

ROMERO'S LEGACY

On Wednesday March 24th, people all over the world will be celebrating the 30th anniversary of the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador. He was shot, by orders of the government, while celebrating Mass in the chapel of the hospital for incurables where, as Archbishop, he lived. The previous day he preached what was to be his last Sunday sermon in the cathedral. In it he made an appeal to the ordinary soldiers in the army and low-ranking policeman, calling on them not to obey immoral orders from their officers. It is worth listening to his words: "Brothers, you come from our own people. You are killing your own brother peasants when any human order to kill must be subordinate to the law of God which says 'Thou shalt not kill'. No soldier is obliged to obey an order contrary to the law of God. No one has to obey an immoral law. It is high time you recovered your consciences and obeyed your consciences rather than a sinful order. The church, the defender of the rights of God, of human dignity, of the person, cannot remain silent before such an abomination. We want the government to face the fact that reforms are valueless if they are to be carried out at the cost of so much blood. In the name of God, in the name of this suffering people whose cries rise to heaven more loudly each day, I implore you, I beg you, I order you in the name of God: stop the repression."

This was more than the authorities could stomach. They knew they had to silence his voice and so took the only course that remained open to them: a sniper was sent to shoot him while he was offering Mass. Little did they realise that, instead of silencing his voice, this would spread it to the four corners of the earth and that his message would give hope and inspiration to thousands.

Who was this man ? What relevance has his message still got today ? When his predecessor, Archbishop Chávez y González, retired after 38 years, neither he nor the majority of the priests wanted Romero to succeed him. Timid, retiring, hesitant, conservative in thought and action, he seemed the last person they needed at that particular moment of El Salvador's history. They wanted Bishop Rivera y Damas, auxiliary of San Salvador, a firm supporter of the post-Medellin church and not frightened to speak out. But Romero was the candidate of the Nuncio who had consulted the government, the military, business circles and society ladies who felt he would be "one of ours whom we could control". They even offered him a luxurious mansion and a large new car, both of which he refused.

The story of Romero's conversion, though he himself preferred to speak of rediscovering his roots, is well known but bears repetition. While its importance should not be exaggerated, the assassination, three weeks weeks after Romero had taken over as Archbishop, of Rutilio Grande, a young Salvadoran Jesuit priest, together with an old man and a 15-year old boy, as they were on their way to celebrate Mass in the small village church of El Paisnal some 30 miles north of the capital, had a profound and lasting effect on him. Romero and Rutilio had come to know each other 10 years before when both were living in the diocesan seminary, Romero as secretary to the Bishops' Conference and Rutilio as teacher and prefect of the students. As soon as he heard of the assassination, Romero left the city and went to the church in Aguilares where they had laid out the three bodies. There he celebrated Mass with the Jesuit Provincial and then, with peasants who had come in from many surrounding villages, spent part of the night in prayer and part seeking advice on what should be done.

As he recounted afterwards, that night he read the Gospel message anew through the eyes of the poor and oppressed. He began to understand what Jesus has to say, and therefore what he as Archbishop should also be saying, to the despised, the persecuted and the underprivileged. As he put it later to César Jerez, the Jesuit Provincial: "*When I looked at Rutilio lying there dead, I thought: if they killed him for doing what he did, then I too have to walk the same path.*" When morning came, he returned to the capital, summoned his priests and advisers and decided after long and sometimes difficult discussions, to boycott all state occasions and meetings with the president until an official investigation into Rutilio's death was carried out. It never was, and Romero all the time he was Archbishop never attended any state occasion, not even the swearing-in of the new president. He also decided to close all Catholic schools for three days, inviting both pupils and teachers to reflect on what had happened. Finally, in the face of strong ecclesiastical opposition from the Papal Nuncio, he decided to suspend all Masses in the capital the following Sunday and celebrate just one Mass in the Cathedral with all his priests, both as a sign of protest to the Government and of solidarity with Rutilio and the cause for which he died. Over 150 priests concelebrated the Mass which was attended by an estimated 100,000 people, one of the biggest crowds ever seen in the country. And in the streets around the Cathedral, long lines queued up to go to confession. For many, and not just Romero, it marked a turning point.

