor radio, he attempted to reach out to the peasant farmers by broadcasting his Sunday homilies through radio stations. In 1970, he was made the auxiliary bishop in San Salvador and, in 1974, the bishop of Santiago de María.

⁷ 'Is Justice Still a Long-Way off for Jesuit Martyrs in El Salvador?' *America* 222/6 (6 March 2020), 3.

A traditionalist, Romero supported the hierarchy and conformity to church teachings. He was against political activism that challenged the government. In fact, when news came from Rome that Romero had been chosen to succeed Archbishop Chávez, the government of El Salvador and the oligarchy were very pleased. They believed that Romero, being a conservative, would not threaten the status quo. Most clergy in the archdiocese, however, were disappointed; they thought that Romero was more keen to maintain good relations with the government than to serve the needs of the people. They were mistaken. Soon Romero proved his mettle by championing the rights of the poor and downtrodden. It was not a sudden change, but a gradual transformation as he began to appreciate the social reality in El Salvador.

After two years as bishop of Santiago de Maria, Romero came to understand that the social injustice existing in Salvadoran society was the root cause of all its evils. He witnessed children dying because their parents were too poor to seek medical help. Using the resources of his diocese, Romero began to help the poor. Over time, he realised that charity was not enough. To dismantle unjust economic and social structures there must be a conversion of hearts. Convinced that the Spirit was speaking through the suffering of the people, he defended activist priests fighting for the rights of the poor. When Rutilio Grande, a Jesuit working for the poor in rural areas, was murdered in 1977, he realised he had to take sides, but also be prepared to forgive.

At the funeral mass for Rutilio Grande and the two companions who were killed with him, Romero preached that the Church, inspired by love, is able to reject hatred:

We want to tell you, murderous brothers, that we love you and that we ask of God repentance for your hearts, because the church is not able to hate, it has no enemies. Its only enemies are those who want to declare themselves so. But the church loves them: 'Father forgive them, they know not what they do'.⁸

Later Romero acknowledged that it had been the assassination of Rutilio Grande, his personal friend, which motivated him to put into practice the teachings of Vatican II and the Latin American bishops' conference at Medellín, calling for solidarity with the poor, marginalised and dispossessed.

⁸ Quoted in Brockman, *Romero*, 10.

Though devastated by the brutal killing of Grande, Romero harboured no ill will or hatred, but continued to preach reconciliation:

Let there be no animosity in our heart Let this Eucharist, which is a call to reconciliation with God and our brothers and sisters, leave in all hearts the satisfaction that we are Christians Let us pray to the Lord for forgiveness and for the due repentance of those who converted a town into a prison and a place of torment.⁹

As a man opposed to violence, Romero believed that those who kill by the sword will die by the sword. He pleaded for repentance from the perpetrators so that God's mercy and kindness would fall upon them like the rain and they would all become brothers and sisters.

Romero continued to bear witness to more atrocities committed by the military when he became the archbishop of El Salvador in 1977. Confronting President Carlos Humberto regarding human rights violations, he became the 'voice of the voiceless', one who offered his people faith and hope for a better life.¹⁰ He defended progressive priests, religious sisters and lay persons who dared to denounce the atrocities of the authorities. Visiting churches in his archdiocese, especially those harassed by the military in the rural areas such as Chalatenango and Aguilares, Romero also made a passionate plea for the rights of his people to protest. During Sunday homilies in the cathedral, he denounced the brutality of the army and greed of the government as well as the oligarchy, those who controlled most of the country's natural resources.

An outspoken, vocal critic of the violent activities of right-wing groups—as well as the leftist guerrillas, Romero began to raise global awareness with reports on the murder, torture and kidnaps that were rampant throughout the country. Addressing soldiers and policemen, Romero cried: 'I beg you, I implore you, I order you ... in the name of God, stop the repression!'¹¹ Unfortunately, his pleading fell on deaf ears. Yet he never gave up working towards peace and reconciliation in his country. He avoided partisan political positions and advised his priests to do the same. Viewing the country's division and the Church's involvement in the unrest as social rather than ideological, Romero

⁹ Quoted in Brockman, *Romero*, 63.

¹⁰ Jon Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom: The Martyrs of El Salvador and the Crucified Peoples* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2003), 15.

