

# ARCHBISHOP OSCAR ROMERO, THE PREACHER

In one of the sketches in her collage of different life stories told of slain Salvadoran archbishop, Oscar A. Romero, María López Vigil includes the testimony of a guerrilla commander during the country's civil war:

I was undercover, head of the militias of the Central Front. Each Sunday, in all the groupings of the FPL (People's Liberation Front) where I was, we used to listen together to the homilies of *Monseñor* Romero. It was part of our work of political education. It isn't that it was obligatory to listen to the homilies, it's just that nobody missed them. I still remember how all of us would tune into what the old man" was saying. Sometimes we even applauded him, hidden behind the four walls of some security house, trying to be careful not to make noise. When he would finish, we would all comment on the homily. I still remember the way the guys from the countryside had such tremendous veneration for *Monseñor*.

*Monseñor*, as the people of El Salvador and all of Central America affectionately refer to the martyred champion of the region's oppressed poor, was a man of tremendous holiness and remarkable courage. Placed over the tomb of Romero, whose twentieth anniversary of martyrdom is celebrated March 24 of this year, there was originally a plaque which read: *Monseñor Romero: Pastor, Profeta y Mártir*, and he was indeed all three of these. But it is probably true that most Salvadorans knew their archbishop best through his weekly Sunday homilies. It was as preacher of God's Word that *Monseñor* Romero made such an impact on his contemporaries, and his preaching continues to echo clearly through the world today.

Not only was Romero's Sunday preaching the weekly highpoint for a large majority of Salvadorans who lived in the shadow of the country's ominous military stranglehold, but he also wove into his homilies, over the three year period in which he served the Archdiocese of San Salvador, the principal characteristics of a theology of preaching. In other words, not only was Archbishop Romero a very competent and powerful preacher, but he also articulated what it means to be a preacher, a prophet of the Word of God. For our present reflection, we will look at Romero's preaching from three viewpoints: the preached Word is always first and foremost *God's* Word; true gospel preaching must be rooted in a concrete historical reality; preaching as raising up in the public forum the voice of the voiceless.

## AN ECHO OF GOD'S WORD, GOD'S TRUTH

Shortly after returning from the Latin American bishops' conference in Puebla, Mexico in early 1979, and at a time in which his preaching was beginning to be noticed throughout the continent, Romero commented, "The truth will be said...always within our limitations. It is the

particular word of one who has his own style and way of being, but who is *only God's instrument* in the history of events" (18 Feb. 1979). Archbishop Romero never pretended to know everything or to have the entire truth at his disposal. But he knew without a doubt that he was an instrument for God's Word to reach the people of El Salvador in a particularly difficult period of history. He did not shy away from the danger of speaking the truth, for after all, it was God's truth, not his own.

I am not afraid that our faith may depend only on the archbishop's preaching. I don't think I'm that important. I believe that this message, which is only a humble echo of God's Word, enters your hearts, not because it is mine, but because it comes from God (29 Oct. 1978).

And a week later he picked up again on the same theme.

I give thanks to God because you are receiving my word as what it truly is: God's Word. For many receive it as a man's word, an enemy's word, a subversive's word.... That is the sad lot of one who preaches God's Word, to be, like Christ, a sign of contradiction. But blessed be God... that the vehicle, even though it be crude and useless, is only a vehicle. What matters is what is in this vehicle: God's Word (5 Nov. 1978).