The rest, as the saying goes, is history. In three short years Romero, visibly growing in strength and conviction, became the defender of the oppressed, "the voice of those who had no voice", the conscience of a nation. His Sunday sermons in the cathedral, which towards the end lasted 1½ hours, were, when the diocesan radio station was functioning and hadn't been sabotaged, listened to by friend and foe alike throughout the country and by many abroad. By his enemies he was called an agitator, a communist, a false priest, an ambitious schemer out for himself. Some of the attacks, and this hurt him most, came from his fellow bishops who accused him of being politicized and preaching erroneous theology. But Rome also lent an ear to these accusations. No less than three apostolic visitors were sent to examine him in a little over a year while the Congregation of Bishops, under Cardinal Baggio, seriously considered imposing on him an apostolic administrator with full powers to run the diocese. And it is common knowledge that, whereas he felt confirmed in his ministry after meeting Pope Paul VI, his first encounter with Pope John Paul II left him sad and disheartened. And, as we have seen, to the government and the military, Romero was a permanent threat, a thorn in the side, a subversive voice that had to be silenced.

A month before his assassination, Archbishop Romero received a warning from the Papal Nuncio in Costa Rica that there were new death threats against him and that he should be very careful. This warning was repeated shortly afterwards by the Nuncio in El Salvador just as Romero was beginning his annual retreat with a group of diocesan priests. It is not surprising therefore that, during this retreat, Romero tried to come to terms with the prospect of his assassination. He was clearly frightened. He wrote in his retreat notes: "*I feel afraid of violence against my person. I fear for the weakness of my flesh but I beg the Lord to give me serenity and perseverance.*" And a little further on: "*My disposition should be to offer my life to God, whatever way it may end. He helped the martyrs and, if need be, I will feel Him very near as I offer him my last breath.*" And then comes his full acceptance: "*I accept with faith in Him my death, however hard it be.*" He ends with a firm act of faith: "*For me to be happy and confident, it is sufficient to know with assurance that in Him is my life and my death, that in spite of my sins I have placed my trust in Him and shall not be disappointed, and others will carry on with greater wisdom and holiness the works of the Church and the nation.*"

It was certainly the grace of this retreat and the strength Romero found through his prayer that enabled him to reply two weeks later to a Mexican journalist, who asked him if he was afraid of death, in the famous words some of you may already know: *"I have often been threatened with death. I have to say, as a Christian, that I don't believe in death without resurrection: if they kill me, I will rise again in the Salvadoran people. I tell you this without any boasting, with the greatest humility. As pastor, I am obliged, by divine command, to give my life for those I love, who are all Salvadorans, even for those who are going to assassinate me. If the threats are carried out, even now I offer my blood to God for the redemption and resurrection of El Salvador. Martyrdom is a grace of God I don't think I deserve. But if God accepts the sacrifice of my life, may my blood be the seed of liberty and the sign that hope will soon become reality. May my death, if accepted by God, be for the freedom of my people and as a witness to hope in the future. You can say, if they come to kill me, that I forgive and bless those who do it. Hopefully they may realise that they will be wasting their time. A bishop will die, but the Church of God, which is the people, will never perish."*

I believe these great words express far better than anything I can say the real nature of martyrdom: and not just the martyrdom of Romero but of hundreds and thousands of ordinary people who, throughout the ages, have offered their lives in defence of what they believe. For that is the essence of martyrdom: to give witness to the truth through the offering of one's life. In one of his early sermons as Archbishop, Romero explains what it means to offer one's life: *"To give one's life is not just being killed by someone; to give one's life is to have the spirit of martyrdom, to give through one's duty, in silence, in prayer, in the faithful performance of one's obligations, in that silence of daily life, to go on giving one's life, like the mother who, without fuss, with the simplicity of maternal martyrdom, gives birth, suckles her child, helps it grow and looks after it with love. This is to give one's life."*

But how to explain Romero's growing popularity over the years, the fact that, though Rome is still dragging its feet, thousands of ordinary people across the world, Christians and non-Christians, venerate him as a saint? There are many reasons, but I would like to emphasize the following three:

First of all, he was a simple and humble man who not only remained in touch with the poor, but went out of his way to listen to and learn from them. As his Vicar-General Mons Urioste explained, at the age of 60 he went back to school. But his teachers were not university professors or professional theologians. They were the simple uneducated peasants who flocked into his office from all over the country to explain their situation to him and seek his understanding and support. He was always ready to receive them and gave them priority over the many VIP's who also sought to see him. In this he resembled Jesus himself. A new life recently published for his 30th anniversary, makes this point very clearly and describes the remarkable similarity between his life and that of Jesus of Nazareth.

Both were born into conditions of poverty in the province of a small and insignificant country. Both lived a life of profound intimacy with God and prayed by night. Both learned the trade of a carpenter. For both, the assassination of a good friend became a decisive event in their lives. They became public figures through their preaching, proclaiming the goodness of God and announcing the coming of the kingdom of God as a new order of love among all people. Both took sides with the poor and those who were socially excluded. Following the tradition of the prophets of Israel, they denounced injustice and corruption. In time, all the important social groups were allied against them. They were accused of being traitors who

tried to upset the established order. Both confronted the imperialist powers of their day, and their public life lasted a mere three years.

