







# STUDIES

IN  
THE SPIRITUALITY OF JESUITS

Archbishop with an Attitude

*Oscar Romero's Sentir con la Iglesia*

DOUGLAS MARCOUILLER, S.J.

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*Oscar Romero's Sentir con la Iglesia*

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Douglas Marcouiller, S.J.

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STUDIES IN THE SPIRITUALITY OF JESUITS

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## *The first word . . .*

“If you hear my voice, squeeze my hand.” Many a hospital chaplain uses this sentence as he administers the last rites to comatose patients.

I’ve been tempted to address those words—part inquiry, part exhortation—to other varieties of the comatose. Imagine, for example, a windowless classroom filled with undergraduates, who first thing on a Monday morning find themselves subjected to a learned explanation of the mysteries of panchromatic film stock, parallel editing, and the lap dissolve. “Is anyone awake out there? Alive?” Or look out over a congregation on a Sunday morning, noses burrowing into those awful missalettes, a godsend for the deaf and a refuge for the bored. “Hello, good people! I’m preaching to you. At least put down your beads and devotional booklets and look up every once in a while, just to prove you’re still here. Squeeze my hand.” Any experienced teacher or preacher knows that dull, sinking feeling of an audience drifting away. It’s our common lot in life.

In contrast, a strong reaction to the spoken word comes rarely and, when it does, it comes as a shock. For example, many years ago, when I was “on the circuit” for giving retreats at motherhouses of sisters, I unwittingly stepped on a landmine and provoked a vigorous response—a shot, if not heard around the world, at least heard relentlessly until the end of my otherwise quiet week in the country.

Here’s what happened. The size of the group determined the format. It was a “guided retreat,” with two conferences each day and the opportunity for private direction for those who wished: a common practice in the 1970s. Since the military imagery of the Ignatian texts can be an obstacle for many women, especially after the antiwar furor of the Vietnam War era, it seemed a good idea to present the Two Standards as a reflection on the nature of religious life. Smart, thought I. Not smart enough, as it turned out.

The point, which seemed innocuous enough, even commonplace, was that the essence of religious life consists in the vow of obedience. Speaking as a homilist rather than a systematic theologian, I argued that most people in religious life do not feel many of the effects of poverty. We have access to education and health care; to food, shelter, and clothing; to vacations and entertainment. Remember those endless, acrimonious “lifestyle” debates of years past? Above all, in our evangelical poverty, we retain our human dignity, while the lot of many poor people is systematic degradation. In addition, most lay people lead a common life as radical as ours; their earnings and property benefit the family rather than the indi-

vidual. Some choose to “simplify” their lives for many reasons: to save the environment or to pursue a Thoreauvian dream of returning to nature in a cabin in Idaho. Many secular priests in poor areas embrace the lifestyle of their parishioners. Some lay people even choose poverty out of religious motives, like Catholic Workers or many volunteers engaged in demanding ministries in impoverished regions throughout the world. No, our poverty does not distinguish us as religious.

By their promise of fidelity unto death, married couples make a public profession of chastity appropriate to their state. Some lay people even choose a life of celibacy for several reasons: to care for an aging parent or invalid sibling, to devote all their energies to science, to art, to a dangerous profession, which may embrace anything from being a CIA undercover operative to serving victims of communicable diseases. Again, spiritual motives could conceivably color any of these key decisions. No, we religious may be eunuchs for the Kingdom of God, but we have a lot of company.

Obedience, however, marks us as making a unique commitment to this Kingdom. We place our freedom as adults in the hands of others. While others have the trajectory of their lives defined by circumstances they cannot control, like poverty, disability, or talent, we make a deliberate choice to follow the call of Christ as it comes to us through the constitutions of our religious community and is mediated by other individuals placed in positions of authority. I can’t think of any other group that makes this kind of profession. This line of argumentation seemed to me a reasonable alternate route around the massed armies of the Two Standards to the unconditional commitment Ignatius has in mind at this point in the Exercises.

Much to my surprise, the massed armies descended on the poor director as though in retaliation for a sneak attack. I had inadequate intelligence for my ill-fated foray. This particular community had been going through the post-Vatican convulsions of rewriting its constitutions. Not only the concepts but even the words “superior” and “obedience” held horrific connotations for them. They had begun to enter a brave new world of coordinators and councils, discernment and self-chosen, personal missions. The path to the future was understandably paved with resentment of past abuses. “This obedience is a Jesuit thing,” one sister told me with a bit of an edge in her voice; “it has nothing to do with the rest of us.”

I wonder about the “Jesuit thing.” We used to talk a good game. Those of us old enough to have once worn bell-bottom pants with a fat belt remember the monthly reading of Ignatius’s *Letter to the Scholastics at Coimbra*. We listened dutifully to the ideal Jesuit’s goal of allowing himself to be led around like “a dead man” or “an old man’s staff.” Such a doctrine, if followed, certainly would have made life a lot easier for superiors;



but I wonder to what degree it ever was followed. We listened to the reading in the refectory, but did we believe it? Again, I wonder.

Jesuit obedience, so the saying goes, consists in absolute authority vested in the general and his delegates, tempered only by absolute insubordination vested in everyone else. This is a tension that crosses generational boundaries quite promiscuously, from the scholastic threatening to leave the Society if he does not get a particular assignment to studies (Let me help you pack.) to the old-timer who refuses to stop driving or move out of his room of forty years. Both find support amid misguided friends who cheer them on for not letting themselves be pushed around. For an organization that idealizes obedience, we have a strange habit of making folk heroes of the defiant and regarding inconvenient directives of superiors with the presumption of sinister intent, malice, or stupidity.

Obedience of the intellect presents still another area of conflict. Ignatius gave us the “Rules for Thinking with the Church,” which to a greater or lesser degree we read today with embarrassment, especially the lucky thirteenth rule: “What seems to me to be white, I will believe to be black if the hierarchical Church thus determines it.” A world without theological disputation and resistance, active as well as passive, to various disciplinary rules from Roman officialdom probably never existed in the Society of Jesus or in the Church, and this side of the Parousia, it probably never will. Most of us usually have the good sense to keep quiet in the face of unpalatable realities, as the rules prescribe, but on rare occasions a good conscience demands speaking out, taking a stand, and going on record despite the consequences. To our credit, as a group, we have come to understand that fairly well.

Most of us live lives of constant negotiation with our obedience, usually on the little things and occasionally with a major issue. This is fine. In one of his last testaments, John Courtney Murray left us a reflection entitled “The Danger of the Vows.” We can’t dehumanize ourselves and abrogate adult responsibility in the name of virtue. At the same time, we have dedicated our lives to the Church and our energies to a corporate ministry within the Society of Jesus. Loose cannons need not apply.

When you think about it, we’ve made a lot of progress as a community in our thinking about obedience. Our assignments are no longer posted on the bulletin board at midnight on the feast of the Sacred Heart. (Surprise, you’re going to Siberia next week!) We generally have a chance to talk about changes in ministry before they are finalized. We know the vocabulary and process of discernment with superiors. Representation, or asking the superior to change his mind about a particular case, has become a fairly common practice and can be done without confrontation. Dissent has its place, and so does authority. It’s a lot messier now, especially for superiors, but it’s much more human, and thus more graced.

We Jesuits are not alone in our struggles with obedience and negotiation. In the pages that follow, Doug Marcouiller shows the life of Archbishop Oscar Romero as one of ongoing negotiation among the values he held dearest in his life. No, he was not a Jesuit, but he was Ignatian—a priest of the diocese who made a thirty-day retreat and who regularly made his annual retreat according to the outline of the Spiritual Exercises. He chose as his episcopal motto the familiar phrase from Ignatius's rules, "To think with the Church."

As his journals show so clearly, Archbishop Romero was without question a dedicated man of the Church and he regarded the papacy with an almost childlike awe. Yet he gradually realized how far the Vatican was from El Salvador, both in geography and in sensibility. The Roman design for the church in Latin America, its perception of the Marxist threat, and its awareness of the political situation did not mesh with the realities he perceived in city streets and rural villages of his archdiocese. His diaries reveal a man of great love, torn between his duty to the hierarchical Church, to his country, and to the people God had entrusted to his care. His life holds a lesson of holy negotiation that can inspire us all.

STUDIES and its readers are privileged to have this report from Doug Marcouiller. An economist by trade, Doug's work has several times taken him to Central America for prolonged visits. As he worked through the written records, he was able to contact many people who knew Archbishop Romero personally, and their observations flesh out the texts that the archbishop left behind. It is an inspiring story, and clearly it was a labor of love for Doug to retell it. We are blessed to have it.

*Richard A. Blake, S.J.*  
Editor

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## ARCHBISHOP WITH AN ATTITUDE: *Oscar Romero's Sentir con la Iglesia*

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*The archbishop of San Salvador died a martyr's death because of his fidelity not only to the Gospel of Christ but to the Magisterium of the Church. His final years were a living martyrdom caused by divisions in his country and misunderstanding on the part of those he most respected and loved. A gentle priest, he became a symbol of strength in a violent world of government-sponsored repression. His path to martyrdom was clear. He had committed his life to "thinking with the Church, the body of Christ in history."*

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### Introduction

**O**n his first trip to Central America, Pope John Paul II stopped unexpectedly at the cathedral in San Salvador. Within its walls of rough brick and poured concrete, the Pope knelt to pray with his hands on the tomb of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero, who had been assassinated three years earlier. He called Romero a "zealous pastor led by the love of God and the service of his brothers and sisters to the giving up of his life."<sup>1</sup> Though understated, the praise is rather remarkable; less than a year

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I thank the members of the Seminar on Jesuit Spirituality, the Jesuits of El Salvador, and especially Msgr. Ricardo Urioste, vicar general of the Archdiocese of San Salvador during Archbishop Romero's time and after, for their help with this project.

<sup>1</sup> *Orientación*, March 13, 1983, 14.

before Romero's death, the Pope had discussed sending an apostolic administrator to run the archdiocese in Romero's place.<sup>2</sup>

At the foot of the tomb where the Pope knelt was a plaque with Romero's episcopal motto, *Sentir con la Iglesia* ("to feel" or, as we usually say in English, "to think with the Church"). Romero knew the Ignatian resonance of this phrase. He encountered the Exercises

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*Thinking with the Church demanded discernment that was attentive to the particular circumstances of the local Catholic community and to the specific needs of Salvadoran society.*

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as a student at the Gregorian University, made the thirty-day retreat as a young priest, and often returned to the Exercises, the last time just one month before his death.<sup>3</sup> Romero knew Ignatius's rules for having the right attitude in the Church. He had been advised to hold to be black what he saw as white, should the hierarchical Church so determine.<sup>4</sup> Knowing all this, he wrote during a retreat

before his ordination as bishop, "My consecration is summarized in this word: *Sentir con la Iglesia*."<sup>5</sup> He later wrote to Cardinal

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<sup>2</sup> *Diario pastoral*, May 7, 1979. The *Diario pastoral* consists of transcriptions of tapes recorded by Romero between March 31, 1978, and March 20, 1980. I have used the transcripts that were published as vol. 9 in *Colección Homilías y Diario de Mons. Oscar Arnulfo Romero* (San Salvador: Arzobispado de San Salvador, 2000). The homilies will hereafter be identified by the title *Homilías*, followed by the date. The transcripts were first published by the archdiocese in 1990, and an English translation was published entitled *Archbishop Oscar Romero: A Shepherd's Diary*, trans. Irene Hodgson (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> As a young priest, Romero made the thirty-day retreat in Santa Tecla, under the direction of Miguel Elizondo, S.J., who at the time was the Central American novice master (Segundo Azcue, S.J., *Newsletter* of the Central American Province, April 1980).

<sup>4</sup> *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, trans. George E. Ganss, S.J. (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992), no. 365 (p. 135). Hereafter this source will be abbreviated to *SpEx*, followed by the marginal number and, when helpful, by the "verse" number.

<sup>5</sup> "Spiritual Diary," 45. Romero kept handwritten retreat notes from time to time, photocopies of which are found in the Brockman Romero Papers in the library of DePaul University in Chicago. I will refer to these unpublished notes as the "Spiritual Diary."

Sebastiano Baggio, "For many years my motto has been 'Sentir con la Iglesia.' It always will be."<sup>6</sup>

Romero, however, led the Archdiocese of San Salvador as he saw fit. He was often in trouble with the Vatican and always in trouble with other Salvadoran bishops. What, then, did it mean to Romero to think with the Church?

As I read the record, Romero's thinking with the Church went beyond intellectual assent to authoritative teaching. For him it was an extremely rich concept:

- To think with the Church is not a matter of the head alone. It is a personal act of identification with the Church, the Body of Christ in history, sacrament of salvation in the world.
- To identify with the Church means to embrace its mission, the mission of Jesus, to proclaim the Reign of God to the poor. To think with the Church is therefore an apostolic act.
- The power of the Gospel is revealed in particular historical circumstances. In San Salvador in 1980, to think with the Church meant following the pastoral lines sketched by the Second Vatican Council in *Lumen gentium* and *Gaudium et spes*, by Paul VI in *Evangelii nuntiandi*, and by the Latin American bishops at Medellín and Puebla—but not only that. Thinking with the Church demanded discernment that was attentive to the particular circumstances of the local Catholic community and to the specific needs of Salvadoran society.
- Romero maintained a lifelong devotion to the pope. His devotion to the successors of Peter did not carry over to the Vatican's diplomats and bureaucrats.
- Finally, for Romero, to think with the Church meant not to think with "the powers of this world." Romero listened to them, talked with them, but refused to align himself with them.