It was not always easy for *Monseñor* Romero to carry out his mission as vehicle of God's Word to those people of the archdiocese who hungered for signs of hope in such a dire situation. One of the most formidable obstacles in his preaching mission came from his brother bishops. Not only did they not support in any way whatsoever the prophetic direction which Romero and the archdiocese were taking, but they publicly portrayed Romero as the cause for dissent and division within the bishops' conference and the Salvadoran Church in general. In April of 1978, in a vote of four against one (Bishop Rivera y Damas, Romero's sole supporter, was out of the country at the time), the bishops decided to publish a document opposing a group of priests who had criticized the repeated negative gospel witness on the part of the apostolic nuncio. Romero pleaded on behalf of the priests, reminding the bishops that they at least had a right to a fair hearing. In his personal diary, dated 3 April 1978, Archbishop Romero wrote the following:

The document was approved and I was the object of many accusations on the part of the bishops. I was told that my preaching was subversive and violent, that my priests were provoking the environment of violence among the peasants. They told me that we shouldn't be complaining about the abuses that the authorities were committing... It has been a bitter day because of this circumstance, and I lament that the division within the episcopate will only increase with this step....

Archbishop Romero knew the price one had to pay in order to be faithful to the

bittersweet task of preaching the Word of truth. Some people even tried to sidetrack his preaching by accusing him of being a puppet of outside forces. He made it clear to all that he was nobody's puppet: "Many go around saying that I'm being pressured and that I'm preaching things I do not believe. I speak with conviction; I know that I am speaking the Word of God to you" (15 May 1977). Two weeks later, on the Feast of Pentecost, Romero preached about the Spirit of truth working through the Church, a Church which is "victim of slander and misunderstandings." He strongly denounced those paid ads in the newspapers which present only half truths, to which he replied, "That is worse than lying!" To be faithful to God's Word, God's truth, as Romero himself was beginning to experience, brought with it persecution. "Always when one preaches the truth against injustices, abuses and the trampling down of others, the truth has to hurt" (29 May 1977).

In the same Pentecost homily Archbishop Romero gave a delightful example which he himself had been told by a poor rural farmer, and one which certainly would have been for him a consoling confirmation of his own mission. "*Monseñor*," said the man, "when one sticks his hand into a pot full of salt water, if the hand is healthy it doesn't hurt at all. But if there is a little cut, then ouch! It hurts!" Archbishop Romero came to know, with an increasing self-confidence, that his preaching task was that of placing the pot of salt water before the different sectors of Salvadoran society, trusting that it was God's salt water and God's truth which would separate the healthy hands from the unhealthy ones. God's Word would, in the end, be faithful.

#### A WORD ROOTED IN HISTORY

During the years that Oscar Romero was archbishop of San Salvador (23 February 1977 - 24 March 1980) Sundays were truly *holy* days for the country's poor -- *holy* because of the Word of God which echoed out from the Cathedral in San Salvador, touching the hearts of simple people of faith throughout the country. The fact that in every village and *barrio* and cornfield of the nation people tuned their transistor radios to listen to *Monseñor's* Sunday preaching certainly did nothing to help cool the waters of his tense relationship with the country's conservative bishops, who resented that "their faithful" preferred the "subversive" radio preaching of the archbishop to their own "orthodox" homilies given in their respective local cathedrals.

For Romero, though, it was a tremendous personal blessing and source of strength to know that his preaching was touching the lives of El Salvador's poor and forgotten masses. In April of 1978 he commented with great tenderness of heart,

Yesterday when I visited (the village of) Dulce Nombre de María, and the humble peasant people told me how they listen to my words, words which console them, giving them hope and support, it made me want to cry and say with Christ: AI thank you, Father, because you have hidden these things from the proud and have revealed them to the very poor."

As one person commented, "In those days you could walk down the street of the town and not miss a single word of *Monseñor's* homily, because it sounded forth from every house."

Perhaps no other theme concerning the Word of God reached its way into more of his homilies than that of the Word's ability to act as a light of truth illuminating the particular, concrete history of the people of El Salvador to whom Archbishop Romero preached.

A preaching that awakens, a preaching that enlightens, as when a light turned on awakens and annoys a sleeper -- that is the preaching of Christ.... Naturally, such preaching must meet conflict, must spoil what is miscalled prestige, must disturb, must be persecuted. It cannot get along with the powers of darkness and sin (22 Jan. 1978).

