

'A saint for the whole people of God: Oscar Romero and the ecumenical future' by Lord Rowan Williams, given at St Chad's RC Cathedral, Birmingham, 12 December 2014

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I count it a very great honour to be invited to speak in memory of Archbishop Romero, and to be invited to speak here this evening. I join in those prayers that next year may see Archbishop Romero recognised for what he undoubtedly is: one of the great gifts of God to the whole people of God in the last few decades; one whose witness and teaching is a legacy for Christians everywhere.

It was one of Archbishop Romero's friends and associates, the great Jesuit theologian Jon Sobrino, who wrote of the Archbishop that he was, 'a theological event'. What does it mean to say of someone's life and death, or indeed of someone's whole personality, that they constitute 'a theological event'? Sobrino makes it clear as he elaborates this theme something of what he means. A theological event is an event in which there is some kind of rapprochement between the Word of God and the word, or sometimes the wordless cry, of the suffering. Theology, so far from being a set of human speculations about God, is at its most authentic when it becomes in some sense the very utterance of God. Not the utterance of God delivered from on high, much as theologians and bishops would like that to be the case, but the Word of God uttered with and through those who share the suffering of Christ and his glory.

Sobrino writes, 'the cries of a whole people were transformed into the prayer Archbishop Romero offered to God'. And in hearing and giving voice to those cries, in the presence of God, Romero becomes a theological event: the Word of God and the cries of the suffering are bound together.

It's a picture which has its roots far back in Christian thinking, as a matter of fact. At the end of the fourth century St Augustine in his great addresses on the Psalms says that one of the great mysteries of the incarnation is that Christ speaks for suffering, doubting, struggling humanity. And when in the Psalms we hear the voice of suffering and struggle, as so often we do, we should remember that the Psalms are the prayers of Christ incarnate: God in Christ makes his own the cries of our suffering and our darkness. In that Augustinian sense Archbishop Romero is 'a theological event'.

Human pain, human loneliness, the suffering of terrible oppression is put into a new context, a new and divine world, when it is immersed in Christ, by the Christ-like compassion and service of Christ's body, and the servants of Christ and the prophets of Christ in that body.

Archbishop Romero gave voice to the cries of the poor, and it's a theme which in his own writings, and reflections, and sermons comes to the fore with great frequency. He believed that a central part of his ministry was precisely that: to give a voice to those who had no voice. But of course, his giving voice to the cries of the poor was more than just a matter of words or reporting. He gave voice to the experience of the poor by taking risks alongside them. Once again, just as in the case of Christ himself, the taking on of the voices, the cries, of the suffering, becomes a risk, and occasion of suffering itself. Christ does not simply repeat our human words to God as if at third hand. He cries out of the risk and suffering that he himself embraces, and so, with Monseñor Romero.

Archbishop Romero believed that if the Church was to be where God is, it would have to be with the poor. And so he writes in December 1979 on Christmas Eve, "Today is the time to look for this child Jesus, but do not look for him in the beautiful images of nativity sets; but look for him among the children lacking proper nutrition

who have gone to sleep this evening with nothing to eat. Let us look for him among the poor newspaper boys who sleep in the doorways wrapped in today's paper. Let us look for him in the shoeshine boy who perhaps has earned enough to buy a small gift for his mother. Let us look for him in the newspaper boy who, because he did not sell enough papers, is severely reprimanded by his stepfather or stepmother. How sad is the history of these children. Yet Jesus takes on all of this tonight"¹.

Where is God? God is with the most vulnerable. That ought to be an axiom for every Christian reading her or his Bible. And that, of course, means that the unity of the Church, if it's true unity with Jesus Christ, is bound up with the Church being where Christ is. For Romero, the unity of the Church is bound up with being united with Christ through solidarity with the poor. The calling of the believer is to be where Christ is, and like Christ to give voice to the cry of the suffering and dispossessed. Speaking with and for Christ, speaking from the place of Christ, is speaking from the place of the dispossessed and the marginal.

Famously, Archbishop Romero's episcopal motto was, *Sentire cum Ecclesia*, 'thinking or feeling with the Church'. A phrase which has sometimes been used to confirm a rather mindless affirmation of whatever the Church through its officials happens to be saying at any one time. It meant something very different for Archbishop Romero. *Sentire cum Ecclesia*, is thinking from and with the perspective of the dispossessed. Thinking from where Christ is. To borrow a phrase from that remarkable contemporary Catholic thinker, James Alison, it is learning to have the intelligence of the victim. Learning to read the world and see the world from the point of view of those who have no power – because that is Christ's perspective.