Romero talked about the Spiritual Exercises in an informal interview granted during the 1980 Puebla Conference in Mexico. Speaking of having the mind of the Church, Romero said: "St. Ignatius would present it today as a Church that the Holy Spirit is stirring up in our people, in our communities, a Church that means

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<sup>6</sup> Letter to Baggio, May 1978 (The Brockman Romero Papers).



not only the teaching of the Magisterium, fidelity to the pope, but also service to this people and the discernment of the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel.”<sup>7</sup> Msgr. Ricardo Urioste, Romero’s vicar general and close collaborator, says simply that, for Romero, *sentir con la Iglesia* meant to be rooted in God, to defend the poor, and to accept whatever conflicts arose from fidelity to the Lord.<sup>8</sup>

This essay takes a narrative rather than an analytical approach to Romero’s way of thinking with the Church. I begin with an overview of Romero’s three years as archbishop of San Salvador, a

framework in which to place specific stories. I then illustrate Romero’s way of thinking with the local church, focusing on three places important in his ministry: the town of Aguilares, the cathedral in San Salvador, and the small hospital where Romero lived. Finally, turning to Romero’s way of thinking with the universal Church, I focus on his interaction with the Holy See.

A colleague once said to me, “Romero is so last-century,” implying that his story ought to be left there. Maybe Romero himself

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*In San Salvador he was out of step with the progressive pastoral line of the long-serving archbishop, Luís Chávez, and the other auxiliary, Bishop Arturo Rivera Damas. Among Jesuits Romero was known especially for his attack on the Jesuit high school, which he accused of Marxism.*

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would agree: “The Church is not just a rearview mirror. The Church is moving forward, and it also needs new perspectives.”<sup>9</sup> In many ways, Romero’s perspective is foreign to Jesuits in the United States

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<sup>7</sup> The short interview with Romero was originally published in José Magaña, S.J., *Ejercicios espirituales, en, desde, y para América Latina* (Torreón, Mexico: 1980). I quote here a translation by James Brockman that appeared as “Reflections on the Spiritual Exercises,” by Oscar Romero (*The Way*, Supplement no. 55 [Spring 1986], 103).

<sup>8</sup> In El Salvador, the title “Monseñor” is given to bishops and to monsignori who are not bishops; Urioste is not a bishop. Romero was generally referred to as “Monseñor.” I will follow this usage in direct quotations but substitute “Archbishop” elsewhere. Urioste gave an interview with the author of this issue of *STUDIES* on December 7, 2002. Hereafter this interview will be referenced as Urioste, Interview, December 7, 2002.

<sup>9</sup> *Homilías*, November 26, 1978.



today. He was a bishop, with a role in the Church different from ours, and he was Salvadoran. The church he led had a history of power and privilege protected by the state. The nation he served was caught in geopolitical processes over which it had little control. The people he loved were pushed to the edge.

But perhaps Romero, a non-Jesuit friend of the Society, does have something to teach us about serving Christ's mission today, as friends in the Lord and friends with the poor in a divided society.<sup>10</sup> I imagine him saying: "As the church in the United States struggles to reform its inner life, it should also keep an eye on the mission of the Church in the world. Listen and learn. Listen to God, to the Magisterium, and to the people, especially to the poor. Discern carefully and then speak up, even when it's uncomfortable. Do not bow before the powers of this world. Proclaim the Reign of God." Romero can't show us precisely how to do this, living as we do in a different time and place, but he can inspire us, as saints do.<sup>11</sup> The archbishop can share with us his attitude.

## In the Church Militant? With the Orthodox Church?

I'd like to begin with a short preliminary note. The phrase *sentir con la Iglesia* does not appear in the original texts of the *Spiritual Exercises*. It comes from a short title that we now customarily insert before marginal no. 352. That title is "Reglas para sentir con la Iglesia" in Spanish, usually translated into English as "Rules for Thinking with the Church." Louis Puhl says that this departure from the Autograph "has been added for clearness and is traditional."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>"Servants of Christ's mission," "friends in the Lord," and "friends with the poor" are phrases used by General Congregation 34 in its d. 2. See *Documents of the Thirty-Fourth General Congregation of the Society of Jesus (DocsGC34)* (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1995), 25–38 *passim*.

<sup>11</sup>The cause for the canonization of Archbishop Romero was submitted to the Vatican in 1996, at the conclusion of the canonical investigation at the archdiocesan level. Joining with many others, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops voted unanimous support for the beatification (*Origins* 29 [November 25, 1999]: 24).

<sup>12</sup>Louis Puhl, S.J., *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius Based on Studies in the Language of the Autograph* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1951), 197.

Particularly in English, however, the title may confuse rather than clarify. George Ganss notes that no. 352 "involves far more than the realm of thought or correct belief."<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, the early texts of the *Exercises* themselves disagree. In the Autograph, no. 352 reads, "Para el sentido verdadero que en la iglesia militante debemos tener, se guarden las reglas siguientes," which Puhl translates, "The following rules should be observed to foster the true attitude of mind we ought to have in the Church Militant."<sup>14</sup> André de Freux's Latin Vulgate edition of the *Exercises*, which like the Autograph dates from the 1540s, gives a different version of no. 352.<sup>15</sup> "Regulæ aliquot servandæ, ut cum orthodoxa Ecclesia vere sentiamus." Note that "in" the Church has changed to "with" the Church. Jesús Corella claims that "in" highlights the exercitant's participation in the life of the Church, while "with" sets up a relation between two different entities, "one of which establishes the norm and another which must align itself" with the former.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the Church "militant" becomes the "orthodox" Church, losing in translation, says Corella, the vigor of the Church "of the streets."

So which is it? "In the Church militant?" "With the orthodox Church?" In fact, Ignatius knew and approved both texts, frustrating any search for the "right" one. Perhaps this is a blessing, drawing attention away from the text of the rules and refocusing it on their purpose. In David Fleming's words, these "guidelines" are meant "to be helpful in developing a true and loving sensitivity to the ways of thinking, feeling, and acting as a Catholic in our present-day Church."<sup>17</sup> Gerald Fagin's essay in *STUDIES*, "Fidelity in the Church—

<sup>13</sup> *SpEx* endnote 163 (p. 197).

<sup>14</sup> Puhl, *Spiritual Exercises*, no. 352.

<sup>15</sup> The Vulgate is from 1547, the Autograph from a few years earlier. For a complete discussion see *Sancti Ignatii de Loyola Exercitia Spiritualia*, ed. Josephus Calveras, S.I., and Candidus de Dalmases, S.I., vol. 100 of the series *Monumenta historica Societatis Iesu* (Rome: Historical Institute of the Society of Jesus, 1969), 86–418.

<sup>16</sup> Jesús Corella, S.J., *Sentir la Iglesia: Comentario a las reglas ignacianas para el sentido verdadero de Iglesia* (Bilbao: Ediciones Mensajero, 1995), 106 f.

<sup>17</sup> David L. Fleming, S.J., *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius: A Literal Translation and a Contemporary Reading* (Saint Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1978), 231.



Then and Now," offers an excellent introduction to the Rules and to their contemporary interpretation by decree 11 of General Congregation 34, "On Having a Proper Attitude of Service in the Church."<sup>18</sup>

This paper is not an essay in translation or textual criticism. I interchangeably use the expressions "to think with the Church," "to have the sense of the Church," "to have the mind of the Church," and "sentir con la Iglesia," appealing to Romero's example rather than to textual criticism to suggest what the phrase might mean. I tend to avoid the most obvious contemporary translation of *sentir* (to feel). I recognize, however, that the compassion and empathy conveyed by "to feel" may be precisely what we need today.

## Romero's Three Years as Archbishop

Romero was installed as archbishop of San Salvador on Tuesday, February 22, 1977, in a quiet ceremony in the church attached to the seminary of San José de la Montaña.<sup>19</sup>

It was not yet a time of war; massacres like those at the Río Sumpul and El Mozote were still several years away.<sup>20</sup> However, even the most timid attempts to modify El Salvador's highly skewed pattern of land ownership had already been reversed, and fictitious reform was beginning to give way to real repression. Hard-line defense minister Gen. Carlos Humberto Romero, who was not related to Archbishop Romero, was the government's candidate in the presidential election held on February 20. Three priests had been expelled from the country during the preceding month, and the

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<sup>18</sup> See Gerald M. Fagin, S.J., "Fidelity in the Church—Then and Now," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 31, no. 3 (May 1999). Also see DocsGC34 143–53.

<sup>19</sup> Readers looking for a more complete picture should turn to biographies written by Jesús Delgado, *Oscar A. Romero: Biografía*. (San Salvador: UCA Editores, 1990), and James Brockman, S.J., *Romero: A Life*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989).

<sup>20</sup> On December 11, 1981, the Atlacatl Battalion, trained by U.S. advisers, murdered several hundred civilians in the town of El Mozote. Years later, skeletal remains of 143 bodies were unearthed from the sacristy of the church alone. Of these, 131 were remains of children under the age of twelve. Cartridge cases found among the remains identified the ammunition as manufactured for the U.S. Government at Lake City, Missouri. See the report of the United Nations Truth Commission, *De la locura a la esperanza* (San Jose: Editorial DEI, 1993). For a full account, see Mark Danner, *The Massacre at El Mozote* (New York, Vintage Books, 1994).

house of a fourth had been bombed.<sup>21</sup> Political tension was one reason for a quiet installation.

Another reason for the quiet ceremony was that the archdiocese wasn't quite sure what to expect from the new archbishop. Many expected the worst. Jesús Delgado, a priest who later collaborated closely with Romero, wrote that when Romero began to speak that morning, "the silence was sepulchral."<sup>22</sup>

Romero was not unknown. Ordained a bishop in 1970, he had served as auxiliary in San Salvador until his 1974 transfer to the Diocese of Santiago de María. In San Salvador he was out of step with the progressive pastoral line of the long-serving archbishop,

Luís Chávez, and the other auxiliary, Bishop Arturo Rivera Damas. Among Jesuits Romero was known especially for his attack on the Jesuit high school, which he accused of Marxism.<sup>23</sup>

Some have argued that Romero's pastoral approach began to change while he served as bishop in Santiago de María.<sup>24</sup> It was there, Urioste says, that Romero

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*For now, it is enough to say that Romero's response to Rutilio's death strengthened his identification with the archdiocese and strained his relations with the Vatican.*

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began to approach the poor not just as people who had to be helped but as actors themselves.<sup>25</sup> Even in Santiago de María, however, Romero was known for restructuring a catechetical training center inspired by the documents of Medellín.<sup>26</sup> He also failed to protest publicly when the National Guard murdered five *campesinos* at Tres Calles and a sixth nearby, although he did write a private letter of protest to the president.<sup>27</sup> It is no surprise that, as his Jesuit spiritual

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<sup>21</sup> Brockman, *Romero: A Life*, 1–5.

<sup>22</sup> Delgado, *Biografía*, 71.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 53–59.

<sup>24</sup> Zacarías Díez and Juan Macho, *En Santiago de María me topé con la miseria: Dos años de la vida de Mons. Romero* (publisher and date unclear).

<sup>25</sup> Urioste, Interview, December 7, 2002.

<sup>26</sup> Delgado, *Biografía*, 63–66.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 67–70, 73 f. Brockman, *Romero: A Life*, 54. For a detailed account see Díez and Macho, *En Santiago*, 59 ff.



director wrote, some did not consider Romero suitable for the ministry of archbishop, given the circumstances of the country.<sup>28</sup> Urioste, who became Romero's vicar general, did not even attend the installation.<sup>29</sup>

Romero's first month as archbishop was dramatic. Evidence of fraud in the presidential election mounted, and protectors gathered downtown. On February 28 troops fired on the crowd, many of whom fled for refuge to the Dominican church. Dozens of people were killed.<sup>30</sup>

On March 5 the Salvadoran Conference of Bishops prepared a letter condemning specific violations of human rights and also pointing to fundamentally unjust social structures. The letter was to be read at Mass on Sunday, March 13. On March 12 Romero got cold feet, according to a story later told by Bishop Rivera Damas. At noon on March 12, Romero said to Rivera: "The letter is inopportune. The letter takes sides; I don't know why this letter was issued."<sup>31</sup> Later that same afternoon, the pastor of Aguilares, Rutilio Grande, S.J., and two companions were murdered while on their way to celebrate Mass in El Paisnal. That night, Romero went to Aguilares and something happened. As Rivera tells it, Romero not only read the letter at Mass on Sunday the thirteenth, he gave such a beautiful commentary that "we saw that the wisdom of God was with him. From that moment the man was changed."<sup>32</sup>

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*It is no surprise that, as his Jesuit spiritual director wrote, some did not consider Romero suitable for the ministry of archbishop, given the circumstances of the country.*

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More will be said about this in the next section of the essay, focusing on the church in Aguilares. For now, it is enough to say

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<sup>28</sup> Azcue, *Newsletter*, April 1980.

<sup>29</sup> Urioste, Interview, December 7, 2002.

<sup>30</sup> Brockman, *Romero: A Life*, 6.

<sup>31</sup> Arturo Rivera Damas, remarks at the Cathedral of San Salvador, March 25, 1980, published in the *Newsletter* of the Central American Province (April 1980).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

that Romero's response to Rutilio's death strengthened his identification with the archdiocese and strained his relations with the Vatican.

Romero made his first visit to Rome as archbishop at the end of March, roughly a month after his installation. Soon after, he published his first pastoral letter to the archdiocese, *The Paschal Church*. In April a small leftist guerrilla group known as the Popular Liberation Forces (Fuerzas Populares de Liberación, FPL) kidnapped the foreign minister, Mauricio Borgonovo, demanding the release of thirty-seven political prisoners in exchange for his life.<sup>33</sup> No solution was found, despite appeals by Romero and others, and Borgonovo's body was discovered on May 10. The next day, Father Alfonso Navarro and a companion were murdered in an act of vengeance, demonstrating that the Right blamed the church for revolutionary violence. A week later, Aguilaes was occupied by troops who killed at least fifty people and carried hundreds away.<sup>34</sup> Looking back a year later, Romero wrote as follows to Cardinal Baggio, prefect of the Congregation for Bishops:

In my first months as pastor of this archdiocese, it fell to me to witness impotently the assassinations of two priests, the expulsion and/or exile of nearly twenty more, the profanation of the Blessed Sacrament in the military occupation of the entire rural zone of Aguilaes—El Paisnal, including its church and parish house, and above all the harassment, jailing, torture, disappearance, and murder of poor Salvadoran peasants from my archdiocese, in whom the Lord Jesus Christ was repeatedly crucified [*Lumen gentium*, no. 8]. . . . Confronted with this iniquity, all the more scandalous for occurring in a country whose governors are proudly Catholic, I could not be silent.<sup>35</sup>

Far from silent, Romero preached powerfully and at length. It is said that so many people tuned their radios to his Sunday homilies that one could walk down the street without missing a sentence, passing from one person's radio to the next. Romero not only spoke, he also listened—to pastors and to peasants, to workers and to

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<sup>33</sup> Brockman, *Romero: A Life*, 25.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 31 f.