Romero never lost sight of the Word's ancient rootedness in Judeo-Christian history, but he was a true artist in making that Word come to life in the here and now. "The Word of God... has to be a word which springs forth from the eternal, ancient Word of God, but which touches today's wound, today's injustices, today's victims, and this is what causes problems..." (12 Dec. 1977).

On more than one occasion *Monseñor* noted that for one to truly hear the Good News, "one must become poor." He humbly included himself in that category, as reflected in his Epiphany homily of 1979: "Each Sunday when I speak, I am only a poor adorer of the Lord, telling him, 'Lord, I bring you what the people produce... rich and poor, rulers and ruled.'" He called Mary "a prophetic messenger of Christ (for) in her song of the Magnificat she remembered the poor and the hungry" (15 July 1979).

But most of all it was Romero's sharp, double-edged sword of prophetic preaching that made the largest impact on the social, political and religious reality of violence-torn El Salvador. For Romero, God's Word was not something that floated on clouds or remained safely in pulpits wrapped in incense. The mission of the Word of God was to pierce into the flesh of real, human history, opening up wounds which festered from lack of the truth.

To try to preach without referring to the history one preaches in is not to preach the gospel. Many would like a preaching so spiritualistic that it leaves sinners unbothered and does not term idolaters those who kneel before money and power. A preaching that says nothing of the sinful environment in which the gospel is reflected upon is not the gospel (18 Feb. 1979).

So often was Romero accused of messing with politics, that it almost became for him a sign that his preaching was bearing fruit, but he always sought to clarify the reasons for his touching on concrete examples of social injustice in his homilies. "I wish to affirm that my preaching is not political. It naturally touches on the political and touches people's real lives -- but in order to illuminate those realities" (21 Jan. 1979). He knew very well that to preach the light of Christ as it shone into the sinful situations of Salvadoran society would bring opposition and disgust, but he never softened the prophetic edge to his preaching just to protect the social status of the Church. "It is much easier," he said, "to preach lies, to accommodate oneself so as

not to lose privileges... If it is necessary for the Church to lose its privileges, then it will lose them; but it will always speak the truth” (22 April 1979).

Someone once remarked to the archbishop that his homilies were like receiving a university course, to which Romero responded, with the humility that so clearly characterized his preaching ministry, “I have never intended anything like that, but only to be an ordinary catechist, an evangelizer of the people, nothing else” (15 Oct. 1978). But one cannot deny that Archbishop Romero did have a very keen grasp of the day-to-day situation of the Salvadoran reality, along with a unique capacity to speak of God’s loving, transforming presence within that reality. His early years as an ardent student, a kind of theological “book worm,” actually quite cut-off from the reality in which he lived, paid off in the end. His preaching was well rooted in an ongoing social analysis and a profound, and yet also very pastoral, study of the scriptures. “Let them not say we don’t read the Bible,” he once said. “Not only do we read it, but we analyze it, celebrate it, incarnate it, and we want to make it our life” (11 Nov. 1979). And again, “We cannot segregate God’s Word from the historical reality in which it is proclaimed. That would not be God’s Word. The Bible would be just a pious history book in our library” (27 Nov. 1977). It was from a context of arduous study and contemplative pondering on the daily plight of his people, that Archbishop Romero’s prophetic word sounded forth with such clarity and conviction. His advice would do well to be repeated in all courses of homiletics today.

I study the Word of God to be read on Sunday. I look around me, at my people. I use this Word to shed light on my surroundings... Naturally, the idols and idolatries of the earth are irritated by this Word, and they would like very much to remove it, to silence it, to kill it. Let happen what God wills, but God’s Word, as St. Paul said, is not tied down (20 August 1978).

Those words, read from our contemporary perspective, twenty years after the martyrdom of Archbishop Oscar Romero, cannot but shake us up and force us to look honestly at our own preaching in the Church today. Are we willing to “let happen what God wills” so as to not tie down the Word of God?

