

The Martyrdom of an Apostle for Peace and Vatican II Champion Challenges Us¹

*Even when they call us mad,
when they call us subversives and communists
and all the epithets they throw at us,
we know that we only preach
the subversive witness of the Beatitudes,
which have turned everything upside down
to proclaim blessed the poor,
blessed the thirsting for justice,
blessed the suffering,
blessed the peacemaker.²*

1. The Jesuit theologian, Ignacio Ellacuria, famously said³ “*With Archbishop Romero God passed through El Salvador.*” I would prefer to say that ‘*With Archbishop Romero God passed through the universal Church*’. For me personally it has been the greatest grace of my life to have known and worked with Archbishop Romero and to have enjoyed his friendship⁴. It was a fleeting glimpse of God at work in the world.
2. As Chair of the Archbishop Romero Trust⁵ I’ve come to feel rather like a peripatetic evangelist; or perhaps a wandering minstrel singing a song you’ve heard so many times before, the story of a Christ-like bishop, martyred at the altar for his profound and loving commitment to the poor, his fidelity to both the teaching and the genuine spirit of Vatican II, and his indefatigable pursuit of peace through justice. Still now 33 years on, reflectively reading his homilies, his Pastoral Letters and his diary, strengthens me in faith and hope; but challenges me at the very core of my being to live out that Catholic Christian faith authentically. In this ‘Year of Faith’ we can surely hold up Oscar Romero with pride as a truly credible witness to the Gospel and the resurrection of Jesus Christ for our times.
3. The Church is in the midst of celebrating 50 years of Vatican II; and during these coming weeks, we focus on John XXIII’s 1963 encyclical ‘*Pacem in Terris*’ whose full title is: ‘*On establishing universal peace: in truth, justice, charity and freedom*’.
4. In that Cold War era, alongside a critique of the nuclear arms race and the stockpiling of weapons, Pope John entered a long discussion of human rights (in the context of natural law) and on the duties of states. In fact there is a defence of human rights to an extent that was quite new in the official pronouncements of the Church. And it was exceedingly pertinent to Romero’s context in El Salvador.
 - Pope John went so far as to declare⁶
“*....Any government which refuses to recognize human rights or acts in violation of them would not only fail in its duty; its decrees would be wholly lacking in binding force.*”

This extraordinarily powerful statement was echoed in Romero's homilies when he confronted the military regime with its most ignominious failings.

- And, in a seemingly explicit reference to Latin America, Pope John wrote⁷:
*“In traditionally Christian States.... civil institutions are often little influenced by Christian motives and a Christian spirit.... In Our opinion the explanation lies **in a certain cleavage between faith and practice.**”*

In El Salvador that was a massive understatement. Amongst the Catholic elite there was not a cleavage but a chasm between the profession of Christian faith - and adherence to Catholic social doctrine, on the one side, and the lived practice in daily life, on the other.

- But it's the beautiful peroration of *Pacem in Terris*⁸ that I would argue set the framework for Romero's ministry:

‘Peace is but an empty word, if it does not rest upon an order....

- a) founded on **truth**,*
- b) built upon **justice**,*
- c) nurtured and animated by **charity**, and*
- d) brought into effect under the auspices of **freedom**’.*

That could be Oscar Romero's epitaph.

What was being cruelly attempted in El Salvador was to shore up an order

- a) founded on **cover-up and lies**,
- b) built upon **exploitation and repression**,
- c) nurtured and animated by **diatribe and fear** and
- d) brought into effect under the auspices of **dictatorship** - dictatorship unfortunately supported by the governments of the United States and other western democracies.

5. And Pope John concludes his encyclical letter⁹ *“And so, dear brother bishops, with the ardent wish that peace may come upon the flocks committed to your care, for the **special benefit** of those who are most lowly and in the greatest need of help and defence”*. In other words he's saying 'the poor come first'; it was a felicitous and unmistakable allusion to a preferential option for the poor.
6. *Pacem in Terris* arguably laid momentous foundations for the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, which came two years later. And *Gaudium et Spes*, with its explicit call to scrutinise the signs of the times¹⁰, became Romero's constant inspiration. He read those Salvadoran 'signs of the times' in the light of the Gospel and at the same time he interpreted the Gospel in the

light of the 'signs of the times' -an approach to doing theology which David Tracy describes¹¹ as 'mutually critical correlation'.