<sup>35</sup> Letter to Cardinal Baggio, May 21, 1978, photocopy in The Brockman Romero Papers. See "Lumen gentium," in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents (DocsVatII)*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P., et al. (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1975), no. 8 (p. 358).



business people. Urioste, the vicar general, tells a story about listening:

I remember a meeting with pastoral theorists, theologians, moralists, canonists, and all the brains of the archdiocese. Monseñor would ask a question and one or another would answer, and he took notes, took notes, took notes, took notes. Then he thanked everyone and the meeting ended. . . . We went down the steps of the seminary, and there was a beggar. Monseñor went over to him, and I thought, "He's going to give him alms." You know what he did? He asked the beggar the same questions that he had asked us. . . . He had a great capacity to listen, as though he wanted to be sure of the *sensus fidelium*, to see what the people thought.<sup>36</sup>

Gen. Romero was inaugurated president of El Salvador on July 1, 1977. Archbishop Romero had established a policy of attending no official ceremonies until the government began a serious investigation of the murders in Aguila- res, and in a departure from long- standing tradition, he refused to attend the inauguration. Two other bishops did attend, along with the nuncio. Romero defended his action in the subse- quent meeting of the Episcopal Conference, citing Vatican II, Medel- lín, and *Evangelii nuntiandi*.<sup>37</sup>

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*"I want to call attention to the witness of holiness, of serenity, that has been given us by our brothers, the Jesuit Fathers. . . . No one has fled. . . . Thank you."*

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On June 21, 1977, the White Warriors' Union, a shadowy Rightist group, gave the Society of Jesus one month to abandon El Salvador; any Jesuit remaining at the end of the month would be killed. No Jesuit left. In his homily of July 24, Romero said: "I want to call attention to the witness of holiness, of serenity, that has been given us by our brothers, the Jesuit Fathers. . . . No one has fled. . . . Thank you."<sup>38</sup> Romero's visible solidarity with the Society at the time of Rutilio's murder and again in July was one of the reasons for the charge often leveled against him in later years, that he was manipulated by the Jesuits.

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<sup>36</sup> Urioste, Interview, December 7, 2002.

<sup>37</sup> Brockman, *Romero: A Life*, 71.

<sup>38</sup> *Homilías*, June 24, 1978.

Lay pastoral workers in rural areas of the archdiocese continued to be targeted for repression as 1977 wore on. One example: Felipe de Jesús Chacón, a member of the national secretariat of the Cursillos de Cristiandad, was seized by police while walking home down a dusty road at the end of August. His mutilated body was found the next morning, with the skin of his face and head peeled away.<sup>39</sup>

Why the persecution? In Romero's view, "At the root of everything was a government manipulated by intransigent owners of capital unwilling to allow the Church to proclaim its complete message, which awakens the critical conscience of the people."<sup>40</sup> Bishop Marco René Revelo, at the time auxiliary bishop in Santa Ana, read the situation differently. In the October Synod of Bishops in Rome, Revelo said: "The rural catechists, the best prepared, the most aware, those who always have the greater capability of leadership, are rapidly falling into the nets that the Communist Party and the extreme-left Maoist groups spread for them, and they quickly fill their ranks."<sup>41</sup> Two months later, Bishop Revelo was transferred by the Holy See from Santa Ana to San Salvador to work with Romero as his auxiliary.

Revelo and his brother bishops were not only concerned about the formation of catechists and of the officially commissioned lay preachers known as Delegates of the Word. They also worried about the formation of priests in the national seminary, which was located in San Salvador. In 1972 the Jesuit faculty and administrators, who were in line with the pastoral plan of the archdiocese but out of step with the bishops of other dioceses, were removed from the seminary that they had led since 1915.<sup>42</sup> The first few months of 1978 saw a renewed dispute among the bishops about pastoral training in the seminary. The dispute was exacerbated in April, when Romero offered short-term refuge on the seminary grounds to people fleeing a government-sponsored attack on peasant organizations in the town of San Pedro Perulapán, a few miles east of San Salvador.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Brockman, *Romero: A Life*, 92.

<sup>40</sup> Letter to Baggio, June 24, 1978 (The Brockman Romero Papers).

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Brockman, *Romero: A Life*, 93.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 108 f.



Rome involved itself in the matter. The tenor of the discussion can be gathered from a letter Romero wrote to Cardinal Gabriel Garrone, prefect of the Congregation for Catholic Education:

You refer, Your Eminence, to my "known devotion to the Holy See." That, Your Eminence, you may take as certain. What I would also like to be certain about is that this sacred congregation is well informed about the reality of what has been and is the life of our central seminary. I have very well-founded reasons to think it is not.<sup>44</sup>

At this point Cardinal Baggio, prefect of the Congregation for Bishops, invited Romero to Rome for a "*fraterno e amichevole colloquio*" (a friendly, brotherly conversation). That little chat will be described later in this essay.

People who turned to the Salvadoran judicial system for help in dealing with political prisoners and the "disappeared" found no relief. Habeas corpus had no meaning. Torture continued. Romero noted this in his homily of April 30, 1978. In response, the Supreme Court challenged Romero to "name names" of corrupt judges. Unwilling to be drawn into denunciation of particular persons, Romero responded with such a clear indictment of systemic problems that the Supreme Court backed down.<sup>45</sup>

Economic recession and military repression strengthened the grass-roots organizations rather than destroying them. Many people active in these organizations were also active Catholics. Archbishop Romero and Bishop Rivera Damas, who had been transferred to Santiago de María as Romero's successor there, clarified the relationship between the church and the popular organizations in a joint pastoral letter issued in August 1978, timed to coincide with the patronal feast of San Salvador, the Transfiguration.

Father Ernesto Barrera was killed on November 28, 1978. The government claimed that he was killed in a shoot-out with members of the Popular Liberation Forces, the group that had earlier kidnapped Borgonovo. In the midst of the subsequent crisis, the nuncio sent Romero a note saying that the Vatican had appointed Bishop

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<sup>44</sup> Quoted *ibid.*, 120.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 121–25.

Antonio Quarracino, who had already arrived in the city, as apostolic visitor to the archdiocese.<sup>46</sup>

The year 1979 opened with an attack by government forces on a small retreat house in San Salvador, El Despertar. Four teen-aged retreatants and Father Octavio Ortiz, a young priest whom Romero himself had ordained, were murdered.<sup>47</sup>

Romero left two days later for the meeting of the Latin American bishops in Puebla, Mexico. Upon his return to San Salvador, he said, "[T]hose who hoped that Puebla would be a step backward, a repudiation of Medellín, have turned out to be mistaken."<sup>48</sup> One can sense in this statement the tension that surrounded the meeting, the first general meeting of Latin American bishops to be held during the pontificate of John Paul II. Among those who had hoped for a different outcome was another Salvadoran delegate to the meeting, the president of the Episcopal Conference of El Salvador, Bishop Pedro Arnoldo Aparicio. Romero described in his diary a declaration by Aparicio "in which he blames the violence in El Salvador on the Jesuits and denounces them for having come to Puebla to defend the position of the archbishop, which is, according to the declaration, 'indefensible.'"<sup>49</sup> Remembering the context of Aparicio's statement, shortly after the murders at El Despertar, Romero might well have issued an outraged response. Romero's response, however, was measured. He agreed to meet with Father General Pedro Arrupe, who was also present in Puebla, to prepare a statement, "not so much to defend ourselves as for the good of the church and to avoid the dangers this declaration [by Bishop Aparicio] might unleash against the Society of Jesus."<sup>50</sup>

One of the low points of 1979 was Romero's May visit to Rome, his third as archbishop. After much work, Romero managed to arrange an audience with Pope John Paul. Romero recorded that the Pope "referred to the report of the apostolic visitation of Monseñor Quarracino, who acknowledges an extremely delicate situation and recommends, as a solution to the pastoral deficiencies and to the

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 164 f.

<sup>47</sup> *Diario pastoral*, January 20–21, 1979.

<sup>48</sup> *Homilías*, February 16, 1979.

<sup>49</sup> *Diario pastoral*, February 3, 1979.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., February 3, 1979.

lack of union among the bishops, an apostolic administrator *sede plena*.<sup>51</sup> In effect, if Quarracino's suggestion were adopted, "Romero would remain archbishop in name, but another would govern."<sup>52</sup> I will return to this proposal in the last section of the essay. While Romero was in Rome, the security forces fired on a demonstration in front of the cathedral in San Salvador, leaving perhaps twenty-five dead and many more wounded.<sup>53</sup>

As always, Romero issued a pastoral letter in August on the feast of the Transfiguration. The title of the 1979 letter was *The Mission of the Church in the Present Crisis of the Country*. Reformist military officers also recognized a "present crisis," and they staged a coup on October 15.<sup>54</sup> "The young officers had demonstrated to the whole world, without intending or wanting to do so, that the archbishop's prophetic denunciations had been solidly based."<sup>55</sup> People awaited the pastor's public response to the events. Romero issued a statement suggesting that it would be prudent "to watch and wait before judging and acting." The same statement reminded the new government that actions speak louder than promises, and prayed that God might now open the path to justice and peace. Citing *Gaudium et spes*, Romero offered to engage in dialog with this new government, stipulating only that the state and the church both recognize that their purpose is to serve the people, each in its own way.<sup>56</sup>

Romero's openness toward the new government was rejected by some of the "ecclesial base communities." All along, Romero had pursued a two-pronged pastoral strategy. One dimension was the use of radio and the print media to reach as many people as possible with his preaching. The other was to support intensive evangelization in small ecclesial communities. As has already been noted, some

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., May 7, 1979.

<sup>52</sup> Brockman, *Romero: A Life*, 167.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>54</sup> An excellent overview of these events can be found in *Paying the Price: Ignacio Ellacuría and the Murdered Jesuits of El Salvador*, by Teresa Whitfield (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 120–128.

<sup>55</sup> Delgado, *Biografía*, 164.

<sup>56</sup> *Diario pastoral*, October 15, 1979. The allusion is to no. 76 of "Gaudium et spes," in *DocsVatII*, 984 f.



members of these communities found that their Christian vocation led them to leftist political commitments, a phenomenon that Romero and Bishop Rivera Damas had addressed at length in their joint pastoral letter of 1978. When some of the leftist organizations rejected the professedly reformist coup as a sham, their associates in the base communities also denounced Romero's wait-and-see attitude toward the new junta.

As weeks passed, it became clear to all that the hope for reform was misplaced. The young officers and civilian members of the government were unable to wrest effective control of the military from the hands of its older hard-line leaders, one of whom retained the post of minister of defense. The most trustworthy civilian members of the government resigned in January 1980 "as a protest at the impossibility of carrying out the reforms promised by the October 15 movement."<sup>57</sup> Repression escalated dramatically under the so-called Second Junta, an alliance of the Christian Democrats with the military, supported by the United States.

On January 22, Romero recorded in his diary, someone opened fire on a large, peaceful demonstration of organizations of the Left, killing many. Eleven bodies were gathered from the cathedral steps alone. The government told Romero that they had not been responsible, but Romero noted, "many witnesses said that the guards who had been on the balcony of the National Palace had fired on the crowd," just as they would again during Romero's own funeral.<sup>58</sup> A few weeks later, when it was announced that the United

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States was considering military assistance to this government, Romero wrote a letter of protest to President Jimmy Carter.

Romero made his last visit to the Vatican at the end of January 1980. The visit included an audience with Pope John Paul that ended with "a brotherly embrace." Romero recorded that he left the

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<sup>57</sup> Brockman, *Romero: A Life*, 216.

<sup>58</sup> *Diario pastoral*, January 22, 1980.



Holy Father "feeling the confirmation and strength of God for my poor ministry."<sup>59</sup> Urioste maintains that even then Romero was misunderstood by the Vatican, which continued to believe that he was too active in politics.<sup>60</sup>

At the end of February, Romero made his last retreat. He had planned to make the retreat in Guatemala but, given the explosive political climate, he decided not to leave the country. Accompanied by six other priests, he made the retreat in Planes de Renderos at the house of the Passionist Sisters. His notes from this retreat are available to us. I find one passage, built on the Exercises, especially moving:

We have come to the meditations on the Reign of God and on the Following of Christ. Even "against my sensuality and against my carnal and human love," I make my oblation: "Eternal Lord of all things, I make my offering with your favor and help, before your infinite goodness, and before your glorious Mother and all the holy men and women of the heavenly court, that I wish and desire and that it is my deliberate decision, if only it be for your greater service and praise, to imitate you in suffering all injuries and all affronts and all poverty, both actual and spiritual, if your most holy Majesty desires to choose and receive me in such a life and state." Thus I make my consecration to the Heart of Jesus, who was always the source of inspiration and Christian joy in my life—I entrust to his loving providence all my life and I accept with faith in him my death, no matter how difficult it be. . . . To be happy and unafraid, it is enough to know surely that in him are my life and my death, that, in spite of my sins, in him I have put my trust and I shall not be put to shame, and others will carry on with greater wisdom and holiness the works of the church and of the nation.<sup>61</sup>

Romero's retreat notes go on to sketch a plan for reform of life and even the calendar for pastoral visits to various communities around the archdiocese.

He didn't make many of those visits. On Sunday, March 23, he preached a homily which he entitled *The Church in the Service of Liberation: Personal, Communal, Transcendent*. One particular sentence

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., January 30, 1980.

<sup>60</sup> Urioste, Interview, December 7, 2002.