### THE VOICELESS HAVE A VOICE

In 1989, on the ninth anniversary of Romero’s martyrdom, I participated in the annual commemoration march through the streets of San Salvador. As my friend and fellow Dominican, Jim Barnett, and I made our way through the city, along with thousands of demonstrators, I watched, at first a bit caught off guard, as young men and women occasionally dropped out of the crowd to paint graffiti on the walls of public buildings. Some of the more courageous ones painted their social protests (often just the name of a dead or disappeared companion, followed by the word (*¡Presente!*) in open defiance, as heavily-armed soldiers stood by watching their every move. At certain strategic points along the route soldiers video taped the protesters from atop military and government buildings.

Little by little it began to sink in that this type of graffiti (certainly not *all* types) was

really the newspaper of the poor in a country where the right to free expression was heavily controlled by fourteen wealthy families, backed by the Army and the U.S. government. The people's right to speak their the was caged in a world held captive by lies. The poor are usually relegated to a place of social voicelessness, and in El Salvador that meant that the country was more than 80% mute.

Archbishop Romero, was keenly aware that *truth* was a rare commodity in Salvadoran society, and so he allowed the pulpit of the cathedral to serve as the microphone of the voiceless, an outlet of prophetic expression for the oppressed.

These homilies try to be this people's voice. They try to be the voice of those who have no voice. And so, without a doubt, they displease those who have too much voice. This poor voice will find echo in those who love the truth and who truly love our dear people (29 July 1979).

In the spirit of the Hebrew prophets of old, Romero responded to God's call: "Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of glad tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O herald of Jerusalem, lift it up, fear not. Tell the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God'" (Is 40:9). *Monseñor* Romero's preaching was a kind of *gospel graffiti* which provided a forum for the poor to speak their truth to the world.

Along with his weekly homilies in the archdiocesan cathedral, *Monseñor* Romero also took advantage of the other outlets of the mass media. He frequently wrote columns in the local newspapers (those that would print them), and one of his prize treasures, and one which he knew how to use wisely, was the archdiocesan radio station, YSAX. He publicly lamented the distorted truths which flowed from so much of the media.

It is a shame, brothers and sisters... to have mass media that have sold themselves out to these situations. It is a shame to not be able to trust the news in the papers, the television or the radio because it has already been bought and tampered with; it is not the truth (2 April 1978).

And in an even more direct call to those involved in disseminating the news in a society suffocated by lies, Romero said, "A journalist either speaks the truth or he or she is no longer a journalist" (29 July 1979). In a newspaper column dated 20 August 1979 Archbishop Romero severely criticized the arsonists who had set fire to the offices of the newspaper *La Crónica del Pueblo*. "We can only repudiate this barbarism," he wrote, adding that, "The ashes continue to speak out. The voice of truth, the loving service of the people's noble interests, the intelligence and heart of those who raise those banners, have not been burned." The work of truth-telling was not something to be taken lightly in Romero's estimation. For thousands of Salvadorans the truth was literally a matter of life and death. "If we do not speak the truth," he said, "we are committing the worst sin."

Each Sunday the archbishop's homily was broadcast throughout the country by way of the archdiocesan radio. Romero knew how to speak not only to those who were gathered with him in the cathedral, but he had a way of reaching into the hearts of the peasant poor who crouched near their radios to catch his every word. "What an honor to think that all of you before me are Christ! Even the humblest peasant, maybe pondering there next to a radio, you are Christ!" (13 Jan. 1980). Two weeks later, in an exquisite theological reflection on the place of the homily in the liturgy, Romero said with simple, yet profoundly insightful words, "Christ is the homily that keeps explaining to us that God is love... Christ is God's homily preaching to you" (27 Jan. 1980).

