

Mons. Romero and Liberation Theology¹

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The opportunity to discuss the question of Mons. Romero's relationship with liberation theology arose once again with his beatification on 23 May 2015. Some try to disassociate him completely from it. Others call him a liberation theologian. I do not agree with either camp. The issue is complicated because Mons. Romero underwent a profound change in his attitude towards liberation theology. This article is an attempt to analyse the extent to which the method and central content of liberation theology is present in the homilies, pastoral letters and diary of the blessed archbishop and martyr. We will see that Mons. Romero has become a source of great inspiration for renowned proponents of liberation theology.

1. Two opposing views

Roberto Morozzo della Rocca, in his book, "Oscar Romero. The Biography",² a somewhat pretentious title, states the case for disassociating Mons. Romero from liberation theology. The author maintains, "Liberation theologians have presented Romero's actions as the incarnation of this ideology, even though he was not a follower of it."³ This assertion invites criticism. Firstly, it suggests that liberation theology is an ideology. There is no mention by name of a liberation theologian, and no source is quoted. "Following" a theology is a strange turn of phrase. It would seem that the author is guided by prejudice and interest. Controversy has superseded scientific research.

Jesús Delgado is another proponent of Mons. Romero's voluntary disassociation from liberation theology. In the 2003 book, "Oscar Romero. A bishop caught between a cold war and a revolution"⁴, he examined the small library of 205 books that Archbishop Mons. Romero left in his bedroom at the Divine Providence Hospital. He asserts that, "...the least read literature in this library is that concerned with liberation theology (12 volumes). The books dedicated to this theology are as new as the day Monseñor bought them, or perhaps we should say, was given them."⁵ From this, he concludes that Mons. Romero paid no attention to liberation theology. As a scientific argument, this is somewhat superficial.

The opposing point of view is put forward by, for example, Ralf Pauli in "Zeit Online", writing on the occasion of the beatification. "The pope will beatify the liberation theologian Oscar Arnulfo Romero."⁶ Firstly, Mons. Romero was not a professional theologian, and therefore cannot be called a "liberation theologian". Using the three-way definition of Leonardo and Clodovis Boff of a liberation theology that is popular, pastoral and professional,⁷ it could be said that at best what Mons. Romero in his three years as Archbishop demonstrated was a pastoral version of liberation theology. But in order to fully understand this, it is necessary to review the great change in Mons. Romero that some people call his conversion and which has an impact on his stance on liberation theology.

¹ This is an English translation of a text originally delivered in Spanish at the UCA, the Jesuit University, in San Salvador in August 2015

² R. Morozzo della Rocca, Óscar Romero. La biografía, San Salvador 2015.

³ Ibid.; pg 150

⁴ R. Morozzo della Rocca (ed.), Óscar Romero. Un obispo entre guerra fría y revolución, Madrid 2003,

⁵ Ibid., p. 58

⁶ <http://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/zeitgeschehen/2015-02/romero-el-salvador-papst>

⁷ L. y Cl. Boff, Como hacer teología de la liberación, Madrid 1986, pp. 21ss.

2. From struggling with liberation theology to defending it.

Mons. Romero criticised liberation theology strongly when he held the position of Director of the diocesan weekly magazine *Orientación*, from 1971 to 1974. This was rooted in his struggle with a politicisation of the church. Certainly a mixture of religion and politics and the Church's identification with revolutionary political movements could be dangerous. At the Vatican II Council (1962 – 1965) and the Bishops Conference in Medellín (1968), however, the Catholic Church recognised that Christians also have a responsibility to engage politically for justice and human rights. This was not looked upon favourably by those who were benefiting from the existing situation and who were opposed to any form of change. They would later accuse Mons. Romero of interfering in politics and call him a communist. They also demonised liberation theology as a theology impregnated with Marxism and accused it of justifying and encouraging violence. The consequence was one of the bloodiest persecutions of Christians in the history of the church.