¹¹ Brockman, *Romero*, 242.

held that the conflict was not between the Church and the state, but between the state and the people. The Church stood with the people because the people are with the Church.¹²

In order to restore trust and confidence between the Church and the state, Romero was prepared to engage in dialogue with the government. He wanted the authorities in El Salvador to account for the disappearances and end torture and arbitrary arrests, and afford due process to priests who had been deported.¹³ In setting the conditions for a successful dialogue with the authorities, Romero wanted all sides to be present and all



Romero with Rutilio Grande (back right)

violence to cease, especially government repression of civilians. The subject for dialogue was the call to dismantle unjust structures that promote violence. Terrorists and those who supported violence would lay down their arms if they had a sincere desire for dialogue. Romero emphasized the critical importance of protecting the freedom of expression through various labour organizations—these would be the signs of the presence of democracy in El Salvador.

Romero's outspoken defence of the poor and victims of violence made him a target of violence himself. In the face of threats to his life, he declared his willingness to sacrifice himself for 'the redemption and the resurrection of El Salvador'.¹⁴ Ironically, the president of El Salvador offered protection by providing Romero with security guards and an armoured car. Romero politely rejected this offer of protection, and wrote to the government in 1979: 'I wouldn't accept that protection, because I wanted to run the same risks that the people are running; it

¹² Peterson, *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion*, 62.

¹³ Brockman, *Romero*, 84.

¹⁴ Quoted in Brockman, *Romero: A Life*, 248.

would be a pastoral anti-testimony if I were very secure, while my people are so insecure'.¹⁵ Instead, Romero took the opportunity to ask the president for protection for the people, especially at military checkpoints and roadblocks. Like most people, Romero was afraid of violent death, but he never neglected his duty and responsibility to accompany his flock when they were in danger. Neither did he seek protection for his priests. He said:

How sad it would be, in a country where such horrible murders are being committed, if there were no priests among the victims! A murdered priest is a testimonial of a church incarnate in the problems of the people.¹⁶

Persecution produces Christian hope for the Church.

Two weeks before his death, Romero had already forgiven his killers:

If they kill me, I will rise again in the people of El Salvador You can tell them, if they succeed in killing me, that I pardon them, and I bless those who may carry out the killing. But I wish that they could realize that they are wasting their time. A bishop will die, but the church of God—the people—will never die.¹⁷

Just before his death, Romero uttered these prophetic words: 'Those who surrender to the service of the poor through love of Christ will live like the grain of wheat that dies The harvest comes because of the grain that dies'.¹⁸ On 24 March 1980, while celebrating Mass in the chapel of Divine Providence Hospital, Óscar Romero was gunned down by an assassin belonging to a right-wing death squad.

In spite of prevailing violence, tens of thousands of mourners attended Romero's funeral, transforming the service into one of the biggest demonstrations the country had ever witnessed. Romero lives on in the lives and memories of his people, especially among the poor, with whom he identified. Even before his beatification, the people considered Romero a martyr.

¹⁵ Quoted in Peterson, *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion*, 62.

¹⁶ Quoted in Jon Sobrino, *Archbishop Romero: Memories and Reflections* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990), 38.

¹⁷ Óscar Romero, *Voice of the Voiceless: The Four Pastoral Letters and Other Statements*, translated by Michael J. Walsh (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985), 51.

¹⁸ Romero, *Voice of the Voiceless*, 191.

Violence against the Church

The repression of peasant movements and popular organizations leading to the killing of thousands of indigenous people has taken place in Latin America since colonial days. But persecution of the Church was a recent phenomenon, given the fact that Roman Catholicism was the dominant religion in the continent. This attack on the Church coincided with the Church's teaching on the preferential option for the poor in the 1960s and the establishment of base Christian communities. As a result, thousands of Catholic activists, clerics, religious and lay persons were imprisoned, tortured and murdered by the military for their involvement in fighting for justice and equitable distribution of land. Between 1971 and 1990, more than forty religious sisters and priests, and one archbishop, were killed in Latin America. Most of these murders took place in El Salvador.¹⁹

Archbishop Romero and the other activists were assassinated not for their faith but for denouncing the government and the elites in El Salvador, who were responsible for running a country that systematically exploited the poor for their own advantage. Romero said: 'Our church is persecuted precisely for its preferential option for the poor and for trying to incarnate itself in the interest of the poor'.²⁰ The victims were mostly the poor and those who defended them. The attack on the clergy led to widespread persecution of the Christian community.

The conservative establishment in El Salvador, including many bishops, insisted that this attack was committed in retaliation for Romero's political involvement. They blamed left-wing Catholics for getting involved in politics, thus incurring the wrath of the government and the military. Romero, they maintained, should stay out of politics and confine himself to the spiritual care of his flock. In fact, even sympathetic citizens in El Salvador interpreted the attack on the Church as politically motivated. The oligarchy colluding with the government and the military sought to crush all opposition, whether secular or religious. The growth of base Christian communities, led by the clergy and lay leaders, became a threat to the established order. Hence, some were brutally killed by death squads, not because they were Catholics

¹⁹ Peterson, *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion*, 63. For a review of works written about the violence in El Salvador, see Charles D. Brockett, 'El Salvador: The Long Journey from Violence to Reconciliation (Book Review)', *Latin American Research Review*, 29/3 (1994), 174–187.