As part of each Sunday homily, Archbishop Romero would include a section which he called *Events of the Week*, in which he would give news of the different happenings throughout the archdiocese and the country. It was a kind of homiletic *60 Minutes*, a chance for the *real* news, the *truth*, of the people to be shared nationwide. He would comment on the different events of the popular organizations, the meetings of base Christian communities, gatherings of priests and religious, and the visits of foreign solidarity groups. Another part was dedicated to sharing the week's tragedies: the disappearances, unjust imprisonments and attacks, and almost always, the news of one or more brutal deaths at the hands of the security forces. For many people it was only the voice of *Monseñor* that could fully be trusted to tell the truth of what was happening in the country. Romero knew that the YSAX radio played an important role in his own preaching mission, but he also knew that the day would probably come when *that*, too, would be taken away.

I said once and I repeat today that if, unhappily, some day they silence our radio and don't let us write our newspaper, each of you who believe must become a microphone, a radio station, a loudspeaker, not to talk, but to call for faith (29 Oct. 1978).

And, of course, that day did come in February 1980. In his Sunday homily, in the days following the bombing of the radio station, *Monseñor* Romero strongly denounced what he called "a grave violation against the freedom of expression." But, as if the spirit of St. Paul were again speaking, Romero knew that, "We are persecuted, but not forsaken, struck down, but not destroyed" (2Cor. 4:9). In his homily that Sunday the archbishop once again called his people to a stance of hope in God's promise of justice, "With this latest attempt they pretend to silence the prophetic and pastoral voice of the Archdiocese, precisely because we are trying to be the voice of the voiceless... (but) this absence of our radio transmission, contrary to those who wanted to silence us, gives greater moral strength to the word of the Church" (24 Feb. 1980).

What was so remarkable about Romero was that he was convinced that the prophetic preaching charism which God freely bestowed on certain people was not property of the archbishop alone, but in fact, rested in the people themselves. "The people are my prophet," he was fond of saying, and he put that dogma of his personal faith into practice daily. "Each of you has to be a microphone of God, everyone of you a messenger, a prophet" (8 July 1979). Romero had named the grace of preaching as belonging, by right of baptism, to the people of God themselves, and in so doing, he was preparing his beloved flock to continue the ministry of

prophecy in the event that one day he would no longer be able to carry on.

And *that* day came, as well -- one month after the bombing of the radio station. Aware that the bombing of the radio had only strengthened the prophetic stance of the Church, the enemies of the truth took the more drastic step: to silence once and for all the voice of the shepherd himself. On Sunday, March 23, 1980 Archbishop Romero preached what was perhaps the most radical, or at least, the most courageous homily of his life. It was, as so many of his homilies were, a call to conversion and to an authentic following of Christ. In the homily, his last Sunday homily, he directly addressed the soldiers of the Army and of the National Guard:

Brothers, you are part of our very own people, and you are killing your own peasant brothers and sisters. Before an order to kill given by a man, God's law "*You shall not kill*" must prevail. No soldier is obligated to obey an order which goes against the law of God. No one has to fulfill an immoral law. It is time for you to recover your own conscience and to obey your conscience before obeying a sinful command. The Church...cannot remain silent in the face of such an abomination.... In the name of God, therefore, and in the name of these suffering people whose cries rise up to heaven, each day more tormented, I ask you, I beg you, *I order you in the name of God: Stop the repression!*

Archbishop Romero was assassinated the very next day, at precisely the moment in which he concluded his homily at the small cancer hospital where he lived and often celebrated daily mass. He had lived as a preacher and he died as a preacher. He did not leave the people of El Salvador orphaned, for he had helped them find their *own voice* of prophecy. "My voice will disappear," he had foretold in December of 1978, "but my word, which is Christ, will remain in the hearts that have made it their own." That Word remains to this day.

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Sources for the above quotes: Mons.Oscar A. Romero (*Colección Homilias y Diario*); María López Vigil (*Piezas Para un Retrato*); James R. Brockman, S.J. (*The Church is All of You; The Violence of Love*); Equipo MAIZ (*Monseñor Romero: El Pueblo Es Mi Profeta*).

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