Yet, in the articles and editorials of *Orientación*, Mons. Romero issued serious warnings against political theology and liberation theology. In the issue of *Orientación* of 10 March 1974, there is a brief note under the title, "Serious objections to political theology"⁸. It says, "in response to a recent publication called "Political Theology", the Holy See has made available a theological study from which we can pick out the complex reasoning and conclusion, with the sole aim of clarifying confusions which that publication has sown among some of our select readers." Although the name of the author is not given, this is a clear reference to the "Political Theology" of Ignacio Ellacuría, published in 1973. Ellacuría defended himself from the accusations in a "critical response" published only in 2009.⁹

In the editorial of 7 April 1974, he says in the tone of an apologetic, "It is scandalous how naturalism, immanentism, materialism and even atheism have infiltrated the arguments of certain intellectual Christians ... Christ ... never will be the guerrilla fighter, Marxist, economist and political Christ that some would want him to be."¹⁰

The editorial of 6 October 1974 tackles the synod of bishops on evangelisation in the world today. Still following a neoscholastic line and antimodernist theology, it says, "evangelisation is nothing other than the supernatural work that Christ entrusted to his Church, to transmit his message to all so that they may believe and be saved." There are serious warnings of deviation or error: "Think, for example, of the defective arguments we have heard about "political theologians", or "liberation theologians", or those strange "christologies" or "ecclesiologies" that cause us to fall into the old errors of "modernism", etc."¹¹

On 18 May 1975, Romero was appointed advisor to the Pontifical Commission for Latin America. In November 1975, he penned a confidential memorandum for the Commission called, "Three factors of the political movement in the clergy in El Salvador".¹² He starts with a critical analysis 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 the attention of Rome especially to the "new Christology" of Jon Sobrino. The roman congregations

⁸ *Orientación*, No 2058, 10 de marzo 1974. P. 3

⁹ Cf. I. Ellacuría, Respuesta crítica a „Nota sobre la publicación Teología Política del Reverendo Padre Ignacio Ellacuría, S.J.“, en RLT 77 (2009) pp. 204-221.

¹⁰ *Orientación*, No 2063, 7 de abril 1974, p. 3

¹¹ *Orientación*, No 2086, 6 de octubre 1974, p. 3.

¹² Cf. J. R. Brockman, *La palabra queda. Vida de Mons. Oscar A. Romero*, San Salvador 1985, pp. 80ss.

reacted swiftly. Sobrino and Ellacuría had to justify the orthodoxy of their theology for the first time.

The homily of 6 August 1976 offers a summary of Romero's theological and political thinking at this time. 6 August is the Feast of the Transfiguration, and in San Salvador it is also the national day for the patron saint, the Divine Saviour. Traditionally, there is a pontifical mass in the Cathedral attended by anyone who holds a public position or of public renown. The preacher is chosen with great care.

In his homily, Romero spoke of Christ as the Saviour, but he warned people not to think of liberation only in a material sense. He did not refer to the social conflicts. Rather, he attacked head-on the so-called "new christologies". Without mentioning any names, it was clear that he was referring to Jon Sobrino. Sobrino recalls his homily thus, "I didn't go to the Mass on 6 August, but a few hours afterwards a priest brought me a recording of the homily. I listened and I froze. In his first point, Mons. Romero criticised the christologies that were emerging in the country: rationalist christologies, christologies that called for revolution, christologies with hate...In other words, his homily was a full-on attack on my Christology".¹³ There was nothing to suggest that just one year later Sobrino would become one of Romero's closest theological advisors.

3. Change or conversion?

There was a profound change in Mons Romero that some have called a conversion.¹⁴ But this too is controversial and linked in a strange way to liberation theology. Andrea Riccardi says, "Then there is Romero's conversion. In literature it is preferable to a Romero who is conquered by liberation theology: his conversion would happen following the violent death of Father Rutilio Grande."¹⁵

Monsignor Arturo Rivera y Damas in his introduction to the book on Mons. Romero by Jesús Delgado, has the following to say on the topic of his conversion: "I agree with those who speak of the "conversion" of Mons. Romero, when he assumed the pastoral role of the archdiocese of San Salvador."¹⁶ However, Mons. Rivera does not consider this to have been such a sudden and spectacular conversion as that of Saint Paul on the road to Damascus, "but the result of a long and progressive process of maturity throughout his life."¹⁷

There is no doubt that the murder of Father Rutilio Grande and his two companions, Manuel Solorzano and Nelson Rutilio Lemus, was a key moment in this conversion. Mons. Rivera puts it beautifully in this deep reflection: "A martyr gave life to another martyr. Before the body of Father Rutilio Grande, Mons. Romero, on his 20th 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."¹⁸ And it is common knowledge that Pope Francis, in a meeting with Father Rodolfo Cardenal in October 2015 said, "Rutilio's great miracle is Mons. Romero."

¹³ J. Sobrino, *Monseñor Romero*, San Salvador 1989, p. 14.

¹⁴ Cf. M. Maier, *Monseñor Romero: maestro de espiritualidad*, San Salvador 2005, pp. 97ss.

¹⁵ Morozzo della Rocca 2003, p. 326.