7. May I quote just one passage¹² of *Gaudium et Spes*?

*"The Council wishes passionately to summon Christians to cooperate.....with all people to secure **peace based on justice and love**"* (cooperate with **all** people – notice! not just fellow Catholics or fellow Christians; not just those who vote with us on pro-life issues or those who share the Vatican line on a plethora of issues linked to the 'anthropology of man').

It goes on *"Peace is not merely the absence of war; nor can it be reduced to the maintenance of a balance of power between enemies; nor is it brought about by dictatorship. Instead, rightly and appropriately, **Peace is an enterprise of justice.**"* *Opus iustitiae pax.*

8. Confronted with an avalanche of human rights violations, in the midst of violent conflict and impending civil war, Romero adopted and adapted those words; he enriched them with the Medellin Document on Peace and Paul VI's apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, (which Romero described¹³ as the Magna Carta of evangelisation) - and he struggled, ceaselessly, for peace through justice in El Salvador.

I will not tire of declaring that if we really want an effective end to violence we must remove the violence that lies at the root of all violence: structural violence, social injustice, exclusion of citizens from the governance of the country, and repression. All this is what constitutes the primal cause, from which the rest flows naturally¹⁴.

9. Paul VI's 1972 World Peace Day cry, taken from the Prophet Isaiah¹⁵, had been 'If you want peace, work for justice'. It became Romero's banner. Indeed we will see it was his last breath.
10. Romero's familiarity with, and his ability to cite from memory, key passages - not just from the documents of Vatican II but from the whole corpus of magisterial social doctrine and indeed from broader papal teaching was hugely impressive - starting from Leo XIII and his hero Pius XI right down to Medellin, Puebla and John Paul II. He had studied and absorbed the documents - and their messages were at the core of his teaching and preaching and pastoral practice in San Salvador. In three years and 193 homilies Romero quoted *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes* no less than 244 times. He preached the Gospel and he preached the Council. We could say that *Gaudium et Spes* and the Constitutions and Declarations of Vatican II were in his bloodstream.
11. But building on Vatican II, the Latin American Church at Medellin in 1968 had rearticulated and reinserted into Catholic social teaching what we now describe as 'the preferential option for the poor'¹⁶. And Romero and the Church in San Salvador embraced it wholeheartedly.

12. Pastoral action to protect human dignity and promote and defend basic human rights and freedoms emanates from our fundamental belief in the incarnation - that God became man. We are all equally sons and daughters of God made in his image and likeness, therefore sisters and brothers of Jesus Christ, with all the inherent dignity and inalienable rights that flow from that. We constitute a single human family from which no one, but no one, is excluded. In a secular context the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and the associated Covenants spell out those rights and the corresponding duties.
13. But the Church's option for the poor, the gospel option for the poor, which is as old as the hills, goes further. Within that single human family, the poor come first. As Blessed John Paul II reminded us¹⁷, in the poorest man or woman we meet "Jesus himself in distressing disguise". So it is as stark and simple as that. The poor come first; first on our agenda, first in defining our priorities, first in the call on our resources, first in the focus of our mission. But more than that: the place where we might best reflect and discern is standing alongside the poor (looking at the world from the victim's perspective). That too is the place in which to do theology and to develop our spirituality. We are evangelised by the poor. The good news of the gospel is for the poor first of all. They are its privileged recipients. It is good news for us the rich, whether in San Salvador, London or Notre Dame, when we become good news for the poor. We might say that we save Lazarus; and we are saved by Lazarus¹⁸.

That is the radical and seminal contribution of the Latin American Church to Catholic social thought and which, quite evidently, Archbishop Romero "inhabited". It is now freely, indeed routinely, invoked in theological reflection, cited in episcopal statements and even papal encyclicals¹⁹. So let's be clear the option for the poor goes far beyond the secular commitment to human rights for all, far beyond equal opportunities for all; it says that the poor and the true friends of the poor will actually be called first when we register for God's kingdom.

14. Oscar Romero's appointment as Archbishop of San Salvador 36 years ago, in February 1977, came as a shock to the clergy and the people of the diocese and probably to Romero himself - in his pocket diary for 8 February he wrote self-effacingly *'Today it was announced in the newspapers that Monseñor Romero has been designated Archbishop of San Salvador'*
15. The man who eventually succeeded Romero, Bishop Rivera Damas, had been expected to get the post. He'd attended the Vatican Council and

served as auxiliary bishop for 16 years; he shared wholeheartedly the pastoral vision and apostolic priorities of the illustrious retiring Archbishop Chavez. It was a vision of the Church alongside the poor, a Church of small basic communities, a strategy of conscientisation and empowerment in the mould of Paulo Freire²⁰, a Church where action (and organising) with the poor to secure justice was truly a constitutive dimension of preaching and living the gospel (as the 1971 Synod of Bishops had so clearly proclaimed²¹).