<sup>61</sup> "Spiritual Diary," 49–51 (The Brockman Romero Papers). Also published in *Revista de teología latinoamericana* no. 13 (January–April 1988): 3–12.

in this long and complex homily is often quoted: "In the name of God, then, and in the name of this suffering people whose laments rise to heaven more tumultuously day by day, I ask you, I pray you, I order you in the name of God, halt the repression!"<sup>62</sup> The next day he met with a priest of Opus Dei.<sup>63</sup> He went to the Jesuit residence in Santa Tecla to speak with Segundo Azcue, S.J., his confessor.<sup>64</sup> He returned to the hospital where he lived to celebrate the evening Mass. At the conclusion of the homily, as Romero unfolded the corporal over the altar, he was shot dead.<sup>65</sup>

## Thinking with the Local Church

Romero identified with the local church as the body of Christ in history, committed to the truth and filled with compassion for the poor, sent to proclaim the good news. Romero poured himself into preaching the Kingdom and accepted the conflicts that arose from faithfulness to the Lord. For Romero *sentir con la Iglesia* meant to evangelize in the concrete circumstances of the archdiocese, exposing personal sin and sinful structures that pushed aside the poor, proclaiming and promoting the love and justice of the Reign of God, undeterred by repressive forces that served under another standard.

Having already sketched the broad outlines of Romero's three years as archbishop, I'd like to go back now and fill in some stories that illustrate Romero's way of thinking with the local church. I'll structure these stories around three places important in Romero's ministry: the parish of Aguilares, the cathedral in San Salvador, and the hospital where Romero lived.

### Aguilares

Many people who knew Romero—although not all—speak of a change during his first months as archbishop, a change associated with the murder of Rutilio Grande, S.J. Ten years after Romero's

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<sup>62</sup> *Homilías*, March 23, 1980.

<sup>63</sup> Brockman, *Romero: A Life*, 243.

<sup>64</sup> Azcue, *Newsletter*, April 1980.

<sup>65</sup> Testimony of Mother Luz de La Cueva, in *La espiritualidad de Monseñor Romero* (San Salvador: Fundación Monseñor Romero, 2000), 121.

murder, Archbishop Arturo Rivera Damas wrote:

I agree with those who speak of a "conversion" of Monseñor Romero, in the moment in which he assumed the pastoral charge of the Archdiocese of San Salvador. . . . One martyr gave life to another martyr. Before the body of Father Rutilio Grande, Monseñor Romero, on his twentieth day as archbishop, felt the call of Christ to defeat his natural human timidity and to fill himself with the intrepidity of the apostle. From that moment, Monseñor Romero left the pagan territory of Tyre and Sidon and headed freely toward Jerusalem.<sup>66</sup>

Some background about Rutilio Grande and the Aguilares experience needs to be supplied here. Archbishop Luís Chávez, Romero's predecessor, gave pastoral responsibility for the parish of Aguilares to the Society of Jesus in 1972. The town of Aguilares itself was a commercial center. The surrounding area was given over to the cultivation of sugar cane. As everywhere in El Salvador, very large parcels of land surrounding Aguilares were held by very few people. The majority of the people were landless, poorly paid agricultural wage workers.

The Jesuit pastoral team was headed by Rutilio Grande, a native of El Paisnal, one of the villages that belonged to the parish. Among the Jesuits of El Salvador, Rutilio stood out for his commitment to pastoral work and his close association with the diocesan clergy, whom he admired and who admired him. During the 1960s, he taught pastoral theology and supervised field work at the national seminary, then under the direction of the Society. In 1970 he left the seminary, spent a year at the Jesuit high school, and then took a sabbatical at the Latin American Pastoral Institute in Quito.<sup>67</sup> While in Quito he formulated his apostolic preference this way: "pastoral work as a member of a

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<sup>66</sup> Rivera Damas, preface to Delgado, *Biografía*, 3.

<sup>67</sup> All this is from *Rutilio Grande, Mártir de la Evangelización Rural*, by Rodolfo Cardenal (San Salvador: UCA Editores, 1978), 20 ff. This source will hereafter be cited as Cardenal, *Rutilio Grande*.



team, in a rural zone or a marginal urban area, oriented toward integral development rooted in Christian conscientization."<sup>68</sup>

In Aguilares the Jesuits spent nearly a year giving two-week missions in twenty-five different geographical sectors of the parish. They spent the day talking with people and visiting families, the afternoon leading catechesis for the children, and the evening meeting with adults. In their meetings, adults would read a gospel

passage several times, then discuss its implications. From among the natural leaders who emerged, lay Delegates of the Word were commissioned to continue the meetings and to maintain the tie between the small base communities and the rest of the parish. By the end of this "mission" phase, marked by a huge liturgy on the

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*It wasn't necessary to tell the campesinos that they were oppressed or who their oppressors were. Both things were clearly seen.*

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feast of Pentecost, 1973, the parish had thirty-seven organized communities and some three hundred Delegates of the Word. Members grew in confidence, in unity, in familiarity with the Scripture and in ability to read their own situation in its light.<sup>69</sup>

The second phase of the pastoral experience in Aguilares had two principal thrusts. The first was to revitalize sacramental life, spurring people to more active participation and to greater responsibility. Some of this effort focused on the Eucharist, some of it on baptism. The other major thrust of the team's work was to accompany the Delegates personally as they grew in faith. In this process, some Delegates chose to join organizations not directly linked to the parish, particularly the Christian Federation of Salvadoran Peasants (Federación Cristiana de Campesinos Salvadoreños, FECCAS).<sup>70</sup> "It wasn't necessary to tell the *campesinos* that they were oppressed or who their oppressors were. Both things were clearly seen. They came to understand perfectly well that the Gospel, far from exhort-

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<sup>68</sup> Quoted in *Historia de una esperanza: Vida de Rutilio Grande*, by Rodolfo Cardenal, 3rd ed. (San Salvador: UCA Editores, 2002), 207. This source will hereafter be cited as Cardenal, *Historia*.

<sup>69</sup> Cardenal, *Rutilio Grande*, 72.

<sup>70</sup> The definitive discussion of the relation between FECCAS and the parish is given in Cardenal, *Historia*, 433–509.



ing them to resignation, asked them to fight against the oppression."<sup>71</sup>

What did this mean concretely? An example may help. On May 23, 1973, at the end of the sugar harvest, the administrator of La Cabaña Sugar Mill refused to pay in full the wage that had been orally agreed upon. Over fifteen hundred workers then refused to accept the incomplete payment. Whether because of the workers' number, their unity, or the implicit threat of their cane-cutting knives, the "strike" was successfully resolved.<sup>72</sup> The pastoral team certainly did not organize this protest, but among the strikers were Delegates of the Word.

The pastoral plan had the complete support of Archbishop Chávez but, understandably, not the support of the local landowners. United, vocal peasant communities were not part of the landowners' plan, especially not communities with the freedom and confidence of people inspired by the Word of God. Refusing to acknowledge the long-standing problem of "institutionalized violence," the landlords claimed instead that the parish was creating a new problem.<sup>73</sup> The Word of God was being manipulated and the liturgy politicized, they said, by abusive priests and a permissive archbishop, Archbishop Chávez. Tension mounted.

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*Even in an atmosphere of  
ideological ferment and  
political tension, to murder  
a priest had seemed  
unthinkable.*

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Father Mario Bernal, pastor of the neighboring parish of Apopa, was expelled from the country on January 29, 1977.<sup>74</sup> Catholics from other parishes joined the Apopa community for Mass on February 13, and Grande preached the homily. God created the

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<sup>71</sup> Cardenal, *Rutilio Grande*, 80.

<sup>72</sup> Cardenal, *Historia*, 276 ff.

<sup>73</sup> The term "institutionalized violence" comes from the Medellín *Document on Peace*, no. 16. In their third pastoral letter, Romero and Rivera Damas describe this institutionalized violence as "the product of an unjust situation in which the majority of men and women—above all, the majority of children—in our country find themselves denied what is necessary to live" ("Iglesia y Organizaciones Políticas Populares," in *La voz de los sin voz* [San Salvador: UCA Editores, 1980], 114).

<sup>74</sup> Cardenal, *Historia*, 546.

material world for all of us, he said. The material world is like the table of the Eucharist, a common table, beautifully adorned, with room for everyone to pull up a chair. Jesus used a supper to signify his Reign. "He talked a lot about a supper. And he celebrated it the night before his total commitment. Thirty-three years old, he celebrated a farewell dinner with his most intimate friends, and he said that was the great memorial of the Redemption. A table shared as a family, where everyone has a place."<sup>75</sup>

A month later, March 12, Grande drove with some friends toward El Paisnal for a Saturday afternoon Eucharist in a nine-day celebration leading up to the March 19 solemnity of St. Joseph, patron of El Paisnal. The car was ambushed. Rutilio and two companions, seventy-two-year-old Manuel Solórzano and fifteen-year-old Nelson Rutilio Lemus, were shot dead.<sup>76</sup>

In light of what happened later, it is difficult now to recover the sense of shock that hit the Salvadoran church after this first of many murders of priests. Even in an atmosphere of ideological ferment and political tension, to murder a priest had seemed unthinkable.

Romero had been archbishop for three weeks. Shortly after the crime was committed, probably within the hour, Romero received a telephone call from Gen. Armando Molina, president of El Salvador, expressing his condolences.

Monseñor Romero thanked President Molina, interpreting his call as a gesture of friendship. But when he received the first bits of evidence about the assassination, that it had been committed by men using arms and ammunition of a caliber that only the state security forces used, deep indignation touched his heart. The phone call from his "friend" Molina began to seem raw cynicism.<sup>77</sup>

That evening Romero and Rivera Damas drove to the parish church of Aguilares to join the hundreds of *campesinos* and clerics who were praying by the bodies of the three victims. Romero and Grande had been friends; Grande had served as master of ceremonies at Romero's episcopal ordination. Now Romero stood before Rutilio's bullet-ridden body and those of an old man and a young

<sup>75</sup> *Orientación*, March 27, 1977, 4.

<sup>76</sup> Cardenal, *Historia*, 572.

<sup>77</sup> Delgado, *Biografía*, 76.



boy, stretched out on tables placed before the altar. They celebrated the Eucharist. After the liturgy, well after midnight, in an atmosphere charged with anger, grief, and fear, Romero asked some people to stay and talk with him. He asked them what to do. Jon Sobrino was there. "I felt great affection for that humble bishop who asked for help, almost begged for help, to carry the burden that was being laid upon him, far beyond what his shoulders or anyone else's could bear."<sup>78</sup> Sobrino continues:

Certainly, he was nervous; but in the midst of the nervousness and the not knowing what to do in those first moments, I believe that Monseñor Romero made a deep commitment to act however God would ask him to act; he made a true option for the poor, represented that night by hundreds of poor *campesinos* around three bodies, defenseless before the repression that they now suffered and the repression that they foresaw. I don't know whether I interpret well what passed in those moments through the heart of Monseñor Romero, but I believe that he must have experienced that those *campesinos* had made an option for him, that they were asking him to defend them. And the answer Monseñor Romero gave was to make an option for the *campesinos*, to become their defender, to become the voice of the voiceless. (17)

This is the moment sometimes called Romero's conversion, although Romero himself disliked that expression. He wrote instead of

an evolution of the same desire that I have always had to be faithful to what God asks of me; and if earlier I gave the impression of being more "prudent" and more "spiritual," it was because I sincerely believed that in that way I responded to the Gospel, because the circumstances of my ministry were not as demanding as those when I became archbishop.<sup>79</sup>

I wonder whether one might interpret what happened to Romero, in the light of his motto, as a deepening of his sense of the concrete historical Catholic community in Aguilares. He shared the grief and fear of the people with whom he celebrated the Eucharist that night, and he heard the call of the "hundreds of *campesinos* who with their eyes on him wordlessly asked what he was going to do."<sup>80</sup> Over the next three months, Romero gave his answer.

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<sup>78</sup> Jon Sobrino, *Monseñor Romero*, 4th ed. (San Salvador: UCA Editores, 1997), 16.

<sup>79</sup> Letter to Baggio, June 24, 1978 (The Brockman Romero Papers).

<sup>80</sup> Sobrino, *Monseñor Romero*, 17.



The funeral Mass for the three slain men was held at the cathedral in San Salvador on March 14. The nuncio presided and Romero preached. He acknowledged his own close friendship with Grande, but continued, "This is not the moment to think of personal

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*With the nearly unanimous support of the clergy, however, Romero refused to retreat.*

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things, but rather the moment to recover from that body a message for all of us who are still on pilgrimage." Citing Paul VI, Romero said that the Church offers to the universal struggle for liberation men and women inspired by faith, informed by the social doctrine of the Church, and motivated by

love.<sup>81</sup> He spoke of the unity of the Church and of its mission. "We are a pilgrim Church, exposed to misunderstanding, exposed to persecution, but a Church that walks on calmly because it carries the force of love" (ibid.).

I don't know why the nuncio presided instead of the archbishop. I do know that Romero began his homily with a greeting to "the most excellent representative of His Holiness, the Pope" (ibid.). Perhaps this reflects devotion to the Holy See, which Romero appears to have maintained throughout his life, or perhaps it reflects his friendship with the nuncio, which would end within the week.

Two decisions were taken by the archdiocese in the days following Grande's death. The first was the decision not to participate in any government-sponsored ceremony until the government committed itself "to shine the light of justice" on the murders.<sup>82</sup> The nuncio would complain about this later, when Romero refused to attend the presidential inauguration on July 1.

The second decision caused an immediate problem with the nuncio. After widespread consultation, Romero decided that a single Mass would be celebrated in the archdiocese on Sunday, March 20, in the plaza in front of the cathedral. Everyone in the archdiocese would be invited to share in that *misa única*. All the priests would be asked to concelebrate. A sign and source of unity, it would also be a

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<sup>81</sup> Homilías, March 14, 1977. Romero is here citing no. 38 of *Evangelii nuntiandi*, Paul VI's letter of December 8, 1975.