²⁰ Quoted in Peterson, *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion*, 62.

but because they threatened the wealth and privilege of the elites. As such, can these Catholics, priests and laity, who were murdered because they stood by the side of the oppressed and downtrodden, be regarded as martyrs in the Church or of the Church?

Martyrdom

In the twentieth century in Latin America, many Christians who fought for justice died at the hands of their fellow Christians because of difference in political ideology. Can these be regarded as martyrs in the Catholic tradition? Óscar Romero and Rutilio Grande were killed by death squads in El Salvador—were they Christian martyrs or victims of

political assassination? In a broad sense, they were martyrs who died struggling for justice on behalf of the poor against a ruthless military regime. Even though they may also have been baptized Catholics, the leaders who ordered the killings and those who carried out their orders were anything but Christian. Victims of repression in Latin America have inspired the Church to expand and redefine the meaning of Christian martyrdom.

In the light of the situation in Latin America, Karl Rahner argued that someone who dies fighting for a cause related to his or her Christian convictions can be regarded as a martyr, provided the death is not directly sought. Of course, not everybody who dies fighting on the Christian or Catholic side in a religious war is a martyr. But in Rahner's opinion, someone such as Romero, who died while fighting for social justice owing to his profound Christian convictions, should be considered

© Trivicted Photography



Mural of Óscar Romero in San Salvador

a martyr. Rahner regarded Christians who died struggling for justice and other Christian virtues as martyrs. His notion differs from the traditional understanding that a martyr is someone who died for his or her faith, such as the Christians in the early Church who were brought to court and sentenced to death. In favour of a legitimate political theology, Rahner called upon the Church to be aware of its responsibility to promote justice and peace in society.²¹

John Paul II in fact broadened the term 'martyr' in his 1995 encyclical *Ut unum sint*:

In a theocentric vision, we Christians already have a common Martyrology. This also includes the martyrs of our own century, more numerous than one might think, and it shows how, at a profound level, God preserves communion among the baptized in the supreme demand of faith, manifested in the sacrifice of life itself.²²

These martyrs included religious who were killed during the Spanish civil war and in the Nazi concentration camps. In Latin America, there were many who died as Christians protesting against the atrocities of military dictatorship. Faithful to the Gospel and church teaching on the preferential option for the poor, they stood for social justice and peace.

Romero himself taught that those who died fighting for justice were martyrs:

For me those who are true martyrs in the popular sense ... are true men who have gone to dangerous areas, where the White Warrior Union threatens, where someone can be pointed out and eventually killed as they killed Christ.²³

Romero himself, in fact, was popularly venerated as a martyr and saint immediately after his death in 1980. Many people came to his tomb to pray and to lay flowers at the cathedral of the Holy Saviour in San Salvador. He was declared a martyr by Pope Francis on 3 February 2015 and canonized as a saint on 14 October 2018.

The situation in Latin America is problematic for declaring someone a martyr because Christians are killing Christians. A Catholic bishop

²¹ Karl Rahner, 'Dimensions of Martyrdom: A Plea for the Broadening of a Classical Concept', in *Martyrdom Today*, edited by Johannes Baptist Metz, Edward Schillebeeckx and Marcus Lefebure (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1983), 10.

²² John Paul II, *Ut unum sint*, n.84.

²³ Quoted in Sobrino, 'Our World: Cruelty and Compassion', 18.

might be killed by soldiers ordered by officers, perhaps with the permission of the president of the country, all of whom were baptized Catholics! Thomas Aquinas taught that a martyr is simply a Christian killed by enemies trying to destroy the Catholic faith. Liberation theologians have expanded the definition of martyrdom to include those who die while defending the poor against the injustice of the state; such martyrdom occurs frequently in Latin America.

Leonardo Boff, a Brazilian theologian, views Jesus as the proto-martyr and emphasizes that it is not the suffering and death that makes a martyr but the cause.²⁴ The Gospel teaches: 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 5:10); 'you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles' (Matthew 10:18). Stressing the politically subversive nature of Christianity, Boff holds that early Christians were killed because they threatened the political-religious foundation of the Roman empire and its leaders. Stretching the concept of martyrdom, Boff thus asserts that modern-day martyrs died for their faith like Christians in earlier times:

Not a few Christians ... because of the Gospel, make a preferential option for the poor, for their liberation, for the defence of their rights. In the name of this option they stand up and denounce the exercise of domination and all forms of social dehumanisation. They may be persecuted, arrested, tortured and killed. They, too, are martyrs in the strict sense of the word.²⁵

With this supposition, martyrs include those Christians who died for their faith in their effort to defend their brothers and sisters from injustice and exploitation.