Archbishop Romero was crystal clear, however, that this feeling with, thinking with the poor, this profound solidarity with the dispossessed, was more than just another partisan programme. He was, of course, predictably rebuked in his life, as so many liberation theologians were rebuked, for failing to proclaim Good News to all. If the Church has an option for the poor, surely that means it has an option against the rich. He had a good deal to say about this, a good deal to say about the way in which as a matter of fact the Church was already divided between rich and poor. And how the option for the poor, and the speaking from the intelligence of the victim, was paradoxically a way of restoring a deeper unity. Here he is in November 1979 reflecting on this,

"The other day one of the persons who proclaims liberation in a political sense was asked: For you, what is the meaning of the Church? He answered with these scandalous words: There are two churches, the church of the rich and the church of the poor. We believe in the church of the poor but not in the church of the rich. Clearly these words are a form of demagoguery and I will never admit a division of the Church. There is only one Church, the Church that Christ preached, the Church to which we should give our whole hearts because those who call themselves Catholic and idolize wealth and have no desire to detach themselves from their wealth – such people are not Christian. They have not understood the Lord's call and this is not the Church. Rich people who kneel before wealth, even though they go to Mass and perform pious acts, yet if they have not detached themselves from wealth, then they are not Christian but idolaters. There is only one Church, a Church that adores the living God and knows how to give relative value to the goods of this earth."²

The implication of that ought to be very clear: it is good news for the poor that is good news for the rich. The rich will not hear good news unless they hear it as good news for the poor, as good news for their neighbour. Think for a moment about how very often we might take it readily for granted that hearing good news is always, really, hearing good news **for us**. Archbishop Romero challenges us to recognise that hearing God's

¹ Homily, 'The Birth of the Lord', Christmas Eve, December 24, 1979, available at http://www.romerotrusted.org.uk/homilies/195/195_pdf.pdf

² Homily, 'Three Christian Forces for Liberation', Thirty-second Sunday of Ordinary Time, November 11, 1979, available at http://www.romerotrusted.org.uk/homilies/188/188_pdf.pdf

good news is hearing what is good news **for everyone** – for our neighbour, for our other, for the stranger, for the dispossessed, the one who doesn't immediately share our place or our perspective.

So, if the option for the poor is indeed not just a partisan programme, if it's not about a church of the poor opposed to a church of the rich, what might that imply? Two thoughts may help us here. Going back to where we started: the Church is to be where Christ is. A united Church is a Church united with Jesus Christ, and there is no hope of unity without that. But to be united with Christ is by definition to have good news for all. Isn't that what the gospels and the rest of the New Testament repeatedly say? Isn't that the message of the angel to the shepherds that we'll be remembering in a couple of weeks time? And that must mean that good news for the poor is good news for all. Good news for the poor promises justice for all. Justice for the poor and for the rich. It promises life-giving newness for the rich as well as the poor.

And that, in turn, suggests a second reflection. The rich, as Archbishop Romero puts it more than once, the rich – in so far as they are idolaters, unwilling to let go of their privilege, the rich are imprisoned; the rich need release. Good news for them is what takes away fear, the anxiety, and the violence that goes with passionate possessiveness. And it doesn't take a theologian to reveal to us that profound inequalities of wealth and power in any society are perennially a source of fear and anxiety and violence. A few years ago, that remarkable little book called 'The Spirit Level' by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett appeared, a book which many of you will have read. A book which laid out very, very clearly the ways in which deeply unequal societies were more anxious and more unhappy than societies where gaps were smaller between 'haves' and 'have nots'. It seems that the Christian gospel is indeed on the right track in claiming that good news for the poor is good news for all. That spiralling inequality is deeply hostile to human wellbeing.

True and lasting security in this context depends not on our endless capacity to defend ourselves and our interests, it depends on a kind of dispossession, a kind of letting go, as the Lord says in the gospels, we save our lives by losing them. And that means, in the context of much of what Archbishop Romero has to say, that the ideal relation between people in a society is one in which you can confidently let others take responsibility for you, as you confidently take responsibility for them. When you know that others are passionately concerned for your interest as you are passionately concerned for theirs, you will be more and more intolerant of the various ways in which the gulf between rich and poor is dug ever deeper; more and more intolerant of the ways in which we, I, protect ourselves, myself, against that risk of life-giving exchange, of confident responsibility - which is what God purposes for his human creation, and indeed, though this is another matter, for our world around us.

The New Testament puts before us the model of the human society in which precisely each takes responsibility for all, and all take responsibility for each. A society in which people are dispossessed to the extent that they know that they do not need to be anxious about protecting themselves because they know that their neighbour is there for them. That's the vision that animated the life and the death of Archbishop Romero.