<sup>82</sup> Cardenal, *Historia*, 581.

particular act of solidarity with the parishes that had lost their priests. The decision was announced on March 15. Powerful business leaders visited the archbishop to protest the decision.<sup>83</sup> On March 17 Romero was summoned to the nunciature to receive a reprimand from the nuncio, who repeated many of the arguments originally proposed by the business people. With the nearly unanimous support of the clergy, however, Romero refused to retreat. He visited the nunciature again on March 18, asking Jon Sobrino and a few others to accompany him. Sobrino picks up the story:

The nuncio was not in, and we were received by his secretary. From the beginning I saw the secretary to be visibly angry. . . . The secretary began by saying that the pastoral and theological arguments in favor of the single Mass were good; I think that he said "very good." . . . "But," he added, "you have forgotten the most important thing." I couldn't imagine what could be more important in those moments, but the secretary declared: "You have forgotten the canonical dimension."<sup>84</sup>

The issue was whether or not the archbishop had the authority to dispense those people unable to come to the cathedral from the obligation of Sunday Mass.

The chasm that was opening between the archdiocese and the nunciature can be seen in Sobrino's response: "I answered him that nothing is more important than the Body of Christ which was being bled dry in this country."<sup>85</sup> In James Brockman's words, "the discussion continued but did not advance."<sup>86</sup> In the words of Jesús Delgado, a participant in both meetings, "Monseñor Romero found himself faced with a choice: to continue to please the nuncio, whose reactions were informed by the reactionary sector of Salvadoran society, or to support his clergy, whose concerns were those of the suffering people."<sup>87</sup>

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*It is not politics when a homily points to political, social, and economic sins.*

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<sup>83</sup> A detailed account of the meeting can be found *ibid.*, 590–591.

<sup>84</sup> Sobrino, *Monseñor Romero*, 27.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> Brockman, *Romero: A Life*, 27.

<sup>87</sup> Delgado, *Biografía*, 83.



Thinking with the Church in what may have been a new way, Romero opted for unity with the priests and with the *mayorías populares*, the poor majority of the people. The single Mass was celebrated, with the participation of 100,000 people, including virtually all the priests of the archdiocese, leaving a tremendous sense of hope in the assembly.<sup>88</sup> During the homily, defending the preaching of his much maligned pastoral workers, Romero said:

You may be sure, brothers and sisters, that the evangelical line which the archdiocese is following is authentic. . . . That is the significance of today, the authorization by the bishop, authentic teacher of the faith, so that all those who are in communion with him may know that they preach a doctrine which is in communion with the pope and, therefore, the true doctrine of our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>89</sup>

For Romero, tension with the nuncio was not the same thing as tension with the Pope.

The Salvadoran army occupied Aguilares on May 19. They searched house by house and beat people found with church publications. Fifty civilians were killed, among them the sacristan who had climbed the bell tower to sound an alarm. Many more were taken away. The three Jesuits remaining in the parish, Salvador Carranza, José Luís Ortega, and Marcelino Perez, were expelled from the country. The church building was turned into a barracks, "the base for repressive operations," Romero called it in a letter to Cardinal Jean Villot.<sup>90</sup> Romero himself was refused permission to remove the Blessed Sacrament, which was found scattered across the floor beneath a tabernacle blown open by gunfire.<sup>91</sup>

Romero returned to Aguilares one month later, on June 19. That day he responded most clearly to those who in March had "wordlessly asked what he was going to do." He reopened the church building and presented the new pastoral team of three women religious, Oblates of the Sacred Heart. Romero's preaching that day revealed a deep sense of the local church, the Catholic community in Aguilares. He feels with the Church: "We are with you. . . . We suffer with those who have suffered so much. . . . You

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 82. Cardenal, *Historia*, 592.

<sup>89</sup> *Homilías*, March 20, 1977.

<sup>90</sup> Letter to Villot, December 12, 1977 (The Brockman Romero Papers).

<sup>91</sup> This description is from Cardenal, *Historia*, 597.



are the image of the Divine One who was pierced. . . . so many loved ones murdered. We suffer with those who are lost, with those whose whereabouts are unknown, with those who are fleeing. . . . We are with those who suffer torture. We know that many are at home now still suffering those pains, those humiliations." He judges with the Church.

Jesus Christ has told us today in his Gospel that the one who would come after him must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow him. . . . Brothers and sisters, I think that we have mutilated the Gospel. We have tried to live a very comfortable Gospel, without handing over our lives. Just piety. Just a Gospel that makes us happy. But here in Aguilares there is beginning a bold movement of a more committed Gospel . . . a very serious commitment to Christ crucified.

He thinks, critically, with the Church. "Do not confuse the liberation of Christ with false liberations that are merely temporal." And he prays with the Church: "We feel our heart so small, but Christ loans us his, so that with one heart on the altar, all of our hearts, we may unite to give glory to God, to give thanks for our lives, to offer pardon to our enemies and to pray for the forgiveness of our sins and the sins of our people."<sup>92</sup>

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*"Finally, [let us have] a committed presence as Christians in a society in which we must be heralds of the Reign of God."*

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A few months later, when the clergy of the archdiocese felt compelled to write in support of the archbishop, they entitled their statement, "To Touch the Archbishop is to Touch the Heart of the Church."<sup>93</sup> *Sentir con la Iglesia*, indeed.

## The Cathedral

The *misa única* after the murder of Rutilio Grande was one of many celebrations that showed the cathedral to be a place of encounter, drawing together the members of the church and reaching out to people who no longer believed. The cathedral was also a

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<sup>92</sup> *Homilías*, June 19, 1977, delivered in Aguilares, 97–102.

<sup>93</sup> *Orientación*, January 22, 1978.

place of refuge, again and again sheltering people fleeing the violence of government agents on the streets. It was a symbol often occupied, over the archbishop's protest, by political organizations that saw it as the heart of the life of the city. Above all, it was the place of the bishop's *cathedra*, the place of his preaching and teaching, the place where Romero gave voice to the voiceless.

Romero's Sunday homilies were long—sometimes two hours long—and explicit.<sup>94</sup> Over and over again, Romero showed how to read the events of the past week in the light of the Sunday Scriptures. In 1978 Romero wrote to Cardinal Baggio:

From March 1977 until now, the 8 A.M. Sunday Mass in the cathedral has given me the occasion to bring the Gospel close to the life of the people of my diocese. With the cathedral filled Sunday after Sunday, and with the Mass also broadcast by the Catholic radio, I have explained the Gospel, working so that the Word of God might never be chained [2 Tim. 2:9] and so that this Sunday encounter with the archdiocese might be a breath of hope for those who suffer in their material circumstances and in their spiritual dignity as human beings and children of God. I have maintained a continuous call to conversion and testified that "there is nothing truly human that fails to find an echo in the heart of the Church."<sup>95</sup>

The purpose of the homily, Romero once said, is "to incarnate in the people the Word of God. It is not politics when a homily points to political, social, and economic sins. It is the Word of God taking flesh in our reality, a reality that many times reflects sin rather than the Reign of God, to show people the path of redemption."<sup>96</sup>

In the homily of December 3, 1978, Romero offered another description of what he was doing as a preacher. That First Sunday of Advent marked the beginning of the *Lectionary's* year of readings from the Gospel of Mark. Romero recalled the second-century testimony of Papias about Mark's Gospel.

He says that a presbyter used to tell them, "When Mark acted as interpreter of Peter, he wrote carefully but without order all that Peter remembered of what the Lord did and said." Then Papias

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<sup>94</sup> *Diario pastoral*, February 10, 1980.

<sup>95</sup> Letter of May 21, 1978 (The Brockman Romero Papers), quoting from "Gaudium et spes," no. 1, in *DocsVatII* (p. 903).

<sup>96</sup> *Homilias*, November 11, 1979.



comments on his own, "Peter used to adapt his teaching to the needs of the moment without establishing an order in the sayings of the Lord." . . . And so we will have as our text this year the example of the first pope, St. Peter, speaking of the Gospel and of Christ not as an ordered theory but in a living practice that sheds light on the realities of El Salvador, week by week.<sup>97</sup>

Romero's homily that Advent Sunday continued with a long scriptural reflection exhorting to wakefulness and hunger for God. It moved on to the events of the week, explaining a new policy linking catechesis to the celebration of confirmation and marriage, then inviting people to the celebration of the feast of the Immaculate Conception and to a novena of Masses for a man who had been killed by the state security forces earlier in the week. Romero read a letter from a couple whose son had been missing for three years; an escaped prisoner testified that the boy was being held by the government. And on and on, finishing with a reflection on the death of Father Ernesto Barrera, allegedly in a shoot-out between government forces and leftist guerrillas. Romero concluded his homily thus:

I invite you to enter into Advent, in this spiritual preparation for Christmas, with the sense of which I have spoken: hunger for God, poverty of spirit, awareness of our need for God. Let us stay awake, attentive to the presence of Christ in the poor one, in our friend, in the brother or sister, so as not to treat them as we would not treat Christ. Finally, [let us have] a committed presence as Christians in a society in which we must be heralds of the Reign of God.<sup>98</sup>

This homily is typical. In all the homilies of his three years as archbishop, delivered from brief notes but recorded and now published in eight volumes, Romero did precisely what he asked the base communities to do: to allow the Lord to be present through the Word, calling to conversion and building their faith. The difference, in Romero's case, was the national and even international range of his voice. The bombing of the archdiocesan radio transmitter by right-wing forces in February 1980 is testimony to the impact of the homilies. One of the first things Romero did at the end of his February retreat was to visit the site of the transmitter, where he found Phil Pick, S.J., of the Wisconsin Province "working like any day

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<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, December 3, 1978.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*



laborer to remove the rubble left by the bomb."<sup>99</sup> In his last Sunday homily, the day before he died, Romero offered special thanks to Father Pick.<sup>100</sup>

Romero's preaching made people uncomfortable. That didn't surprise him. The church is salt for the world. If one puts a healthy hand into salty water, nothing happens; but a wounded hand in salty water stings.<sup>101</sup> If one turns on a light where people are sleeping, they will wake up, but perhaps not happily.<sup>102</sup>

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*In its encounter with the world of the poor, the Church discovered anew the pressing need for conversion. It encountered its own sins and the sins of the world, personal sins and structural sin.*

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If the homilies did not present "an ordered theory," Romero's pastoral letters did. He issued four letters, one shortly after becoming archbishop, and another each year on the occasion of the patronal

feast of the Archdiocese of San Salvador, the Transfiguration. The letters again show Romero thinking with the Church. They draw together the Scriptures, conciliar documents, the faith of the people, and the details of their day-to-day human experience. Several of the letters were preceded by widespread consultation; all of them offered specific pastoral guidelines.

The first letter, *The Paschal Church*, was dated Easter Sunday, April 10, 1977. "Beloved brothers, sisters, friends. We have lived through a Lent that was a way of the cross, and a Good Friday that has come to full flower in this bright and hopeful hour of the Easter of resurrection."<sup>103</sup> Now it was time to recall that "the Church does not live for itself, but in order to bring to the world the truth and grace of Easter" (54). In a phrase, "The Church is the Body of the risen Christ" (57).

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<sup>99</sup> *Diario pastoral*, Feb. 26, 1980.

<sup>100</sup> *Homilias*, March 23, 1980.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, May 29, 1977.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, Jan. 22, 1978.

<sup>103</sup> The original texts of the letters are in *La voz de los sin voz*. In this section of the paper, I will use the English translations found in *Voice of the Voiceless* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985). This citation is from "The Easter Church," p. 61.

The second letter, *The Church, the Body of Christ in History*, developed this theme. Drawing on *Lumen gentium* and *Gaudium et spes*, the letter set out the ecclesiology underlying the pastoral practice of the archdiocese. The Church is a body of men and women who belong to God, but who live as the sacrament of salvation in and for the world. "The Church is the flesh in which Christ makes present down through the ages his own life and his personal mission."<sup>104</sup> Therefore, the Church's mission is authentic "only so long as it is the mission of Jesus in the new situations, the new circumstances, of history" (ibid.).

The criterion that will guide the Church will be neither the approval of, nor the fear of, men and women, no matter how powerful or threatening they may be. It is the Church's duty in history to lend its voice to Christ so that he may speak, its feet so that he may walk today's world, its hands to build the kingdom, and to offer all its members "to make up all that has still to be undergone by Christ." (ibid., quoting from Col. 1:24).

In its encounter with the world of the poor, the church discovered anew the pressing need for conversion. It encountered its own sins and the sins of the world, personal sins and structural sin. Proclaiming the Kingdom of God in a particular time and place, the church has "the pressing duty of publicizing and promoting the means that seem best able to help toward the partial realization of the kingdom. . . . Just as injustice takes concrete forms, the promotion of justice must take concrete forms" (74, 75). The Salvadoran Church was persecuted, Romero wrote, precisely because of its faithfulness to the Gospel.

The church is respected, praised, even granted privileges so long as it preaches eternal salvation and does not involve itself in the real problems of our world. But if the church is faithful to its mission of denouncing the sin that brings misery to many, if it proclaims its hope for a more just, humane world, then it is persecuted and calumniated, it is branded as subversive and Communist. (80)

The second letter ends with a call for unity in the church, based on fidelity to the demands of Jesus Christ and cemented by common suffering:

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<sup>104</sup> "The Church, The Body of Christ in History," in *Voiceless*, 70.



Therefore I once again appeal for the unity of all Catholics. It is something for which I have a keen desire. But we cannot, as the price of this unity, abandon our mission. Let us remember that what divides us is not the action of the church but the sin of the world—and the sin of our society. What has happened in our archdiocese is what always happens in the church when it is faithful to its mission. When the church enters into the world of sin to liberate and save it, the sin of the world enters into the church and divides it. (81)

The third pastoral letter was even more concrete than the first two. Issued jointly by Romero and Bishop Arturo Rivera Damas, then bishop of Santiago de María, for the feast of the Transfiguration in 1978, the letter had as its title and theme *The Church and the Popular Political Organizations*. The phrase “popular organizations” or “people’s organizations,” used in El Salvador to describe grass-roots associations of peasants or workers, most often designates organizations of the Left.