Jon Sobrino writes that, in our time, the situation in Latin America has produced Christians who have died violently not 'on account of their witness to faith but because of the compassion that stems from their faith'.²⁶ They are 'Jesus martyrs' who suffered violence and death like the saviour. Strictly speaking they are not those 'who *die for Christ*' but 'those who *die like Jesus for the cause of Jesus*'; they are 'martyrs in the church but not martyrs of the church'.²⁷ These martyrs find their

²⁴ Leonardo Boff, 'Martyrdom: An Attempt at Systematic Reflection', in *Martyrdom Today*, 13.

²⁵ Boff, 'Martyrdom: An Attempt at Systematic Reflection', 13.

²⁶ Sobrino, 'Our World: Cruelty and Compassion', 17.

²⁷ Sobrino, 'Our World: Cruelty and Compassion', 19.

configuration in the life and death of Jesus. They are killed because of hatred, not for their faith but for their involvement with the lives of the poor and dispossessed, in mercy and compassion for God's people. They include clergy and religious, lay workers, peasants, students, lawyers and journalists. In one way or another they have exposed the unjust structures in society that have caused the suffering and death of many poor people. They are compassionate individuals who have fought against the social, economic and political elites determined to maintain their wealth and privileges at the expense of the poor.

The reality of El Salvador prompted Romero to preach about the significance of Rutilio Grande's death: 'What does the church offer in this universal fight for the liberation from all this misery?'²⁸ The liberation that the Church offers is exemplified by the ministry of Rutilio, working for and with the poor in solidarity against injustice and exploitation. Rutilio died because he was faithful to the social doctrine of the Church. Romero thanked the Society of Jesus for sending men such as Rutilio Grande to El Salvador and 'illuminating so many on the roads to Aguilares'.²⁹ The roads to Aguilares symbolize the El Salvador way of the cross, where suffering and death for justice, peace and righteousness will lead to the resurrection. Rutilio Grande was the first Salvadoran priest to be killed in the 1970s for political reasons. But he was regarded by many in the country as a martyr for justice.

Willing to sacrifice his life for his fellow Salvadorans, Romero has taught that martyrdom is a grace of God. He pardoned his enemies so that they would know that they were wasting their time—a bishop will die but the people of God, the Church, will never perish. The many martyrs in El Salvador manifest that the Church is persecuted for its fidelity to the teaching of Jesus Christ. This sad state of affairs, persecution and martyrdom, is also a glorious witness to the faith of the people in the nation which has the Saviour himself as its patron.

Peace and Justice

Romero was convinced that peace and non-violence could only be achieved when there is justice. In other words, violence is a product of unjust economic and social structures in society, which the bishops at

²⁸ Quoted in John S. Thiede, *Remembering Oscar Romero and the Martyrs of El Salvador: A Cloud of Witnesses* (Lanham: Lexington, 2017), 41.

²⁹ Quoted in Thiede, *Remembering Oscar Romero*, 42.

Medellín characterized as institutional violence. This institutionalised or legalised violence comes in the form of economic exploitation, political domination and military violation of human rights. The fact is: 'violence starts with the structures of violence'.³⁰

The Maryknoll sisters Maura Clarke and Ita Ford, Maryknoll lay missionary Jean Donovan and Ursuline sister Dorothy Kazel, all from the United States, were raped, tortured and killed on 2 December 1980, the same year Romero was murdered. And yet, the United States continued to support the military government in El Salvador throughout the 1980s. On 11 December 1981, an armed battalion executed more than 800 civilians in a village called El Mozote—this event is now referred to as the El Mozote Massacre.³¹ The deaths of priests and religious represent a tiny fraction of the more than 80,000 Salvadorans killed by government-backed death squads since 1979.³² The victims were people working in both religious and secular organizations demanding land reform and better working conditions for the poor. We can consider these victims 'anonymous martyrs' because they died fighting for the kingdom of God.

In El Salvador, when people started to organize themselves to dismantle those structures of violence, the elites would retaliate with further violence with the help of the military. The wealthy class would do all they could to stop revolutionary change that threatened their lifestyle—the 'privileged few repressed the ones seeking change, so this violence of oppression became a violence of repression'.³³ Many of the oppressed believed the only way to bring about change is through the violence of revolution. But Ignacio Ellacuría insisted that the solution is to struggle against the first violence so as to prevent the violence of repression and revolutionary violence through negotiation, dialogue and reconciliation.