16. But sadly this Medellin/Gaudium et Spes Church was anathema to the wealthy landed elite and the military class who ruled El Salvador. They managed to persuade the Vatican authorities, through a young and inexperienced Nuncio²² and the arch-conservative Cardinal Mario Casariego in neighbouring Guatemala, that they should instead appoint the apparently bland and socially conservative prelate, Oscar Romero, who, they mistakenly believed, shared their own antipathy and distaste for this dangerous social involvement of the Church. They felt sure he would get these crazy clergy back into the sacristy and out of the public square.
17. For their own part, members of the oligarchy were determined to hold on to their wealth, power and privileges, unchallenged by either the Church or the rural populace. They steadfastly maintained structures of exploitation on the coffee, sugar and cotton plantations that were being described in the language of Medellin as 'institutionalised violence', a land tenure system where 2% of the population owned 60% of the land and where just 14 families had overwhelming dominance; where the legal minimum wage for a coffee picker was a fiction even on the estates of distinguished Catholic landowners; where tens of thousands of landless campesinos scoured the countryside in search of a day's paid labour; where rural trade unions and peasant associations were simply outlawed; and where a flourishing agricultural export economy brought to the growing numbers of the rural poor only ever-increasing hardship, malnutrition and real hunger; where the opposition parties generally won the elections but through systematic fraud they always lost the count. The response to the ensuing social unrest and popular demonstrations was violent repression and the emergence of death squads which in turn provoked the birth of left wing guerrilla movements.
18. This was the El Salvador that Romero, as Archbishop, had to come to terms with in 1977: a land of massacres and cruel killings which had a long history going back to 1932; a nation pregnant with 'civil war'; a country that was like an abscess filling up with the poison of spiralling violence; an abscess which after Romero's death burst - into bloody war
19. But the shy, loyal, orthodox Romero, the man they thought would cause no waves, changed and was changed. He was never going to be a political pawn of coffee barons nor indeed of any grouping, be it on the right or the

left. The only person who manipulated Romero was God²³ - to whom he turned and with whom he communed in prayer over many hours each day and before every major decision and into the night and early morning hours prior to every Sunday homily.

20. Romero's installation as archbishop, in 1977, coincided with a massive presidential electoral fraud, followed by killings and unprecedented national tension. Romero had scarcely moved in when the Jesuit priest, Rutilio Grande, at the very epicentre of the social conflict in the countryside, was murdered by a death squad, as he drove to celebrate mass in an outlying hamlet²⁴. His body was riddled with bullets – police bullets.
21. Romero's initial disbelief became prophetic determination. He closed the Catholic high schools and colleges for three days and the children were sent home with a question sheet for their parents to discuss what was happening in this country dedicated to 'Our Saviour' when priests were being killed. He suspended all formal relations with the government until the assassins would be brought to justice. He opened a diocesan legal aid centre to document all the killings and disappearances, the rapes and the assaults and to give pastoral support to the families and communities affected. But crucially, the following Sunday, he decreed that the churches of the diocese be closed and all the masses cancelled. He called the faithful to attend a single Mass which he would celebrate in front of the Cathedral – the 'misa unica'. He preached eloquently about Fr Rutilio to a crowd of over 100,000 – a passionate witness to the ugly truth. *'Anyone who touches one of my priests touches me'*. he said²⁵.
22. This response to Rutilio's death offers a template for how Romero would react, with apostolic courage and pastoral fortitude²⁶, as the crises developed and the bloodshed increased, in this country, so very far from peace - and accelerating towards war. Romero read those signs of the times. He saw the victims of the grotesque injustices that fuelled conflict and he spoke the truth of what was happening in the country when everywhere atrocities were covered-up with lies. He read the situation from the perspective of the poor and interpreted it with the aid of the Gospel and the Magisterium of the Church; he named the sins and called without fail for repentance and a change of heart. His weekly homilies became the principal vehicle for his teaching and pastoral outreach on top of which he issued four beautiful Pastoral Letters²⁷.