As noted above, the pastoral strategy of the archdiocese included support for ecclesial base communities, described in this letter as

organized communities that arise around the Word of God, a Word that brings persons together, makes them aware, and makes demands upon them, and around the Eucharist and other sacramental signs, to celebrate the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, celebrating at the same time our human effort to open ourselves to the gift of a greater humanity.<sup>105</sup>

The Word of God awakened in some members of these communities a political vocation. “This is where the problem arises: faith and

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*Not all Christians have a political vocation; those who do not must struggle for justice in other ways.*

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politics ought to be united in a Christian who has a political vocation, but they are not to be identified” (100). Christians with a political vocation may fall into either of two traps: “[T]hey can substitute for the demands of the faith and Christian justice the demands of a particular political organization, or

they can assert that only within a particular organization can one develop the requirements of Christian justice that spring from the

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<sup>105</sup> “The Church and Popular Political Organizations,” in *Voiceless*, 96.



faith" (100). Not all members of the popular organizations are Christians; those who are Christians must profess their faith in solidarity with the Church. Not all Christians have a political vocation; those who do not must struggle for justice in other ways.

Some of the popular organizations had by this time developed military capability. The letter clearly condemned the institutionalized violence of an unjust society, the repressive violence of the state, terrorist violence, and spontaneous violence, but it admitted the possibility of legitimate defense against "an imminent, serious, and unjust threat" (107) when proportionate violence is a last resort which will not "bring about a greater evil than that of the aggression" (105).

From the point of view of thinking with the Church, one more paragraph of this third letter deserves quotation:

We are well aware that, despite our intentions and all our efforts to provide adequate guidance to the political dimension of the faith of our brothers and sisters, especially of the rural population, there are still many questions waiting to be answered. We must do it together, pastors and people of God, never separated from our union in Christ. We must do it in the light of our faith and of the social situation of our country. (105)

That is exactly what Romero did in writing his last pastoral letter, entitled *The Church's Mission and the National Crisis* and issued for the feast of the Transfiguration in 1979. In developing his theme, Romero drew on Vatican II, the papal Magisterium, and the documents of the Puebla conference of the Latin American bishops, held earlier that year. He also recalled the words of *Lumen gentium*, that "the holy people of God shares also in Christ's prophetic office . . . under the guidance of the sacred teaching authority." He continued:

Taking account of the charism of dialog and consultation, I wanted to prepare for this pastoral letter by undertaking a survey of my beloved priests and of the basic ecclesial communities of the archdiocese. I have been struck yet again by the maturity of the reflection, by the evangelical spirit, by the pastoral creativity, by the social and political sensibility expressed in the large number of replies. . . . Notwithstanding their occasional inaccuracies or doctrinal and pastoral impetuosity, they have served to stimulate that charism of

teaching and of discernment with which the Lord has entrusted me.<sup>106</sup>

The survey pointed to a crisis within the nation—infant mortality, malnutrition, unemployment, starvation wages, housing shortages, moral deterioration in public administration and in private life, political exclusion, repressive violence. It pointed also to a crisis within the church—disunity, resistance to renewal on one hand or, on the other, political and ideological adulteration of the faith. Division within the church reflected the division within society; unity within the church would come from adherence to Puebla's "preferential option for the poor" (125). The church must unite to denounce sin and to unmask idolatry, whether in the form of the absolutization of wealth and private property, the absolutization of national security, or the absolutization of popular organizations. The Church must unite to promote integral human liberation. Here we find again, I think, the importance of thinking with the Church. Romero was clearly worried about those pastoral agents who followed a different approach than the one he delineated.

We must never think of the various responses to which one single Spirit gives rise as being at odds with one another. They have to be seen as complementary, and all beneath the watchful overview of the bishop, the person responsible for the apostolate in the diocese. Let us remember that the apostolate ought to be a joint response, and if it is not, then it is neither a pastoral response nor a response of the church. (151)

On the other hand,

I believe that the bishop always has much to learn from his people; and that in the charisms which the Spirit gives to the people, the bishop encounters the touchstone of his humility and authenticity. I want to thank all those who, when they are not in agreement with the bishop, have the courage to dialog with him and to convince him of his error, or to be convinced of their own.<sup>107</sup>

Finally, to think with the Church is not to think with what Romero sometimes called "the powers of this world": the president, the Supreme Court, the security forces, the captains of industry. He criticized with great freedom those who idolized wealth. He criti-

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<sup>106</sup> "The Church's Mission amid the National Crisis," in *Voiceless*, 117.

<sup>107</sup> *Homilías*, September 9, 1979.

cized with equal freedom those who absolutized political organizations.

Urioste says that Romero spoke the truth with great tranquility, as though it came naturally to him. A passage in a letter Romero wrote to Cardinal Baggio suggests that it wasn't always easy:

I have tried to proclaim the true Faith without divorcing it from life, to offer the rich treasury of the Magisterium in its totality to all people, and to keep strong the unity of the Church, represented in the Roman Pontiff. For many years my motto has been "Sentir con la Iglesia." It always will be. Many times I have said to myself: How hard it is to want to be completely faithful to what the Church proclaims in its Magisterium, and how easy, on the other hand, to forget or leave aside certain aspects. The first brings with it much suffering; the second brings security and tranquility and eliminates problems. The former provokes accusations and scorn; the latter praise and flattery. But I have been confirmed by what the Magisterium, through the council, says to the bishops: "Bishops should present the doctrine of Christ in a manner suited to the needs of the times, that is, so it may respond to the needs and problems that people find especially worrying and burdensome. They should also care for this doctrine, teaching the faithful themselves to defend it and propagate it. In presenting this doctrine bishops should proclaim the maternal solicitude of the Church for all people, whether they be among the faithful or not, and should devote special care to the poor, to whom they have been sent by the Lord to give the good news."<sup>108</sup>

At his *cathedra*, Archbishop Romero showed his way to *sentir con la Iglesia*.

### "The Little Hospital"

Romero lived at what everyone called the "hospitalito," the little hospital. The *hospitalito* was and still is a modest 120-bed medical facility established by the Carmelite Missionaries of Saint Teresa to care for indigent, terminally ill cancer patients. Romero lived in a single room behind the hospital's chapel until the sisters presented him with the keys to a three-room house on the grounds as a present for his birthday in 1977. He was the sisters' chaplain,

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<sup>108</sup> Letter to Baggio, June 24, 1978 (The Brockman Romero Papers). For the quotation from "Christus Dominus," see *DocsVatII*, 570, no. 13.



celebrating Morning Prayer and the Eucharist with them each day and also sharing meals with them.<sup>109</sup> The *hospitalito* is an important place in Romero's ministry and he was killed at the altar of its chapel.

The *hospitalito* was a place of intimate dialog. In a review of the *Diario pastoral*, Rodolfo Cardenal notes that Romero met with *campesinos* and workers, victims of repression, bishops and priests, students and university people, members of the popular organizations and members of the security forces, politicians and civil servants, members of the oligarchy, diplomats, representatives of international agencies, and journalists.<sup>110</sup> Many of these meetings took place in the offices of the archdiocese, but some of them took place at the *hospitalito*. Romero met there, often over breakfast, with his closest advisors, and he occasionally met there at night with people who did not wish to be seen talking with him. Very few people were invited to stay overnight. One of these was Cardinal Aloisio Lorscheider of Brazil, who, after being offered a room at the nunciature, opted to stay in Romero's small guest room instead, saying, "This way I show that I am with you."<sup>111</sup>

Romero prepared his homilies at "the little hospital." He met with advisors, including Rafael Moreno, S.J., to go over the events of the week; then he went to his room. There he prepared the notes that would keep him on track as he preached.

He prepared his homilies with great dedication. . . . [In the pulpit] Romero was transformed. He was, I think, captured by the Spirit. Monseñor was a bit timid. In conversations in informal groups he hardly said anything at all. . . . But when he got to the pulpit he was another man, completely different. He didn't hold back but said whatever he believed God wanted him to say, whatever he found by consulting with God.<sup>112</sup>

The *hospitalito* was a place of asceticism; a discipline and *catena*, devices once commonly used for mortification, were found in

<sup>109</sup> Brockman, *Romero: A Life*, 90 f.

<sup>110</sup> Rodolfo Cardenal, "En fidelidad al evangelio y al pueblo salvadoreño: El diario pastoral de Mons. Oscar A. Romero," *Revista latinoamericana de teología*, no. 4 (January-April, 1985).

<sup>111</sup> *Diario pastoral*, December 31, 1979.

<sup>112</sup> Urioste, Interview, December 7, 2002.

Romero's bedside table after his death.<sup>113</sup> The hospitalito was also a place of prayer, of "consulting with God." Many people report finding Romero in solitary prayer in the chapel. One such story is told by the vicar general, Ricardo Urioste. Romero had left some important visitors waiting for him.

After a while I was embarrassed, because those people where there to see him, not me, and while they talked to each other, I got up and went to find Monseñor Romero. . . . I went to his apartment, and he was not there. I went to the sisters' parlor, next to the chapel, but he wasn't there either. I passed through the kitchen, thinking that he might be drinking a cup of coffee, but he wasn't there. . . . [I]t occurred to me to pass by the chapel. I went in, and Monseñor Romero was in the third row, kneeling before the tabernacle. . . . He was immersed in prayer before the crucifix and the Blessed Sacrament, which was exposed. I went up to him and said, "Monseñor, those people are waiting for you." His answer was, "Fine, let them wait." I imagine that Monseñor Romero had gone to ask how he ought to respond to those people. . . . Then I thought, "Monseñor Romero never said anything, never did anything without first consulting with God."<sup>114</sup>

Urioste continues:

You know well that it has been said that Monseñor Romero was manipulated—by the Left, by a small group of priests, by the Jesuits. When delegations came to El Salvador or when I met them outside the country and they asked me, "Look, is it true that Monseñor Romero was manipulated?" I always answered that, yes, Monseñor Romero was manipulated; he was manipulated by God, who made him do and say whatever God wanted! (ibid.)

This testimony is consistent with what Romero himself said and wrote. To Cardinal Baggio he wrote in 1978 of a constant desire "to be faithful to what God asks of me," and he found light for that discernment in prayer.<sup>115</sup> During the homily of March 2, 1980, three weeks before he was killed, Romero said this:

Yesterday, when a journalist asked me where I find my inspiration for my work and my preaching, I replied: "That is a timely question, because I've just finished my Spiritual Exercises. If it were not for this

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> José Ricardo Urioste, "Su sentir con la Iglesia," in *La espiritualidad*, 62 f.

<sup>115</sup> Letter to Baggio, June 24, 1978 (The Brockman Romero Papers).

prayer and this reflection in which I try to stay united with God, I would be no more, as St. Paul says, than a clanging cymbal."<sup>116</sup>

All the witnesses, even those who disliked Romero, agree that he was a man of deep prayer. Sobrino, however, warns against a possible misunderstanding. The world of the spirit is not opposed to the world of history. "Undoubtedly, Monseñor Romero had an intimate relation with God, the great Invisible One, but that did not lead him to confuse the world of spirituality with the world of the invisible. Rather, it carried him to extraordinarily deep and radical incarnation in the reality of El Salvador."<sup>117</sup>

Intimacy with God and engagement in history may perhaps be symbolized by the chapel of "the little hospital." By all accounts, the chapel was a place of intimate dialog with God. It was also the place in which Romero's testimony of faith and defense of the poor were sealed by martyrdom.

To think, to feel, to act as the Body of Christ in the specific circumstances of a quarter century ago, denouncing personal sin and social injustice, proclaiming the Gospel and defending the poor, yearning for the transcendent liberation of the Reign of God—that is what *sentir con la Iglesia* meant at the local level. It required not just intellectual assent but complete personal commitment. "I want to assure you, and I ask your prayers that I might be faithful to this promise, that I will not abandon my people but will run with them all the risks which my ministry demands of me."<sup>118</sup>

## Thinking with the Bishop of Rome

Romero's thinking with the Church extended beyond the borders of the archdiocese, nationally and internationally. Perhaps the best place to see this is in his somewhat rocky relationship with the Vatican. Romero visited Rome four times as archbishop. These trips provide the framework for an account of Romero's *sentir* with the universal Church.

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<sup>116</sup> *Homilías*, March 2, 1980.

<sup>117</sup> Jon Sobrino, "Hombre de Dios y Hombre de los Pobres," in *La espiritualidad*, 13.

<sup>118</sup> *Homilías*, November 11, 1978.



## March 1977: Now, courage!

Romero visited Rome two weeks after the murder of Rutilio Grande and his companions. Accompanied by Msgr. Urioste, he arrived in Rome on Sunday, March 27.<sup>119</sup> The first thing Romero did, Urioste says, was to pray at the Altar of the Confession in Saint Peter's. "Monseñor Romero entered into profound prayer, as though he were bringing before the tomb of Peter, the first pope of history, all the worries of his new ministry."<sup>120</sup> Over the course of the next week, he met with Paul VI, with Cardinal Sebastiano Baggio, prefect of the Congregation for Bishops, with Archbishop Agostino Casaroli of the Council for the Church's Public Affairs, and with Father General Pedro Arrupe. Romero took to Rome a massive dossier of information about the situation of the church in El Salvador. He was not well received by Cardinal Baggio, who must already have received information from the nuncio about the *misa única* after Father Grande's murder.

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*The meeting with the Pope confirmed Romero in his ministry, but he worried about the attitude he had found among papal officials.*

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Having gone to Rome "like St. Paul to St. Peter, to test the Gospel he preached, so as not to waver from the true Christian tradition," Romero was especially eager to meet the Pope.<sup>121</sup> After the regular Wednesday general audience, Paul VI drew Romero aside for a private meeting. Romero gave the Pope a photograph of Rutilio Grande and described his own effort to be a pastor in the spirit of Vatican II, Medellín, and *Evangelii nuntiandi*. The Pope took Romero's hands in his own and said to him, "Qui, è Lei che comanda! Allora, coraggio!" (See here! You are the one in charge. Courage!).<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Summary of trip in Brockman, *Romero: A Life*, 19–22.

<sup>120</sup> Quoted in María López Vigil, *Piezas para un retrato*, 4th ed. (San Salvador: UCA Editores, 1998), 145.

<sup>121</sup> Quoted by Delgado, *Biografía*, 85.

<sup>122</sup> Urioste, in López Vigil, *Piezas*, 146.