¹⁶ Mons. A. Rivera y Damas, *Presentación*, en: J. Delgado, Óscar A. Romero. *Biografía*, San Salvador 1990, p. 3

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

There are those who try to distance Mons. Romero from liberation theology, as though it were something extremely dangerous and contagious. But we should ask what they understand to be liberation theology. Always they present a caricature and fantasy of liberation theology: a politicising theology, Marxist, a theology that incites violence. Ignacio Ellacuría made it clear that liberation theology as represented by himself and Jon Sobrino is not influenced in any way by Marxism.¹⁹

4. A brief summary of Liberation Theology

We can briefly summarise liberation theology according to three basic principles. The first and most important is the option for the poor, with its foundations in the Bible and in God himself. The God of Israel has always shown himself to be a God on the side of the oppressed, the weak, the orphans and the widows, the strangers. This is God in the image of Jesus, who proclaims the good news of the Kingdom of God for the poor. The option for the poor is at the heart of all forms of liberation theology. This is because the option for the poor is central to Christian faith - starting with the liberation of the Jews, enslaved in Egypt, through the defence of the poor of Israel by prophets, in the name of God, to Jesus' identification with the poor, suffering and most in need in the parable of the last judgement in Matthew 25.

The second is the attention that liberation theology pays to the signs of the times with regards to the presence and plans of God visible in history.²⁰ What distinguishes a theology of the signs of the times is the unity it perceives between the history of the world and the history of salvation as conceived and detailed by Karl Rahner and Ignacio Ellacuría.²¹

The third principle is the practical end of liberation theology, which seeks to contribute to change and to humanise the world. It follows the see-judge-act methodology and is rooted in the praxis of the example of Jesus.

Let us examine the presence of these three principles in Mons. Romero's preaching and action.

4.1 The option for the poor

The fundamental principle of the option for the poor is equality of dignity for all human beings.²² This is rooted in the belief that every human being has been made in the image and likeness of God. When talking about the terrible human rights violations in El Salvador, 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 martyrdom is her cross." (II, 165)²³

Precisely because every human being is important to God, he shows that he is a God who stands with those whose dignity and life are under threat. In the Old Testament, God appears as the defender of widows and orphans. Isaiah demands in the name of God: "Learn to do right; see that justice is done, help those who are oppressed, give orphans their rights and defend

¹⁹ Cf. I. Ellacuría, *Escritos Teológicos III*, San Salvador 2002, p. 81.

²⁰ Cfr. J. Sobrino, *Los "signos de los tiempos" en la teología de la liberación*, in: J. M. Lera (ed.), *Fides quae per caritatem operatur. Homenaje al P. Juan Alfaro S.J. en sus 75 años*, Bilbao 1989, pp. 249-269.

²¹ M. Maier, *La influencia de Karl Rahner en la teología de Ignacio Ellacuría (I)*: RLT 39 (1996) 233-255; (II): RLT 44 (1998) 163-187

²² Cf. M. Zechmeister, *Mons. Romero: mártir por la dignidad humana*, en: RLT 97 (2016) p. 55-64.

²³ We quote the homilies of Mons. Romero from the six volumes of the critical edition of UCA Editores, San Salvador 2005. The roman numerals indicate the volume followed by the page numbers.

widows.” (Is 1:17) Jeremiah establishes an intimate link between the wisdom of God and the praxis of justice: “He gave the poor a fair trial, and all went well with him. That is what it means to know the Lord.” (Jer. 22:16). Finding God meant practising justice for the Old Testament prophets.

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 a homily, 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. If he was here in the Cathedral, he would be indistinguishable in the crowd. 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 (cf. III, 296).

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 first place in his beatitudes. In the parable of the final judgement, he identifies with the most needy. Paul sees the quintessence of Christian faith in God’s preference for revealing himself in the least and the weakest in the world. “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) In other words, the option for the poor runs through the Bible like a red cord.

Romero found God in the poor. This was the most joyous experience of his life. In his homilies, he repeats over and 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) It seems by this that Jesus underwent a process of development, of learning. The 12-year-old child still 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. One of his exclamations of the jubilant cry of Jesus is, “I have known God because I have known my people.” The poor are the central axis of his spirituality, whose key criteria is, “how do I treat the poor? For God is there.” (II, 257).