While the Church permits a 'legitimate defence' as a means to uphold human rights, it fervently promotes non-violence based on gospel teaching—turning the other cheek to an aggressor.³⁴ Not simply

³⁰ Thomas J. Gumbleton, 'If You Want Peace, Work for Justice', in *Romero's Legacy: The Call to Peace and Justice*, edited by Pilar Hogan Closkev (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 38.

³¹ Christopher M. White, *The History of El Salvador* (Westport: Greenwood, 2008), 101–102. And see the short history at <https://www.teachingcentralamerica.org/history-of-el-salvador>.

³² White, *History of El Salvador*, 109.

³³ Gumbleton, 'If You Want Peace, Work for Justice', 38.

³⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2263 following.

a passive response, turning the other cheek requires moral strength and the conviction that peace is more powerful than violence. Unfortunately in El Salvador, there existed fanatical groups who believed in 'divinizing violence as the only source of justice'.³⁵ But with or without such responses, violence is not going to stop if there is vast disparity between the rich and the poor. There is no justice and no peace if widespread poverty prevails.

Back in 1967, Pope Paul VI wrote an encyclical entitled *Populorum progressio* (On the Development of Peoples) where he lamented:

In certain regions a privileged minority enjoys the refinements of life, while the rest of the inhabitants, impoverished and disunited, 'are deprived of almost all possibility of acting on their own initiative and responsibility, and often subsist in living and working conditions unworthy of the human person'.³⁶

Most wealthy faithful do not see structural injustice, nor do they feel obliged to reach out to those who are in need.

In 1971, Paul VI called a synod of bishops and produced a document entitled *Justice in the World*. This synod was of historical importance as it put the Church squarely on the side of those who fight against injustice—on the side of the poor, oppressed and voiceless. The synod placed the theme of social justice and concern at the centre of the Church's life. The document acknowledges the concept of structural or institutionalised injustice in society. Liberation in Christ includes all aspects of life and not merely inner spiritual transformation. Education is not just learning traditional values but 'conscientization and criticism of structures, standards and values obtaining in various societies' and 'social reform has been firmly included as an essential element of the pastoral ministry at all levels'.³⁷ Structural social injustice occurs when the community at the national or international level is organized in such a way that it works to the detriment of some individuals or groups, and favouring others in that society.

**Liberation in
Christ
includes all
aspects of life**

John Paul II, too, highlighted how our social mechanisms can lead to poverty, which is the thrust of his teaching on structural sin: 'social,

³⁵ Brockman, *Romero*, 143–144.

³⁶ Paul VI, *Populorum progressio*, n. 9, quoting *Gaudium et spes*, n. 63.

³⁷ John F. X. Harriott, 'The Difficulty of Justice', *The Month*, 5 (January 1972), 9–18.

economic, and political structures, which are frequently agents of violence and injustice'.³⁸ This means no peace, no justice. Today, we have 20 per cent of people living in abject poverty, 60 per cent in some degree of poverty, and the remaining 20 per cent enjoying 87 per cent of the earth's resources and wealth.³⁹ This happens not because those living in the northern hemisphere are more intelligent or work harder than the poor people in other parts of the planet. It is because they have manipulated the economic order, the structures and systems of society, solely to their advantage and benefit.

According to Gustavo Gutiérrez, poverty is the result of how we have organized our society: not only the way we distribute our resources, but the way we think about and classify racial, cultural and gender issues. Poverty has many aspects, including economic, cultural, racial, social and gender-related. We now understand that poverty is not destined; it is artificial, a misfortune produced by injustice which can be avoided. Theologically speaking, the root of poverty is injustice, which is the refusal to love. The core of our Christian faith is love, and thus refusal to love is sin.⁴⁰ It is thus no wonder Oscar Romero said, 'Let us not tire of preaching love; it is the force that will overcome the world'.⁴¹

Ambrose Mong is assistant priest at St Teresa's Church, Hong Kong, and also a research associate and part-time lecturer at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

³⁸ Final Declaration of Participants in the Symposium on *The Spiritual Resource of the Religions for Peace*, Rome, 16–18 January 2003.

³⁹ See United Nations, *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2019*, at <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2019/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2019.pdf>

⁴⁰ Gustavo Gutiérrez, 'Liberation Theology for the Twenty-First Century', in *Romero's Legacy*, 50.

⁴¹ Óscar Romero, *The Violence of Love* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), 20.