The meeting with the Pope confirmed Romero in his ministry, but he worried about the attitude he had found among papal officials. In fact, he began to wonder whether he would be replaced. Romero asked César Jerez, the Jesuit provincial for Central America, who was in Rome to meet with Father Arrupe, "Father Jerez, do you

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*Romero's own tensions with the government were provoked by the government's attack on the dignity and liberty of the church and its assault on the human rights of so many defenseless people.*

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think that they will remove me as archbishop of San Salvador?" César responded playfully that they'd probably not make him a cardinal. Romero replied with all seriousness: "I would rather be removed as archbishop and go with head held high than turn the church over to the powers of this world."<sup>123</sup> Jesús Delgado tells a nearly identical story. To be removed would be a severe blow,

"but he was ready to face it with head held high with the satisfaction of not permitting the church to fall into the hands of the powerful of this world. He said as much to more than one person."<sup>124</sup>

Romero wrote to Baggio from San Salvador at the end of July 1977. He expressed "tranquility of conscience" about the way he had led the archdiocese during his first five months as archbishop, and he pointed to "an exuberant resurgence of the pastoral life of the church and the confidence and credibility that the church is gaining among the people."<sup>125</sup> A few pastoral workers, "overly sensitive to the political and social problems of our environment," may have acted imprudently, but they were neither Marxists nor subversives. p Romero's own tensions with the government were provoked by the government's attack on the dignity and liberty of the church and its assault on the human rights of so many defenseless people. "Eminence, if, in spite of this tranquility of my conscience, the Holy See judges that these are not the most appropriate pastoral criteria, I await your observations; I am even ready with humility and respect to entrust to other hands the helm of this beloved church."

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<sup>123</sup> Jerez quoted *ibid.*, 147 f.

<sup>124</sup> Delgado, *Biografía*, 86.

<sup>125</sup> Letter to Baggio, July 1977 (The Brockman Romero Papers).

Romero's letter noted that, far from supporting his ministry in such a difficult time, the nuncio undercut him. "Analyzing this strange attitude on the part of His Excellency, I have concluded that His Excellency lives very far from the problems of our clergy and our humble people." For his part, Bishop Eduardo Alvarez, the bishop of San Miguel and military vicar, had done nothing to defend the church from the attack by the Salvadoran army. Given the circumstances, Romero wrote, the position of military vicar was harmful and should be suppressed.

In December, looking forward to the World Day of Peace that Paul VI wished to be celebrated with the motto "No to Violence, Yes to Peace," Romero wrote to Cardinal Villot, Vatican secretary of state. In quite a level tone, Romero described how the mission of evangelization continued in an atmosphere of disappearances, rape, and murder. Cardinal Villot responded in February that the Holy See was well informed by many sources, that it was careful to develop an "objective" evaluation of the data, and that, with the help of the Pontifical Representative and the other bishops, Romero should do everything possible to establish a fruitful dialog with the government.<sup>126</sup>

### June 1978: A Friendly Little Chat

On May 16, 1978, Cardinal Baggio sent a short note to Romero inviting him to Rome for a friendly chat.<sup>127</sup> Before receiving Baggio's letter, Romero had prepared a twenty-three-page report on his ministry in the archdiocese.<sup>128</sup> The report notes the difficulties—opposition from outside the church, opposition from the nuncio and other bishops—but also the unity of the church in the archdiocese, the flourishing of catechesis and sacramental life, and the solidarity of the church with the poor. Many of Rome's old complaints are again addressed: the *misa única*, the refusal to attend the president's inauguration, Romero's demand that the government stop the repression of *campesinos* as a condition for dialog with the church, and the accusations of Marxism within the church.

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<sup>126</sup> Letter of Cardinal Villot, February 18, 1978 (The Brockman Romero Papers).

<sup>127</sup> Letter in The Brockman Romero Papers.

<sup>128</sup> Letter to Baggio, May 21, 1978, *ibid.*



One can glimpse in the letter several dimensions of what it meant to Romero to think with the Church. He quotes over and over again the Scriptures, the documents of Vatican II and Medellín, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, *Populorum progressio*, *Pacem in terris*, and *Quadragesimo anno*. Yet, citing *Lumen gentium* no. 12, he also refers to the “*sensus fidei* of the people.” He appeals to “the clamor of my archdiocesan church in which I discerned the voice of the Holy Spirit,” and notes as a sign of confirmation the remarkable unity of pastoral workers with the bishop. Romero sent this statement not only to Baggio but also to Cardinal Eduardo Pironio, the Argentine prefect of the Congregation for Religious, whom he considered a friend who understood his “desire to be faithful to the Gospel and to the cries of the poor.”<sup>129</sup>

Romero, his vicar general Ricardo Urioste, and Bishop Arturo Rivera Damas, who was now the bishop of Santiago de María, left for Rome on June 17. Again, Romero’s first stop in Rome was the tomb of St. Peter, “entrusting to St. Peter the welfare of our church and the success of this dialog with the Holy See.”<sup>130</sup> They then visited Father Arrupe.

On Monday the bishops visited the Congregation for Bishops, where they were asked to speak with Msgr. Miguel Buro. Romero noted in his diary, “[T]he conversation was useful for expressing our own points of view in the few minutes in which we were allowed to speak, since he did almost all the talking.”<sup>131</sup>

Romero met Cardinal Baggio at the Congregation for Bishops on June 20. He then composed a nine-page memo as a record of the meeting. According to the record, Baggio alleged that Romero had surrounded himself with untrustworthy priests who flattered him and made him think that he was a prophet. He disappointed those

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*“However, as long as it is within my responsibility, I will try only to please the Lord and to serve his Church and his people in accord with my conscience in the light of the Gospel and the Magisterium.”*

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<sup>129</sup> Letter to Pironio, June 8, 1978, *ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> *Diario pastoral*, June 17, 1978.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, June 19, 1978.

who had backed his appointment expecting serenity and prudence. He allowed priests to become politicized. He marginalized Bishop Marco René Revelo, who had been assigned as auxiliary in San Salvador. Denying the nuncio the use of the cathedral for a quasi-diplomatic function with government officials caused "an almost irreparable scandal." Romero's homilies were criticized as very long and very concrete, although they were found to be without doctrinal error. Baggio was "terrified" to think of the sort of priests who would emerge from the seminary.

Romero's memo says that he listened respectfully with a sincere desire to better orient his service of the church. He responded, he wrote, with the sincerity of "one who recognizes what is true and, on the contrary, defends the truth when it has been disfigured by inexact or self-interested reports."<sup>132</sup> Serenity and prudence ran up against the suffering of his people, whose funda-

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*Devotion to Peter, gratitude to Paul VI, and acute tension with most Vatican officials are all evident in this second visit.*

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mental rights, including the right to freely express their faith, had been trampled. The conflict was not between the government and the church but between the government and the people. The church simply carried out its mission with the people.<sup>133</sup> In use of the cathedral, the real counter-witness would be "a celebration in

honor of the Holy Father in which honors are also paid to the hierarchy of a government guilty of so much abuse of the Church and of the people." Romero expressed the desire to work more closely with his auxiliary, Bishop Revelo, but also noted that the basis for a good working relationship was rather weak, for "he himself confessed—and Your Eminence confirmed to me—that he has been appointed 'to put the brakes on me.'"

Although his homilies were long, people listened avidly as he showed how the Word of God sheds light on the concrete circumstances of life. Some might listen out of mere curiosity, but that simply impelled Romero all the more to try to "rekindle faith where

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<sup>132</sup> Report to Baggio, June 24, 1978 (The Brockman Romero Papers).

<sup>133</sup> This constant refrain can also be found in the homilies of January 21 and October 21, 1979.



it may have been extinguished." Sharing Baggio's concern for a clergy worthy of the complete confidence of the Holy See, Romero promised to give them even more support in their difficult mission. He also defended the popular veneration of the tombs of the martyred priests Rutilio Grande and Alfonso Navarro.

Finally, Baggio noted that some bishops had asked that Romero be removed. Romero's record states:

With the same simplicity as in our talk, I now write out that, if it be for the good of the church, with satisfaction I will give over to other hands this difficult government of the archdiocese. However, as long as it is within my responsibility, I will try only to please the Lord and to serve his Church and his people in accord with my conscience in the light of the Gospel and the Magisterium.

Paul VI received Romero and Rivera the next day, after the Wednesday general audience. The account of this meeting in Romero's *Diario pastoral* is marked by emotion. Paul VI and Romero clasped hands as they spoke. Romero remembered the warmth of the moment better than the precise words, but "the dominant ideas of those words were these: "I understand your difficult work. It is

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*The Pope then talked about the difficulty of pastoral work in a political context like Romero's. He recommended balance and prudence. One should stick to principles and avoid concrete denunciations, for fear of making mistakes.*

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work that may be misunderstood. You must have great patience and great strength. I know that not everyone thinks as you do. . . . [N]onetheless, proceed with spirit, with patience, with strength, with hope."<sup>134</sup>

Romero left a memorandum with the Pope, a memorandum that Romero saw several days later among the papers brought to a meeting by Archbishop Agostino Casaroli, secretary of the Council for the Church's Public Affairs. Romero noted in the memo that comments made in the various Vatican dicasteries coincided exactly with the criticisms made by the powerful forces in El Salvador that were trying to undermine his apostolic effort. This memo concludes, according to the *Diario pastoral*, professing faithfulness to the succes-

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<sup>134</sup> *Diario pastoral*, June 21, 1978.



sor of Peter and to his Magisterium, faithfulness that provides “the guarantee of walking with my flock according to the Spirit of the Lord.”<sup>135</sup>

At the end of this visit to Rome, Romero went again to Saint Peter's. “There beside the tomb of St. Peter, I prayed the Apostles' Creed, asking the Lord for the fidelity and clarity to believe and to preach always that same faith of the apostle St. Peter.”<sup>136</sup> Devotion to Peter, gratitude to Paul VI, and acute tension with most Vatican officials are all evident in this second visit.

### May 1979: He Reminded Me of Poland

Paul VI died two months after Romero's visit with him. John Paul II had been pope six months by the time Romero next visited Rome. The Dominican Sisters of the Annunciation invited Romero to Rome for the beatification of their founder, Francisco Coll, on Sunday, April 29, 1979. Since Holy Week, Romero had been asking for an appointment to meet John Paul II during this trip, but he found an audience hard to get. When the Pope greeted each bishop at the end of the Wednesday general audience, Romero asked his blessing for the Archdiocese of San Salvador, and the Pope responded that they “would have to talk in private.” Romero replied that to do so was his greatest wish. Yet he still had trouble getting the appointment.<sup>137</sup>

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*The Pope told Romero to continue to defend social justice and love of the poor, but also to ensure that the popular movements did not lose their Christian values and in the end do as much harm as the dictatorship they sought to remove.*

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Romero was finally received on Monday, May 7.<sup>138</sup> He brought documentation about the situation in the country, including interna-

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., June 21, 1978.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., June 28, 1978.

<sup>137</sup> *Diario pastoral*, May 2, 1979.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., May 7, 1979.

tional reports that he apparently thought would carry more weight than his own testimony. When he pulled out all this documentation, the Pope smiled. There would not be time for so much. Romero suggested that the Holy Father order a study to be made of the documents and a summary to be composed, "because I wanted him to have an idea of how impartial observers sketch the situation of injustice in our country." He also gave the Pope a file on the murder of Father Octavio Ortiz and his companions at El Despertar retreat center in January.

The Pope then talked about the difficulty of pastoral work in a political context like Romero's. He recommended balance and prudence. One should stick to principles and avoid concrete denunciations, for fear of making mistakes.

I explained, and he agreed, that there are circumstances—I cited, for example, the case of Father Octavio—in which one must be very concrete because the injustice, the abuse, has been very concrete. He reminded me of his situation in Poland, where he faced a non-Catholic government. . . . He gave great importance to the unity of the bishops. Returning again to his pastoral work in Poland, he said that the principal problem was to maintain unity among the bishops. I explained that I too wanted unity very much, but that unity should not be feigned but based on the Gospel and the truth.

John Paul then referred to the report of the apostolic visitor, Bishop Quarracino, who "recommended as a solution to pastoral deficiencies and to the lack of unity among the bishops the appointment of an apostolic administrator *sede plena*" (ibid.). Romero noted in the *Diario pastoral* that it had been a useful visit and a frank discussion, and that "one ought not always to expect complete approval." He met again with Cardinal Baggio, who thought impractical the idea of naming an apostolic administrator, and then with a friend in the curia, who suggested confidentially that the apostolic administrator might have been proposed to test Romero's reaction.<sup>139</sup> Finally, he met with his friend Cardinal Pironio, the Argentine Prefect of the Congregation for Religious:

He opened his heart to me, telling me that he, too, has had to suffer, as he feels deeply the problems of Latin America, which are not

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<sup>139</sup>Ibid., May 8, 1979.

completely understood by the Supreme Magisterium of the Church, and that, nonetheless, one must continue to work and to inform as much as possible about our true situation. And he said, "The worst thing you can do is lose heart. *Animo, Romero!*"<sup>140</sup>

As always, the trip ended with a visit to the tombs of the popes in Saint Peter's and "intense" prayer.

A report by the journalist María López Vigil suggests how difficult this third visit to Rome must have been for Romero. She met him in Madrid on his return trip to San Salvador, and Romero described to her the papal audience:

The Holy Father insisted that I should get along with the government, so that there would be no conflict. And I tried to explain to him that the government persecuted the people, killed the people. . . . I said to him that the church cannot go along with a government like that. But he kept insisting on the same message, that I had to reach out to the government. For me that was impossible; before God it was impossible. Then I was bold enough to recall the words of Jesus Christ in the Gospel and to say to him, "Holy Father, Jesus says that he himself did not come to bring peace but the sword, conflict." And the Holy Father made a gesture with his hand and said, "Do not exaggerate, Monseñor."<sup>141</sup>

An aside: while still in Rome, Romero received a call from Urioste telling him of an attack on protesters near the cathedral. Urioste said that there were nine corpses in the cathedral, and that probably more people had been killed.<sup>142</sup>

## January 1980: Not *Only* Social Justice and Love of the Poor

Romero made his last visit to Rome in January 1980, on his way to Louvain to receive an honorary doctorate. The visit seems to have gone more smoothly than Romero's first encounter with John Paul II. Perhaps the young officers' October coup convinced some people that Romero had been right to condemn the previous regime. Romero's initially hopeful attitude toward the new government may have been read by the Vatican as an appropriately moderate re-

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., May 9, 1979.