But alongside his preaching and his exhortations for peace and the renunciation of violence which were a regular, and even predictable, feature of his homilies, he offered the services of the archdiocese for efforts of mediation; he strived to promote meaningful dialogue as the alternative to the cacophony of vile diatribe; and most important of all he responded pastorally and compassionately to the victims of terror and

violence, whomsoever had been the perpetrators.

23. After the 'misa unica', the anger of the wealthy Catholics from the land-owning and commercial class and the military, was palpable and, as in the case of Jesus early in his ministry, they began to plot against him. For his part Romero visited dozens of different communities and parishes and heard their stories, their joys and their sorrows. People queued up to see him in his office and he listened till late into the night. Repression intensified and was documented; as too the kidnappings, church occupations and strikes organised on the left. No real dialogue proved possible with the government. Statements after meetings that did take place were used to manipulate Romero. The national press belonged to the same wealthy families and they censored out his concerns but they did carry pages of advertisements from ghost or fake organisations (like the Companions of Christ the King, the Association of Loyal Catholic Women) denouncing the clergy and the Church and insulting Romero. Romero wrote to a fellow bishop in Bogota with great prescience²⁸ *"My new post seems to have put me on the road to Calvary."*

24. The kidnapping and murder, two months later, by leftist guerrillas of Foreign Minister Mauricio Boronovo, whose release Romero had been desperately seeking to secure, was followed immediately, despite Romero's pleadings against revenge, by the killing of a second priest, Fr Alfonso Navarro. At the funeral he declared: -

'Violence is produced not only by those who kill but by those who urge to kill. Violence is criminal, even in those who merely do not do whatever is possible to uncover its origins. They are sinners as much as those who point the weapons to kill'.

25. If we stand back, we can see Romero's mission was no more nor less than evangelisation in its fullest sense, preaching the gospel as good news to the poor, and making that good news a reality in people's lives. He was the evangeliser par excellence.

The church, he said, wants to offer no other contribution than that of the gospel. It has no purely political contribution to make, nor any merely human skill to offer. Quite truthfully, the church is interested only in offering the country the light of the gospel for the full salvation and betterment of men and women, a salvation that also involves the structures within which Salvadorans live, so that, rather than get in their way, the structures can help them live out their lives as children of God²⁹.

But evangelizing is not just saying words. Preaching is relatively easy, but to live out what is preached –....when one tries to give that teaching life in the diocese....Then conflicts arise³⁰.

And together with fellow bishops³¹ Romero went on to say, very challengingly,

*'We would be false to our mission as shepherds if we were to reduce evangelisation to mere practices of individualistic piety and **disincarnate sacramentalism**'.*

Serious food for thought!

26. Romero's theology is best-described as the theology of the beatitudes.

*The Beatitudes are not something we can understand fully; and that is why there are those, **young people especially**, who think that the love of the Beatitudes is not going to bring about a better world; and who opt for violence, for guerrilla war, for revolution.*

The Church will never make that its path.

Let it be clear, I repeat, that the Church does not choose those ways of violence - and whatever is said to that effect is slander.

The Church's option is for what Christ says in the Beatitudes³².

Romero contended that only if we put the Beatitudes into practice can we begin to build that civilisation of love to which we all aspire. He said:

A civilisation of love is not sentimentality, it is justice and truth. A civilisation of love that did not demand justice for people would not be true civilisation.....Because of this, it is only a caricature of love when we try to patch up with charity what is owed in justice, when we cover with an appearance of benevolence what we are failing in social justice. True love means demanding what is just³³.

27. Romero's own space was his cathedral; and with other channels closed to him, from his pulpit, from his 'cathedra', there at the Sunday mass, he spoke the truth and denounced the evil taking place, week in week out, clearly and unambiguously - and he thereby gave hope and consolation to his people.

His homilies were major occasions to interweave catechesis and communication of the social reality. He carefully almost surgically unpacked the readings and interpreted them in the context of El Salvador. He was beautifully clear with inspired metaphor, didactic repetition, and verbal fluidity. Then came the good news of the week - the gatherings and meetings, the celebrations and patronal feasts, and the visitors and letters of solidarity. Then the bad news. Incident by incident, atrocity by atrocity, he named the victims, all the victims, what had happened, where and when and who was responsible. He sought justice, supported recompense and offered pastoral care. This methodology was the forerunner of Truth Commissions that would emerge in future years around the world.