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 February 1980 on the poverty of the beatitudes, he calls it accusing poverty (cf. VI, 276 onwards). 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.”²⁴

4.2 The signs of the times

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.”²⁵

The Second Vatican Council with Pope John XXIII took the signs of the times very seriously as manifestations of God at work in the world. In his homily of 21 May 1978 for the Feast of the Holy Trinity, Mons. Romero quotes No. 11 of the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* from the Second Vatican Council: “The people of God, moved by faith, believe that they are guided by the Holy Spirit who fills the Universe, and in the events going on around them. They seek to discern true signs of the presence and plans of God in the demands and the desires of the people around them, and their own. Faith illuminates everything with its new light, and the divine plan is manifested in the vocation of every individual. Faith guides our minds to finding fully humane solutions.” And he comments: “What a beautiful theology of the signs of the times!” (II, 512)

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. He frequently said, “The word of God has to become incarnate in reality.”²⁶ For example, Romero 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 lay on their marble beds; and those who join up one house with another and annex field after field, until they own the whole area and are left as the only ones in the country.”²⁷ Through the prophets, God demands the situation be transformed.

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

²⁴ Mons. Romero A. Romero, *Su diario*, San Salvador 2000, p. 86s.

²⁵ *Cartas Pastorales y Discursos de Monseñor Oscar A. Romero*, San Salvador 2007, p. 43.

²⁶ Cf. M. Cavada Díez, *Predicación y profecía. Análisis de las homilías de Monseñor Romero*, en *RLT* 34 (1995) 3-36.

²⁷ *Cartas Pastorales y Discursos*, p. 184.

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." (II, 219).

When the Word of God is united with the present, the word becomes explosive, "Preaching is fairly straightforward... but making this doctrine incarnate and live in the Diocese or the community, and pointing out what goes against this doctrine brings about conflict." (III, 105). Preaching the Word of God will cause conflict if the preacher denounces the sins and abuses as the prophets did. Nevertheless, it is the prophetic mission of the Church to speak the truth in a climate of lies.

4.3 Praxis

St. Ignatius de Loyola says in his exercises that love has to be expressed more through action than through words. This is closely linked to the Bible Truth, which should be lived out and put into practice. Mons. Romero says that the actions of the prophets spoke louder than their words. (V, 89). And that the truth of the gospel has to be lived, made real. This is what happened to Mons. Romero. He practised what he preached. Romero's life and death were in themselves a homily, a good news. His discourse and his action were as one. He was not one of those people who cries out, "Lord! Lord!" whilst doing nothing. On the contrary, he committed himself fully to doing what he preached. For him, lived practice was more important than any subtle theory.

His "work" is the testimony of his life. As priest and bishop he was a man of preaching, of the spoken word. There was an existential harmony between his preaching and his person. He was authentic. So, in his famous poem, written in response to the assassination of Romero, Pedro Casaldáliga says, "No one will silence your last homily!"

A Church that is faithful to the Gospel and to the way of Christ in this way will find itself in conflict. This was Mons. 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 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."²⁸ It is very interesting to note that Pope Francis was accused of being Marxist by the ultra-conservative wing in the United States for his tough criticism of the dominant neoliberal economic system.

5. The crucified people

Mons. Romero's deepest and most creative spiritual and theological insight is his association of the passion of the Salvadorean people with the suffering servant of God and the crucified Christ. He spoke of a crucified people. This inspired and nourished the theology of Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino.²⁹ The first time he expresses this association is in his homily of 19 June 1977 in Aguilares, following the siege of the villagers by the soldiers when, in Romero's words, they transformed it "into a jail and place of torture." Romero refers to a phrase used by the prophet Zecariah: "They will look at the one whom they stabbed to death, and they will mourn for him like those who mourn for an only child. They will mourn bitterly, like those who have lost their

²⁸ Ibid., p. 61.

²⁹ Cf. M. Maier, *Teología del pueblo crucificado*. En el 70 aniversario de Jon Sobrino, en: *RLT* 75 (2008) p. 279-294.

first-born son.” (Zech. 12:10). In the Gospel according to St. John, this text is quoted before the image of Jesus dying on the cross. Romero applies it to the abused population of Aguilares, “You are the image of the Pierced God, who we read about in the first reading, in prophetic, mysterious language, but who represents Christ nailed to the cross and pierced by the spear. This is the image of all those villages which, like Aguilares, will be pierced, will be offended.” (I, 150).

In his homily for the first anniversary of the assassination of Rutilio Grande, he explores these thoughts more deeply. Grande showed the poor campesinos the true image of Christ. As a Jesuit, Rutilio Grande searched continuously in spiritual retreats for the possibility of a full encounter with Jesus. But the true image of Christ, “is not discovered through spiritual retreats alone, but through entering into life here where Christ is suffering flesh, here where Christ is present, 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, and to so much suffering; 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.” (III, 323).