Here are some of the things which he wrote about that. In October 1978, "why is the Church only preaching to the poor? Why do we speak of a Church of the poor? Don't the rich have souls? Yes, the rich have souls and we love them profoundly and desire that they be saved and not become imprisoned in their own idolatry. We ask them to become spiritual persons, to become poor in spirit, and to experience the anguish of those in need."³

In July 1979, "And to the rich I want to say also that a spiritual poverty is not enough, a kind of desire but without effect, to them I say: as long as their desire for evangelical poverty does not become incarnate in the realization that they must take on the cause of the poor as if it were their own cause – as if they were Christ

³ Homily, 'God's Feast with Humanity', Twenty-eighth Sunday of Ordinary Time, October 15, 1978, available at http://www.romerotrusted.org.uk/homilies/122/122_pdf.pdf

himself – they will continue to be called the rich, ‘those that God despises’, because they put more faith in their money”⁴.

In February 1980, “What else does the Church do? Announce the good news to the poor. But not in a demagogic sense, excluding the rest. Rather, on the contrary, those who have heard bad news in secular circles, and have lived worse realities, are hearing through the Church the word of Jesus, the Kingdom of God is approaching, it is ours. Blessed are you, the poor, for the Kingdom of God is yours. And this means also that there is good news to announce to the wealthy, let them become poor to share with the poor the good things of the Kingdom of God that belong to the poor.”⁵

In learning to let go, in learning to share to take responsibility for those in need, the powerful and the wealthy are evangelised and released. They hear good news, they’re sprung from their prison. They are fed by the hungry they serve.

All of this is by way of trying to spell out what it might mean to say that the Church is one in being one with Christ, the Christ who is in the needy and the vulnerable, and having one word of good news for all God’s people. A oneness which is shown in that taking responsibility for all by each, by each for all. And for Archbishop Romero, the sacramental unity of the Church, a Church, for example, gathered at the altar, was both a visible sign of this taking responsibility, and a source of grace and strength for pursuing that vision for human society. Because in the Mass we all come as hungry and needy people, and our need is met together, and we are all given in the Eucharist the liberty and the capacity to feed one another, and to take that responsibility for one another.

In March 1979, Romero writes, “When we come to Mass on Sunday we fulfil the covenant that God established. Every Mass on Sunday is a realization of the covenant that leads us to respect the covenant and to experience God as the only true God. Before this one true God we must destroy all the idols that want to take the place of God, idols that want to become rooted in our hearts or in the hearts of our people: the idol of power and money and luxury, the idols of possessing things that alienate us from God. Sunday must be for us an occasion to renew our covenant with God.”⁶

So the Eucharist is both the sign and means of unity. The Eucharist becomes both the mark of our hope, the symbol of our hope, and the means, the strength, by which we grow into it.

So within this broad perspective what the unity of the Church means – unity with Christ, unity with Christ in the vulnerable, unity with Christ’s one word of good news, unity in our taking responsibility universally for one another – in that context, what might we say about the ecumenical future? Monseñor Romero had remarkably little to say about ecumenism. He had a few other things on his mind! But there are real implications in all this for how we approach the ecumenical task, and prayer, and vision. He poses a deeply troubling and challenging question about ecumenism: can we see our vision of unity afresh in the context of being united with Christ as he understands it? Do we seek not just the unity of the churches, some kind of fusion of various kinds of institutional life, or unity with Christ?

The ecumenical vision feels and sounds remarkably different if we begin by saying what we pray for and hope for is to be united with Jesus Christ. And through that, and in that, to be united with one another. And to be united with Christ in Christ’s proclamation and embodiment of good news for the poor. Of course, you can misunderstand this. You might think, for example, that ecumenism understood in this light meant that churches

⁴ From July 1 1979, in *Through the year with Oscar Romero*, p.102

⁵ From February 17 1980, in *Through the year with Oscar Romero*, p.154

⁶ Homily, ‘Lent, Renewal of our Alliance with God’, First Sunday of Lent, March 4, 1979, available at http://www.romerotrusted.org.uk/homilies/143/143_pdf.pdf

ought to assemble around social and political projects, rather than doctrinal formulae. But that's just replacing one kind of formality with another.

We learn more about this when we look at what the experience and witness of the Church actually is in contexts of deep injustice, or long-term suffering, or terror. In our age, when the images of nightmare suffering and injustice are so vividly and so daily before us, not least the terror and injustice suffered by so many of our Christian brothers and sisters in parts of the world – in Nigeria, and Kenya, and the Middle East – we need to look at what the unity of the Church means in Iraq or Colombia, in Nigeria or South Sudan. To look at how churches discover what it means to be with one another as they are with the vulnerable. To speak with and for the vulnerable. To be the one voice of Christ with and for the sufferer. And in so declaring Christ's voice to be the voice of the poor, to speak also the word of judgement to tyranny, injustice, and brutality.