28. But let's pause and just think about what Archbishop Romero had to confront over those three years. Here is a list. He faced and sought to respond
- to pervasive and extreme poverty;
 - to paramilitary killings of community leaders;
 - to peasant massacres and the indiscriminate shooting of urban demonstrators by the security forces;
 - to the torture and disappearance of political prisoners;
 - to the decapitation and mutilation of death squad victims;
 - to the assassination of six of his priests and dozens of catechists;
 - to the deportation of foreign clergy;
 - to the desecration of churches and their tabernacles;
 - to the threat from the White Warriors Union to exterminate all the Jesuits in the country;
 - to the bombings of the diocesan radio station and printing press;
 - to the discovery of a suitcase of dynamite placed behind the altar at his Sunday mass;
 - to the corruption of the supreme court and the judiciary;
 - to the suspension of habeas corpus and constitutional guarantees through a so-called 'Law of Public Order';
 - to a military-civilian junta installed by military coup;
 - to the kidnapping and execution by armed leftist groups of local and foreign businessmen, and of government ministers and public figures;
 - to the occupations of churches, the cathedral, embassies and government ministries by popular movements;
 - to conflictive and paralysing strikes;
 - to continuous campaigns of slander and defamation in the press;
 - and to death threats from both the right and the left.

He preached and he spoke out trying to find the words to convey the horror of what was happening in a deeply Catholic country which he said had come to resemble the dominion of hell³⁴. His statements in retrospect seem mild.

I am grieved that our people continue to be massacred merely for taking to the street to petition for justice and liberty.³⁵

What have we to show to Christ in El Salvador in Holy Week?....Nothing but a week of bloodshed!

My job is to go around picking up the dead bodies of the victims of the persecution of the Church.³⁶

I do not understand Mr President how you can declare yourself before the nation, Catholic by upbringing and by conviction; and yet allow these unspeakable outrages on the part of the security forces in a country we call civilised and Christian.

*Would that this reflection might persuade Salvadorans to lay unjust attitudes aside, and..... to wash clean so many hands and consciences stained by social injustice and human blood!*³⁷

29. Romero knew and continually cited in his homilies the statistics of poverty, deprivation and repression; but for him the statistics were simply human beings with the tears wiped off. And just like the Good Samaritan of the Gospel parable, who tended the man beaten up and left for dead by the roadside, Romero was moved to compassion; and we could use the same expressive Greek word as St Luke: εσπλαγχνισθη 'esplagnisthe' there was a churning in the depths of his bowels; it was literally gut-wrenching for Romero.
30. Romero's messages were "no" to the killings of the right; "no" to the violence of the left; '*This is what we preach; No to vengeance, No to class struggle, No to violence*'.³⁸

Four times he made explicit the excommunication that the torturers and assassins of his priests had brought upon themselves.

31. But bringing about peace among the warring factions in El Salvador was not a simple matter. A centuries-long history of repression and exploitation was at long last being questioned and resisted. The only way to avoid violence, he insisted, was by means of sustained, brutally honest dialogue on the part of government, private capital, trade unions, popular organisations, and rebels. He told BBC journalists:

*"The best solution is a return to love and a sincere desire to achieve dialogue.....a level of trust must be established so that people can freely express their opinions...and **all groups, all groups** must be included in any dialogue designed to arrive at a solution"*

Romero constantly offered the Church's mediation, especially in the case of labour or land disputes or in the case of kidnappings.

32. But the violence intensified - remorselessly; and Romero devoted a substantial part of both his 3rd and 4th Pastoral Letters to an examination of violence – distinguishing between the arbitrary or repressive violence of the state which uses brute force, and the structural or institutional violence that works through mechanisms that are legal but just as brutal in their effects on the people; and then the terrorist violence of the right and the left; which is different again from insurrectional violence and from the violence of legitimate defence.

Inspired by the gospel, he said, the church feels itself driven to seek peace before all else. But the peace that the church urges is the work of justice. Therefore its judgments on the violence that disturbs the peace cannot ignore the demands of justice. There are many different judgments, just as there are many different forms of

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violence. The church cannot just state, in a simplistic fashion, that it condemns every kind of violence³⁹.

And when the church decries revolutionary violence, it cannot forget that institutionalized violence also exists, and that the desperate violence of oppressed persons is not overcome with one-sided laws, with weapons, or with superior force. Instead, as the pope says, revolutionary violence must be prevented by courageous self-sacrifice, by giving up many comforts⁴⁰.