<sup>141</sup> María López Vigil, manuscript in the library of the Centro Monseñor Romero at the UCA in San Salvador.

<sup>142</sup> *Diario pastoral*, May 9, 1979.



sponse. The Vatican had also received a favorable report on the archdiocese from Cardinal Aloisio Lorscheider of Fortaleza in Brazil, former president of the Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM), who had visited San Salvador, not as an official apostolic visitor, but as a fellow Latin American bishop and friend.<sup>143</sup>

Romero's first talk was with his friend Cardinal Eduardo Pironio, the Argentine prefect of the Congregation for Religious, who told Romero that Lorscheider had reported very favorably. That did

not mean that all was well. Pironio went on to say, as Romero recorded in his diary, that "if those who kill the body are terrible, even worse are those who attack the spirit, slandering, defaming, and destroying a person. He believed that to be my martyrdom, even within the Church, and he told me to have courage."<sup>144</sup>

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*It is the Church's duty in history to lend its voice to Christ so that he may speak, its feet so that he may walk today's world, its hands to build the kingdom, and to offer all its members "to make up all that has still to be undergone by Christ."*

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Romero went to the Pope's general audience, at the end of which each bishop again was invited to greet the Pope. John Paul

told Romero that he would like to talk with him. We have two accounts of the meeting in Romero's own words. The first account is in the *Diario pastoral*.

He received me with much affection, telling me that he understood perfectly the difficulty of the political situation in my country, and that he was concerned about the role of the church. We should keep in mind not only the defense of social justice and love of the poor but also the possible upshot of a push from the Left, which could also be bad for the Church. (ibid.)

Romero expressed complete agreement.

I told him, "Holy Father, that is precisely the balance I try to maintain. On the one hand, I defend social justice, human rights, and love of the poor. On the other, I pay attention to the appropriate

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<sup>143</sup> Urioste, Interview, December 7, 2002.

<sup>144</sup> *Diario pastoral*, January 30, 1980.

role of the church and guard that, while defending human rights, we do not fall into ideologies which destroy human sentiments and values."

Romero again explained his work, citing exhortations drawn from the Pope's own speeches. "I felt that the Pope was in agreement with everything I said, and at the end, he gave me a very brotherly embrace and told me that he prayed every day for El Salvador. I have felt here the confirmation and the strength of God for my poor ministry" (ibid.).

At home a week later, during his regular Sunday homily, Romero gave a second account of his meeting with John Paul II. Romero began by saying:

When I met with the Holy Father, I felt that I did so not just personally but bringing the work of priests, religious, and faithful. And the encouraging words of the Pope also are encouragement for all the archdiocese. I want to tell you that the Holy Father knows our work well and is fully in agreement with our defense of social justice and our preferential love for the poor. The tendentious reports that are sometimes given about our relations with the Holy Father are built on nothing but the malicious desire to undercut our pastoral work, which the Pope knows much better than the media, who try to distort things. . . . We should know that the Pope is the one who most pushes forward the advances of the Second Vatican Council, and we should defend against all those currents within the Church that try to impede the progress of a Church more committed day by day to the service of the world.<sup>145</sup>

Later in the homily he expanded on the conversation with the Pope. The Pope did not "scold" him, as some said. The meeting was like that of Paul and Peter in Jerusalem. The Pope told Romero to continue to defend social justice and love of the poor, but also to ensure that the popular movements did not lose their Christian values and in the end do as much harm as the dictatorship they sought to remove. Romero said that he had agreed with the Pope and then added:

But, Holy Father, in my country it is dangerous to talk about anti-Communism, because anti-Communism is espoused by the Right, not out of love for Christian values, but because of their own self-interest. . . . That is why I speak positively, praising the spiritual values,

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<sup>145</sup> *Homilías*, February 10, 2002.

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the Christian values of my people, and saying that those values must always be defended.

Romero himself recounts that this final visit with John Paul ended with confirmation and a brotherly embrace; but the conversation with Pironio suggests that at least some suspicions about Romero remained.

Looking back over the relations with the Vatican, Msgr. Urioste, Romero's vicar general, makes two points. First, Romero "had a great devotion to the popes . . . a great love for the Church and specifically for the popes . . . great respect, admiration, and devotion for the pope, whoever he might be, including John Paul II, who did not understand him."<sup>146</sup> Yet

I believe that, sadly, the Vatican never understood Monseñor. . . . It seems to me that the Church is not accustomed to that type of holiness. It is accustomed to another type of holiness, but not to the holiness of the person who sees what the Church must do directly in support of the human person, for the welfare of a country, for peace in a country, or for respect for human rights in a country. The Vatican interprets that simply as politics. . . . I fear that they always thought of him as a politician, and that they still do. (ibid.)

## Romero's Thinking with the Church

Some may find the exhortation to think with the Church reminiscent of the old advice "Pray, pay, and obey." That sort of thinking with the Church can be difficult, of course. As I write, in February 2003, many U.S. Catholics struggle mightily to come to terms with the Vatican's criticism of U.S. policy toward Iraq. Romero's way of thinking with the Church, however, is yet much more demanding.

Intellectual assent to authoritative teaching was certainly part of Romero's *sentir con la Iglesia*. His homilies and letters are replete with quotations from conciliar and papal documents. In fact, the day before he died, denying the charge that the church was inappropriately "meddling in politics," Romero said he was simply trying to ensure that Vatican II, Medellín, and Puebla would be applied in

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<sup>146</sup> Urioste, Interview, December 7, 2002.



everyday life, so that the Gospel might be preached and the church's mission fulfilled.<sup>147</sup> Vicar General Ricardo Urioste goes so far as to call Romero "a martyr for the Magisterium," because Romero would never have been so bold had he not believed the teaching of the Church demanded it of him.<sup>148</sup>

The teaching of the Church demanded of Romero intellectual assent and much more. The teaching of the Church demanded that he read the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel. The teaching of the Church demanded that he pay attention to the concrete circumstances of the communities of the archdiocese and to the needs of Salvadoran society as a whole. The teaching of the Church called him to put himself on the line, to overcome his natural timidity, to identify himself with the church, the people of God, the Body of Christ in history. It called him to preach good news to the poor and to accept whatever conflict that might entail. Sometimes those conflicts were with members of the Church who understood its teaching differently, with the nuncio, who "lives very far from the problems of our clergy and our humble people," with Vatican officials who were often misinformed, with oligarchs who absolutized their wealth, with soldiers who absolutized their power, or with members of political movements who absolutized their organizations.<sup>149</sup>

Romero wrote: "It is the Church's duty in history to lend its voice to Christ so that he may speak, its feet so that he may walk today's world, its hands to build the kingdom, and to offer all its members 'to make up all that has still to be undergone by Christ'" (Col. 1:24).<sup>150</sup> As Romero said at Puebla, this is a "Church understood not only as the Magisterium but as a people, a people who put their hope in the church, a people who are themselves the church and are Christ, who has become flesh in a Latin American church of the poor, oppressed and suffering." In this light, he said, "St. Ignatius's 'to be of one mind with the Church' would be 'to be of one mind

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<sup>147</sup> *Homilías*, March 23, 1980.

<sup>148</sup> Urioste, Interview, December 7, 2002.

<sup>149</sup> The quotation is from a letter to Baggio, July 29, 1977 (The Brockman Romero Papers).

<sup>150</sup> Romero, "The Church, The Body of Christ in History," 70. See "The Easter Church," 54.

with the Church incarnated in this people who stand in need of liberation.'"<sup>151</sup>

The rules for thinking with the Church do not stand at the center of the Exercises. They come at the very end, almost as an afterthought. At the center of the Exercises is the encounter with Jesus Christ. Making the Exercises, Romero heard the call of the King and offered himself to the Eternal Lord of all things. The God who dwells with us and labors in the world today accepted his offering and sent him to those of whom Romero would say, "With this people, it is not hard to be a good pastor."<sup>152</sup> *Sentir con la Iglesia*, indeed.

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<sup>151</sup> Romero, "Reflections on the Spiritual Exercises, 101.

<sup>152</sup> "Con este pueblo no cuesta ser un buen pastor" (*Homilías*, November 18, 1979).

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Editor:

I have just finished reading William A. Barry's "Jesuit Spirituality for the Whole of Life" (STUDIES 35, no. 1 [January 2003]) and found it most interesting. You mentioned in your introduction that letters are welcome, so I am responding to your invitation. I am eighty-one years of age, retired, and living at Sacred Heart Jesuit Center in Los Gatos, Cal. I enjoyed your story about asking the English Jesuit, "And what do you do, Father?" At Jesuit gatherings in our province, that is still the primary question! My response is, "I don't *do* anything!" In my humble opinion that is the whole point of being retired. You may recall I wrote an article on that subject that was published in the *National Jesuit News*, April/May, 1996. I was surprised how much response it received from various Jesuits throughout the assistance. I am very interested in the subject of Jesuit spirituality for those of us who are retired.

I found the following observations in Barry's piece to be of interest.

His comments throughout the article that the "old" saying attributed to Ignatius should read "Pray as if everything depended on you; work as if everything depended on God." It makes a very big difference in the perspective of both prayer and work. I especially like the concept that trust in God is primary for the outcome of any work we may do, whether or not it is "successful."

His comment on p. 27: "Included in these actions and events are our own aging bodies, our growing debilities, and, God help us, even our senility, if that is our lot; included too is how we live with them." This is a very important observation, especially for those of us who in our old age are literally forced to do so. If we can do so gracefully, with the help of prayer, all the better.

"At the same time we do not totally identify ourselves with our work or our institutions." This reminds me of a teaching attributed to C. G. Jung according to which we can become "persona-identified." That is, our whole identity depends on what kind of work we do and where we do it. When that work is no longer possible for us and we have no real person to fall back on, we can easily fall into a severe depression and a sense of hopelessness. I have come to believe that I was a person before I entered the order and took on the Jesuit persona, and I remain a person in my old age.

"We cannot stave off the steady journey that leads to the grave." I live in a Jesuit house where all of us have our final status. After retirement, assisted living, and possibly the infirmary, the next step is the grave. We have a significant number of funerals, and yet in our daily conversation the subject of death is never actually discussed. I wonder what that says about



our Ignatian spirituality in our later years?

"These communities exist for the sake of the apostolate, not for the sake of the community." That is the best articulation I have heard of an answer to those who maintain we should let our old people remain in apostolic communities and not isolate them in houses of retirement or assisted living. We cannot get the care we need in an "apostolic community." Moreover, we become a burden on those engaged in the apostolate. Not being willing to move out to a proper facility provided by the province is, in my opinion, a breach of Ignatian indifference.

I appreciate Fr. Barry's article and think it should be read and discussed widely in every province. I would have liked to see included some of the psychological dimensions of the issue, but perhaps that would be the subject of another article. Such things as the use of the Enneagram and the Myers/Briggs measurement could be very useful in interpreting the principles of Ignatian spirituality to the ever-increasing population of aging Jesuits, who must always take into account individual differences that are inherent in every personality.

My thanks to you and Bill Barry for giving us a very interesting and thoughtful issue.

J. Ripley Caldwell, S.J.  
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Editor:

Bill Barry has done a masterly job in addressing a very important contemporary issue in the Society. However, I feel it is an issue for active spirituality all the time, not just now and not just for Jesuits. It is an issue that surfaces and challenges anyone living an active spirituality. Bill's practical, experiential approach will touch many people.

I would buttress his presentation with what is another way of talking about the same issue. A Jesuit is *always* on mission and blessed with a ministry. Most of us must retire from active work, which, Bill says, is difficult, even traumatic at times. But mission and ministry are not identified with active work. "Retirement" is an important mission and involves "praying for the Society and the Church," as Bill describes that. The final mission and ministry for a Jesuit is to die.

Every Jesuit mission and ministry is rooted in the Trinity and springs from the heart of the Trinity. This is no pious theologism. It has all the practical effects that Bill speaks of in his reflection. We unintentionally mislead one another when our years of hard work imply that the mission and ministry of holiness are identified with hard work. This danger is exacerbated when we talk too carelessly as though "mission" and "ministry" always involve active work. Those two words must have a connotation of significance greater than "active work."

This is true, I think, for Jesus. His mission was not equal to what he did. His mission involved his unique rela-

tionship with the one he called "dearly beloved Father." It was the love in that relationship that influenced everything he said and did, leading him finally to Calvary. Without denying the salvific quality of his whole life, we realize that Jesus is at his salvific best dying into Resurrection when he was *doing* very little.

A Jesuit never retires from mission. His experience of God's love gives him the freedom to follow God with appropriate enthusiasm and joy all through his life to the final ministries of retirement and dying.

What I am stating here for Jesuits has important application for all sorts of people gifted with an active spirituality. Bill Barry has done a great service for all of us living such an active spirituality.

I also appreciated the editor's introduction, which set up Bill's essay and readied us to hearken to his important message.

George Aschenbrenner, S.J.

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Dr. Paul Shore is a member of the faculty at Saint Louis University in the Department of Educational Studies and the Department of History.

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# Common Testimony

by Carl F. Starkloff, S.J.

The puzzle of “faith and culture,” of “inculturation,” has been with Christianity almost from its beginnings. *Customs of the American Indians* (1724; English translation 1974) by Joseph Lafitau, S.J., also deals with that puzzle. What he was struggling with was cut from the same cloth as the struggle of Las Casas, Ricci, Ramon Lull, Boniface, Gregory I, or Augustine of Canterbury, stretching back to the “Council of Jerusalem.”

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The author of *Common Testimony*, Carl F. Starkloff, S.J., has combined a career as a systematic theologian with work among Native Americans. He has taught at Regis College of the Toronto School of Theology, at Rockhurst University, and at Saint Louis University. Most recently he has been an associate editor at the Institute of Jesuit Sources and is presently vice-president for Missions and Ministry at Saint Louis University.

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