At the end of July this year I had the privilege of visiting South Sudan on behalf of Christian Aid. And for all the weakness, struggles, the intermittent failings of the churches of Christ in South Sudan, as I listened to the voices of a group of pastors around a table in Juba, talking about their calling, it was crystal clear that here was a group discovering unity very much in Archbishop Romero's sense. Not a unity coalescing around a programme, whether political or doctrinal, but a unity of passion for the wellbeing of all those who are suffering so atrociously in the new civil strife that has erupted in South Sudan and claimed the lives of thousands and thousands of people in the last twelve months. They were deeply conscious of responsibility. They knew that no other group was going to take responsibility for the voiceless and the vulnerable in South Sudan. They knew in spite of all their suspicions of one another, and their uncertainties about how their church witness was going to coalesce, they knew that they had no alternative but to speak together, to be unified by that passion for the vulnerable. And they knew that that was what they had to speak into the terribly deadlocked and sterile negotiations between warring factions in South Sudan. They were taking responsibility. They were speaking into a profoundly corrupt, violent political culture. They were recognising that they had discovered a unity in being where Christ is, with Christ's vulnerable people: giving voice to that one voice of Christ the sufferer, and Christ the judge.

We can find dramatic examples of this in many parts of the world. Not only in South Sudan, but in, as I've said, in parts of the Middle East, and many other parts of Africa. We know also of much more prosaic ways in our own cities speaking with one voice alongside and for and with the vulnerable is one of the things that renews Christian vision. In this city, as in my own city, the work of churches together in Food Banks has been one small, but vital example of how there is a discovery of unity in listening and speaking alongside those most in need, most at risk.

We're a very, very long way in our context from the risk that a Romero faces, or even a risk such as the pastors of South Sudan face. All we are likely to risk is a few unfriendly editorials in the newspapers, and the odd dismissive remark in the Houses of Parliament. And that's not a great deal as martyrdom goes! But the positive point remains: the positive point that the discovery of Christ calling and crying, Christ making his own the voice of the voiceless. In the discovery of that Christ we discover unity. We discover where we need to be; how we are united with Christ, what that means for us in practice.

And in whatever context we are thinking about this, we must always remember that what we are talking about is justice for all. We're not talking about giving privilege to the non-privileged, so that somebody else becomes non-privileged. We're not talking about turning the hourglass upside down so that someone else is on top. We're talking about that profound, costly mutuality, what I call that confidence that others are there for you, that you are there for them. And that's a reminder that the very word 'justice' in the Bible means rather more than just making sure everybody has what they deserve, which is a good classical definition, but a rather thin Biblical definition. Justice in the Bible is not about reversal or retribution, it's about healed relation and right alignment. It's being in tune with, in direction of, the purposes of God. It's being restored to that active peace which is always coupled with justice in Scripture.

Justice for all is a matter of relationship, and thus a matter of that mutual responsibility we've been thinking about. Justice for all is the right alignment of all, so that everyone is aligned, directed along the line of God's will, and God's will is always for the good of the neighbour. And so when the rich or the powerful refuse justice for the poor, what they're refusing is life for themselves. Those who seek to protect themselves against the claim and the call of the vulnerable are actually saying no to the life that healed relationship and right alignment bring. And that might suggest to us also that, to the extent that we as Christian communities refuse those opportunities of unity that arise for us, we too are in danger of refusing life.

And that's why I regard Monseñor Romero not just as a teacher and a martyr who witnesses to justice for the poor, but as a teacher who has something crucial, life-giving, vital to say to us about what and who we are as a Church, as churches seeking to be more fully united. And the question he puts to us is, if we are only truly united when we are more deeply united with Christ, then there is a simple place to start on our path to unity, and that is learning to be united with the cry, and the need, and the agenda of those who are most at risk, and where appropriate to go and to share that risk.

None of this is meant to suggest that we simply dismantle all our interests and concerns in doctrine, and sacrament, and discipline, and simply go and look for good causes to support together. For, you see, none of this would make any sense whatsoever, unless our doctrinal and sacramental commitments were what they are. The Christ who is there with and in the poor is not just an impressive human teacher, but the incarnate Son of God, the Lord Almighty, clothing himself in our poverty, so that we may be clothed with his divine richness. Unless we believe that, none of this business about being united with him in the poor would make any sense whatever. And if Jesus Christ were just a great and interesting good man, then the Eucharist would be meaningless, except as a faintly melancholy commemoration of one of the innumerable tragedies of history, where great and impressive men tend to get killed unpleasantly.