33. And whilst rejecting violence over and over again 'Violence is not Christian, violence is not human, nothing violent can long endure' Romero doggedly pressed for profound, urgent, but non-violent changes. He said "yes" to political organisation; "yes" to dialogue; "yes" to social justice for the poor; "yes" to human rights for all Salvadorans; and "yes" to the practice of compassion.
34. As if all this were not enough to contend with on his Road to Calvary, he also had to cope, within the Church, with the open hostility of 4 out of 6 fellow bishops and the thinly-veiled disapproval of the Papal Nuncio and several high-ranking officials of the Roman Curia. It was Romero's Crown of Thorns.

To counter that episcopal isolation I and Tom Quigley, my partner in crime from the USCC, set about connecting him with other prophetic bishops in South America, similarly attacked and scorned for their defence of the poor. For my part, I brought letters of affirmation and endorsement for his evangelical approach from Cardinal Hume in London, Cardinal Suenens in Brussels and Cardinal Marty in Paris – three of the most senior and respected Cardinals in the world. This solidarity brought him great comfort and disarmed many critics who had insisted he was completely out of step with the mainstream Church.

35. In 1978, after coordinating his Nobel Peace Prize nomination in the British parliament, which we dared hope might protect Romero from physical harm, I accompanied a delegation of those same parliamentarians to El Salvador to meet Archbishop Romero. They came to tell him formally of his Nobel candidature and to make an assessment of the deteriorating human rights situation. Not only did we interview government and church figures, we heard searing testimonies from victims of the repression and families of the disappeared. Then, against all the odds, we talked our way from the Ministry of Defence into the National Guard Headquarters; and following clues provided by Amnesty International, we managed to find the interrogation rooms and torture cells used with political prisoners - and we published that discovery to the world⁴¹. There was a certain grim satisfaction in being able to corroborate Archbishop Romero's denunciations of torture. I later learned that one of the Salvadoran bishops⁴² was at the same time actually conspiring with the military government to try to thwart Romero's Nobel candidature - as is demonstrated in a transcript of a telephone intercept (between the bishop

and a General in the President's entourage) whilst the delegation was actually present in San Salvador.

36. In February 1980 Romero sent an Open Letter to President Jimmy Carter⁴³ asking for a halt to US military assistance to El Salvador which he said was being used to kill innocent campesinos – in other words it was directly aiding and abetting the repressive violence of the state; this was a momentous letter, a wake-up call to the US churches to intensify their solidarity, their lobbying and their campaigning over military aid to the Salvadoran regime.
37. As El Salvador edged towards war, the threats and insults became so intense a fever existed; Romero knew he was going to die. Those around him tried to persuade him to have a bullet-proof vest or a bodyguard. His response was simple "Why should the shepherd have protection when his sheep are still prey to wolves?" Just before he died, in an interview with a Mexican newspaper⁴⁴ he said:-

"I have frequently been threatened with death. I ought to say that, as a Christian, I do not believe in death without resurrection. If they kill me I will rise again in the people of El Salvador. I am not boasting, I say it with the greatest humility. Martyrdom is a grace from God which I do not believe I deserve.

But can you tell them, if they succeed in killing me, that I pardon and bless those who do it. But I wish that they could realise that they're wasting their time. A bishop may die, but the Church of God, which is the people, will never die."

38. At the Mass on Sunday March 23rd, the day before he died, in an extraordinary homily he tackled the most difficult question that was insistently being put to him - how should the ordinary soldiers respond when put under orders to kill and massacre? At this desperate crisis juncture Romero felt he could not evade the issue - however outrageous his intervention might seem to the military. Let's listen to the climactic conclusion.

*"I would like to appeal in a special way to the army's enlisted men, and in particular to the ranks of the National Guard and the police. Brothers: you are of part of our own people. You kill your own campesino brothers and sisters. Before an order to kill that a man may give, God's law must prevail: Thou shalt not kill! No soldier is obliged to obey an order against the law of God....It is time to obey your consciences rather than the orders of sin. The Church....cannot remain silent before such abominations....In the name of God, therefore and in the name of this suffering people, whose lamentations reach up to heaven, I beg you, I beseech you, **I order you in the name of God: Stop the repression!**"*

39. Archbishop Romero had pronounced his own death sentence. And he knew it; he had discussed what he was going to say at length with his closest circle of advisers; all else had failed to stop the slaughter and the march to war. It was his last stand. The military high command read it as incitement to mutiny and an already-

existing plan for Romero's assassination was activated. And you know the rest.