In his Palm Sunday homily in 1978, Romero establishes a link between the growing political repression and Jesus’ walk to Calvary. He creates the term “a crucified people”: “In Holy Week, in Christ with his cross on his shoulders, we see the people carrying their cross. In Christ with his arms outstretched, crucified, we see the crucified people, but a people who find hope in Christ in the midst of their crucifixion and humiliation: “I have taught you to speak words of consolation, you have learnt through your suffering to give consolation to others.” (II, 333)

On Good Friday he returns once again to the image of a crucified people, picking up on his Palm Sunday homily, and exploring the theme still further: Christ’s suffering shows us the suffering of all people, and like him, they take comfort in the secret of redemption. “Jesus Christ Our Lord represents our tortured people, our crucified people, spat upon, and humiliated, giving us a sense of redemption in the midst of such a difficult situation.” (II, 355)

In the Palm Sunday homily of 1979, he explores Jesus’ cry, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” Once again, he draws a direct parallel with the reality of El Salvador. “How easily we can identify with Christ in the suffering of our people! So many people in the shanty towns, so many people in the prisons, so many suffering, so many who are hungry for justice and peace, send up their cries, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me.” He has not abandoned us. This is the moment when the Son of God, with all his burden of sin, obediently fulfils God’s expectation of him, in order to forgive the sins of humanity, the root of all injustice, of all selfishness.” (IV, 356)

If Romero considers the “crucified people” the sign of the presence of Christ in the world, it raises the question of the relevance of Christ’s presence in the sacrament of the Eucharist. The abuse of the people of Aguilares and the profanation of the consecrated hosts in the tabernacle by soldiers, affect Christ in the same way: “In the symbol of the host, stamped upon in Aguilares, we look upon the face of Christ on the cross” (I, 135). In the Corpus Christi homily in 1978, Romero establishes a link between the presence of Christ in the sacrament of the Eucharist and the abuse of so many people in El Salvador: “It is very appropriate to honour the body and blood of the son of man when there are so many offences against our own body and blood. I would like to include in this homage of our faith, in the presence of the body and blood of Christ

spilt for us, the blood of the mountain of massacred bodies here in our country, in our sister republic Nicaragua, and the whole world.” (IV, 527)

Lastly, Romero speaks concisely of a martyred people, the suffering servant of God and the crucified Son of God in his speech at Leuven on 2 February 1980: “The real persecution has been directed towards the poor, who are the body of Christ today. They are the crucified people, like Jesus, the people persecuted for being the servant of Yahweh. As a body they complete the passion of Christ.”³⁰ This last phrase alludes to something in Saint Paul’s letter to the Colossians: “and now I am happy about my sufferings for you, for by means of my physical sufferings I am helping to complete what still remains of Christ’s sufferings on behalf of his body, the church.” (Col. 1:24) Enigmatically, Paul says here that there is something missing in Christ’s afflictions and that it has to be completed. So he establishes a link between his own suffering and the suffering of Christ. Romero also relates the sufferings of the crucified people to Christ.

This comparison of the suffering of the poor with the suffering of Christ became an important theme of the Episcopal Conference in Puebla. On the presence of Christ in the world, Puebla says, “He wanted with a special care to identify with the weakest and the poorest.” This is expressed in what is possibly the most beautiful passage in Puebla, in which the faces of the most needy in Latin America are likened to the face of Christ in the passion. Romero quotes liberally from this passage in his fourth pastoral letter.³¹

Final Reflections

To conclude, then, Mons. Romero’s attitude to liberation theology changed with his conversion. Before he considered it a dangerous fashionable theology, but afterwards he chose Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino as his close theological advisors. In the Episcopal Conference in Puebla he met with liberation theologians who were excluded from the official conference.³² In Leuven he tried to dissipate the prejudices of a European theologian towards liberation theology.³³

The main principles of liberation theology – the option for the poor, the signs of the time and the praxis and see, judge, act methodology run through his homilies and pastoral letters and mark his pastoral action. Mons. Romero was inspired by liberation theology and inspired it. We can observe this in the theologoumenon of a crucified people. Jon Sobrino says of Mons. Romero’s theology, with his customary lucidity, “His 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.”³⁴

³⁰ Ibid., p. 186.

³¹ Ibid., p. 114s.

³² Diario, p. 107.

³³ Ibid. P. 383.

³⁴ J. Sobrino, Monseñor Romero, p. 172.