The Eucharist, as the place where the very life of the incarnate Son of God is given to us, the Eucharist is the place where our responsibility for one another is renewed and deepened, and set on new foundations. That again is what makes sense of the commitments we take into our commitments in the world. These commitments are the ground of the whole vision, and they matter theologically precisely because they are what grounds and inspires the vision of solidarity with the poor.

But in a way, there's the point: we have to rediscover many of our theological commitments and theological concerns by, so-to-speak, going round - through this experience of identification with the poor and solidarity with the needy. By going around and discovering the whole point of these doctrinal forms and sacramental practices is to anchor us more deeply, more securely, in the Christ who has made himself poor for our sake, so that we may all of us know his justice and his richness.

In our ecumenical discussions about doctrines and sacraments and discipline, that's part of the journey we have to take. If we say that this or that conviction matters, we need to work out why exactly it might matter in the context of how we learn to be united with Christ, and how we learn to be where Christ is. Not just to repeat inherited prejudice, inherited habit, not just to trade formally in slogans, but to find together the ways in which our theological conviction and commitment can be the motive force in taking us closer to where Christ is, and speaking what Christ says. With any practice, with any doctrine, we have to ask does it enable or disable a unity with Christ in the powerless? We need in our discussions about unity never to lose sight of this dimension. Our discussions about different theological emphases and disciplines must ask how this or that aspect of our theology serves and clarifies our response to the call to be with Christ in solidarity with the vulnerable.

And finally, this may help us to make slightly better sense of what it means to say at one and the same time that God calls us to combat poverty, and that God calls us to poverty of spirit. Bishop Romero writes in February 1980, "Poverty is a spirituality, a Christian attitude and the soul's openness to God. It is for this reason that

Puebla stated that the poor are the hope of Latin America. They are the hope because they are the ones who are more open to receive God's gifts. Thus Jesus says with great emotion: Blessed are you who are poor, for the Kingdom of God is yours. You are the ones most able to understand what is not understood by those who are on their knees before and trust in false idols. You who do not have those idols, you who do not put your trust in them because you have no money or power, you who are destitute of everything, know that the poorer you are, the more you possess God's kingdom, provided you truly live that spirituality. The poverty that Jesus Christ here sanctifies is not simply a material poverty, not just having nothing – that is evil. It is a poverty that awakens consciousness, a poverty that accepts the cross and sacrifice, but not out of mere compliance, but because it knows this is God's will. Therefore we become holy according to the degree to which we make poverty a part of our spirituality and to the degree in which we hand ourselves over to the Lord and show our openness to God.”⁷

To speak of a calling to spiritual poverty has sadly often been in the Church a commendation of passivity, and acceptance of the status quo. Romero takes this to a very different level. To be spiritually poor is to be delivered from idolatry. And notice how often he comes back to that theme of idolatry. To be spiritually poor is to be delivered from idolatry, to have nothing but the true God to worship and adore. When, either by circumstance or by choice, we are brought to that point where there are no idols left, then transformation begins to happen. Then something is released in us which makes us able, as never before, to take responsibility for one another - to be there for our neighbours.

So, the ecumenical future in the light of Archbishop Romero's life and death, his prayer and witness, becomes a future in which all of our Christian communities engage more deeply together in challenging the various ideologies that their own church life, and their own social life, will throw up. It becomes a future in which we seek to help one another further towards unity with Jesus Christ in the prayerful confidence that it is in that moment that we begin the journey towards one another. Archbishop Romero believed very deeply, as we have seen, that there is only one Church; a Church of those who are truly where Christ is, who truly speak with his voice into and out of that situation. And when we're inclined to be anxious or cynical, despairing even, about whether the churches can ever be one, it does help not a little to remember that Christ is already and eternally one, that his body is one, that his good news is one, and that we are stumblingly making our way towards that which is already real in him.

Because, as every saint and martyr would agree, what matters in the Church is not what we achieve, but what God has given, is giving, and will give. And to the God who has given, is giving, and will give great grace through the life and death of Oscar Romero, we give our thanks.

Quotations from Archbishop Oscar Romero were taken from Through the year with Oscar Romero, published by DLT, available to buy in shops and online, including from the [CAFOD shop](#).

⁷ Homily, 'Poverty of the Beatitudes, Our Strength', Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time, February 17, 1980, available at http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/homilies/203/203_pdf.pdf