40. At 6.25 the next evening, Monday March 24th 1980, Archbishop Romero is celebrating a memorial Mass in the chapel of the cancer hospital where he lived. His homily is a reflection on John's gospel⁴⁵ *"Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains just a single grain; but if it dies it yields a rich harvest"*.
41. Romero stands and speaks at the altar. It's not a long homily by Romero's standards – just ten minutes. He concludes and moves to the centre of the altar to pick up the chalice and the paten with the words *"May this body broken and this blood shed for human beings encourage us to give our body and blood up to suffering and pain as Christ did – not for self but to bring justice and peace for our people..."*

He is dedicating his life to justice and peace – no less!

42. It's certain at that moment he saw the assassin take aim through the open door of the chapel. He'd known he was going to die and he'd prepared himself for the moment. He didn't shout out fearing that those around him in the congregation would be killed too. But he flinched, the body's natural reflex action; and a great cold sweat poured out of his body⁴⁶. The marksman fired and the single bullet entered his body just above the heart. He slumped to the floor at the foot of a huge crucifix with blood pouring from his mouth, nostrils and ears. Pandemonium followed; he was packed into the back of a pick-up truck and he was declared dead on arrival at the emergency hospital.
43. Amazingly a nun on the front bench had a micro cassette tape recorder. And so this evening, here in this Hall at Notre Dame, we are in a position to press the button and re-play the martyrdom of the Apostle of Peace. Listen carefully to these 40 seconds⁴⁷. They are the virtually inaudible last words of Archbishop Romero and then the execution shot.
44. And so they killed him. The Good Shepherd had laid down his life for his flock. But not in Russia, or China or Afghanistan. Not assassinated by atheists, communists, or Islamist fanatics. But in one of the most Catholic countries in the world the metropolitan archbishop in the capital city was shot dead in the middle of mass. It was carried out by a death squad linked to the nation's armed forces, close allies of the Pentagon, in an operation planned, approved and financed by wealthy and powerful members of the Catholic oligarchy.

Happily in 2010, Mauricio Funes, the current President of El Salvador offered an official apology to Romero's family and the people of El Salvador for the complicity of the state in the

magnicide and in the subsequent cover-up of what was no less than a crime against humanity.

45. I believe we must ask ourselves what remembering Archbishop Romero means and should mean today. The fundamental Christian model of remembering is 'Do this in memory of me'. For the Church to remember Archbishop Romero must first mean to continue his work not only loving the poor but actually defending the poor; pursuing justice for the crucified peoples of our world; and taking risks for peace and the kingdom of God. And like him it means to struggle with all the paradoxes and conflicts that such a commitment throws up for us. Indeed he warned us in no uncertain terms: *A Church that suffers no persecution but enjoys the privileges and support of the things of the earth – beware – it is not the true Church of Jesus Christ*⁴⁸.
46. He has shown us all that the 'preferential option for the poor' is not just some meaningless rhetoric from the late 20th century. He lived it. And so he challenges us – and if we truly commit ourselves then the option for the poor **is** do-able, even for bishops!
47. With Archbishop Romero there was no "cleavage between faith and practice" - between his orthodoxy and his orthopraxis. The rhetoric of his preaching and teaching and his concomitant pastoral actions were absolutely coherent, consistent and mutually reinforcing. He talked the talk and he walked the walk. It is part of the key to his greatness.
48. As a pastor and as a church leader Archbishop Romero amassed colossal moral authority - which is still recognised today. At the present time the moral authority of the Church is much diminished. Nevertheless across the globe Oscar Romero is embraced with admiration, with affection and with pride as an icon of holiness, a model of a bishop and an heroic Christian witness for these troubled ecclesial times. He was utterly orthodox and utterly radical.
49. Romero was the enemy of cover-up and 'spin' which is today's all-pervasive sin. He spoke the truth fearlessly, prophetically. We have too many 'Nicodemus Christians' today, bishops and lay people alike, afraid to speak the truth in public about contemporary controversies that affect the Church and the world. Romero's road to martyrdom reminds us that maintaining the unity of the bishops' conference is not a fundamental kingdom value; and saving the face of the hierarchy can never trump speaking the truth about the violation of human rights and securing justice for the abused and excluded.
50. Romero was a deeply spiritual man, with a rich prayer life; his example to us is the beautiful, and dare I say it, seamless synthesis he made in living and witnessing to faith and promoting peace with

justice. An Apostle of Peace.