Secondly, as several incidents in his life show, Romero was always ready to admit his mistakes and ask forgiveness for them. He sought advice from many people and, being a man of deep prayer, spent hours on his knees in the presence of God before deciding on a particular course of action or what to say in his weekly homilies, listened to by thousands all over the country. But once his mind was made up, he was fearless in speaking out, denouncing corruption and evil with no regard for his own personal safety. As he put it, *“if I denounce and condemn injustice, it is because this is my duty as pastor of an oppressed and downtrodden people. The Gospel enjoins me to do this and, in its name, I am ready to go before the courts, to prison and to death.”* This was one of the reasons why he himself claimed that his word would not die but would live on in the hearts of those who have wished to receive it. For it was not his word but the word of Christ speaking through him. Describing one of his early sermons, a witness reports: *“At the beginning of Mass, I noticed Monseñor Romero nervous, pale, perspiring. And when the homily started, he seemed slow, without his usual eloquence, as if doubting to enter the door history and God were opening for him. But after five minutes, I felt that the Spirit of God had descended on him.”*

Finally, his message is still valid today and just as much needed as it was 25 years ago. The core of it, as he repeated many times, was the call of the Latin American bishops at Medellín, and repeated at Puebla which he attended in 1979, for *“the conversion of the whole church to a preferential option for the poor with a view to their integral liberation.”* In a country torn by violence and bloodshed, he saw quite clearly where the root of the problem lay: *“I will not tire of declaring that if we really want an effective end to the violence, we must remove the violence that lies at the root of all violence: structural violence, social injustice, the exclusion of citizens from the management of the country, repression. All this is what constitutes the primal cause, from which the rest flows naturally.”* From this it follows that it is the duty of the church and all its members *“to know the mechanisms that generate poverty, to struggle for a more just world, to support the workers and peasants in their claims and in their right to organize, and to be close to the people.”*

The present situation in El Salvador has hardly changed in this respect and, though open hostilities have ceased and a new government put in place. The suffering of the poor and discrimination against them continues. The wealthy countries, represented by the group of G8 and the international financial institutions they control, impose harsh structural adjustment programmes on debt-ridden and defenceless nations who have no option to accept and endeavour to implement them, knowing full well that most of their own citizens will be the first to suffer. Recent declarations and political statements would have us believe the situation has changed or is in the process of changing. But it is only recently that the Latin American bishops made the following statement which Romero would have certainly signed had he still been alive: *“A market economy that encourages indiscriminate consumption, lack of respect for the environment, inequitable distribution of wealth and a superficial culture based on ‘having’ and ‘enjoying’ more than on ‘being’, destroys people and fosters lifestyles that are contrary to freedom, justice and the welfare of those who are poorest.”*

So what Romero has to say about being a genuine follower of Christ is still pertinent and relevant today. I believe his message is for all of us. He doesn't mince his words. *“It is inconceivable to call oneself a christian without making, like Christ, a preferential option for the poor.”* And again: *“A christian who defends unjust situations is no longer a christian.”*

Or: *“The wealthy person who kneels before his money, even though he goes to Mass, is an idolater and not a christian.”* And finally a warning: *“It is a caricature of love to cover over with alms what is lacking in justice, to patch over with an appearance of benevolence when social justice is missing.”*

Because of his forthright stand, the example he gave and the sort of person he was, the poor in El Salvador and many other countries still look to him as their saviour, their father. I would like to end this brief talk with the testimony of a witness who went into the cathedral early one morning to pray at his tomb. *"One winter's morning, the sky dark with rain, a man in rags, covered in dust, his shirt in shreds, was carefully cleaning Romero's tomb, using one of his rags. It was barely light but he was already active and awake. And though the rag was filthy with grease and age, he was giving a polish to the stone. On finishing, he smiled contentedly. At that early hour he had seen no one. And no one had seen him except me. When he went out onto the street, I felt I had to speak with him. 'You, why are you doing that?' 'Doing what? ', he replied. 'Cleaning Monseñor's tomb.' 'Because he was my father.' 'How was that?' 'I'm no more than a poor beggar. Sometimes I'm a carrier in the market with a cart, other times I beg, and sometimes I spend everything on liquor and lie senseless in the gutter. But I never lose hope. I had a father. He made me feel somebody. Because people like me, he loved and didn't turn up his nose. He spoke to us, touched us, asked us questions. He trusted us. He let it be seen the love he had for me. Like the love of a father. That's why I clean his tomb. As a son would.'*

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