51. He is not a martyr because they killed him; they killed him because he was a martyr, a witness, a witness to the truth, a witness to the Magisterium of the Church, a witness to Vatican II, and indeed a witness to Pacem in Terris.

¹ This text has drawn on ‘Eucharist & Martyria –the Witness of Oscar Romero’ and other earlier published work of Julian Filochowski.

² Homily May 11th 1978

³ At a mass soon after Romero’s death. *Revista Latinoamericana de Teología* n. 65, pp. 117-137.

⁴ See Feb 7th 1979 in ‘Archbishop Oscar Romero – A Shepherd’s Diary’. St Anthony Messenger Press.

⁵ www.romerotrusted.org.uk

⁶ PT 61

⁷ PT 151

⁸ PT 167

⁹ PT 172

¹⁰ GS 4

¹¹ ‘Theological Interpretation of the Bible Today’, David Tracy in *A Short History of Interpretation of the Bible* (Fortress Press 1984)

¹² GS 77, 78

¹³ Homily July 13th 1979

¹⁴ Homily September 23rd 1979

¹⁵ Isaiah 32:17

¹⁶ Without using the precise phrase ‘the option for the poor’, the Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops meeting at Medellin dedicated a chapter of their concluding document, ‘The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council’, to poverty and the commitment to the poor under the title ‘Poverty of the Church’. This thinking led to the formal articulation of the preferential option for the poor eleven years later at the Third General Conference in Puebla, Mexico.

¹⁷ Homily at Beatification of Mother Theresa of Calcutta, October 19th 2003.

¹⁸ See: Jon Sobrino SJ. ‘The Eye of the Needle’ DLT, 2006

¹⁹ See: *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 1989; *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 1997.

²⁰ Development of critical consciousness through a process of reflection and action. See: *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire, 1970.

²¹ Justice in the World (# 6), Synod of Bishops, 1971

²² Maltese Archbishop Emanuel Gerada

²³ See Msgr Ricardo Urioste, Archbishop Romero Memorial Lecture, May 2007. “...And I would answer, yes, it is true. He was manipulated - but manipulated only by God, who did with him as He pleased....”

<http://www.romerotrusted.org.uk/documents/romero%20lectures/document2.pdf>

²⁴ Travelling in his VW vehicle from the parish in Aguilares to El Paisnal. Killed together with 72 year-old Manuel Solorzano and 16 year-old Nelson Lemus

²⁵ ‘Misa Unica’ Homily, Sunday March 20th 1977

²⁶ Archbishop Rivera Damas, his successor, said: “One martyr gave life to another martyr. Kneeling before the body of Fr Rutilio Grande, Monseñor Romero, on his 20th day as archbishop, felt the call from Christ to overcome his natural human timidity and to be filled with **apostolic courage**. From that moment on Monseñor Romero left the pagan lands of Tyre and Sidon and marched boldly towards Jerusalem.”

²⁷ <http://www.romerotrusted.org.uk/index.php?nuc=content&id=12>

²⁸ Letter to Bishop Alfonso Lopez Trujillo, 23rd March 1977 in reply to his of 4th March.

²⁹ Fourth Pastoral Letter, August 1979, ‘The Church’s Mission amid the National Crisis’ - part 2.

³⁰ Homily July 16th 1978

³¹ CEDES Statement, May 17th 1977. in ECA Apr-May 77, pp340-41.

³² Homily January 29th 1978

³³ Homily April 12th 1979

³⁴ Homily July 1st 1979

³⁵ Homily January 27th 1980

³⁶ <http://www.romerotrusted.org.uk/index.php?nuc=homilies&item=28&func=view&id=19>

³⁷ Fourth Pastoral Letter, part 3

³⁸ Homily May 8th 1977

³⁹ Fourth Pastoral Letter, part 3.

⁴⁰ Homily February 12th 1978

⁴¹ The report of delegation visit was published by the Parliamentary Human Rights Group in London in 1979.

⁴² Bishop Arnaldo Aparicio

⁴³ Read out in the homily on February 17th 1980

⁴⁴ Telephone interview with Mexican journalist, José Calderón Salazar, the Guatemalan correspondent of Excelsior newspaper, two weeks before his death.

⁴⁵ John 12:23-26

⁴⁶ Jan Graffius, Conservator, Stonyhurst College; <http://www.romerotrusted.org.uk/documents/newsletters/romeronews3.pdf>

⁴⁷ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IM7MTfJvYwM>

⁴⁸ Homily March 11th 1979