

## *Archbishop Romero Memorial Mass 2009*

*"You see before you the Lord's servant,  
let it happen to me as you have said."*

On the day of his death 29 years ago, Monsignor Romero, in all probability, fully expected, as we do when tomorrow comes, to celebrate the feast of the Annunciation of the Lord.

I imagine that if any one of us here this evening was asked to symbolise the meaning of tomorrow's feast, we would, as likely as not, point to the complete openness of Mary to God's desires for her in the concrete circumstances of her life and to the words in which she expressed herself:

"You see before you the Lord's servant, let it happen to me as you have said." (Luke 1:38)

For innumerable people, Mary stands as the superlative example of freedom and generosity in response to God's gifts.

Among the saintly disciples of Jesus in our own times few, surely can be found who so mirrored Mary's confidence in God, as did Oscar Romero.

"You see before you the Lord's servant, let it happen to me as you have said." We remember Mary by these words. What of Oscar Romero's words?

Consider these that he wrote:

"I place my entire life under the loving providence of God, and I accept death, no matter how difficult, with faith in Him. I do not even offer a prayer of intention, as I'd like, for peace in my country and for the flourishing of our Church, because the Heart of Christ will know how to take things to their desired destiny. It's enough for me to be happy and confident, knowing for sure that my life and my death are in His hands, and that in spite of my sins, I have placed my trust in Him."<sup>1</sup>

It is important for us, I think, not to imagine that this complete trust in God, so like Mary's, came easily to Oscar Romero.

It is true that in 1943, at the age of 26, he wrote of the Lord inspiring in him a great desire for holiness and of his pondering how far a soul can ascend if it lets itself be possessed entirely by God.

But the words I quoted a moment ago, expressing such openness to God were not written when he was young: they were written 37 years later, only a month before he was murdered, while he was making his annual retreat.

---

<sup>1</sup> Diary from last retreat. 25 Feb 1980. Quoted in Memories in Mosaic, p.380

They were not aspirational words; they were not the fruit of pious thought. They expressed complete trust in God in the concrete circumstances of his vocation as the leader of the Church in El Salvador. Aware of the dangers and of his own fears, he was yet free to make such a profession of trust in God.

Frequently it is asserted that Oscar Romero's great moment of conversion came on the 12<sup>th</sup> of March, 1977, less than a month after he became Archbishop of El Salvador, when he prayed beside the body of his friend, the Jesuit Father Rutilio Grande, who had been murdered that day. But Mgr Ricardo Urioste, who knew Oscar Romero well, contradicts this. Oscar Romero, he said, never spoke of himself in terms of conversion, but spoke of evolution and therefore wrote: "He who fails to change will not gain the Kingdom."<sup>2</sup>

Of course, to be able to change demands humility – a virtue Oscar Romero possessed in abundance. He looked to others to help him and, in this way, became a powerful force for unity in the face of danger.

We perhaps all know the story, but it bears repeating, of how – to address an issue of major importance for the life of the church in El Salvador – he called a meeting of theologians, canon lawyers and other experts, a meeting that lasted two hours. On leaving the meeting he noticed a poor man, who looked like a beggar standing on the steps of the building. He went over to the man and instead of giving the man money, as the others expected, he asked the man his opinion on the matter that had just been discussed.<sup>3</sup>

He trusted then, not only in himself, not only in those in authority in the Church, but in all its members.

"As long as there is one baptised person left," he said, "the Church will continue to exist".<sup>4</sup>

It was this humility that manifested his sense of the relationship God had with him.

More than two years into his service as Archbishop in San Salvador he told, in a homily, a story from his seminary days that obviously still had meaning for him. He said:

"There is something that I heard back in my seminary days that comes to mind for me today in these circumstances, and I'd like to tell you about it. It's the story of an apprentice sailor who was sent to fix something high up on the mast. From those heights, he looked down at the turbulent sea, became dizzy and was about to fall. The captain realized what was happening and said, "Look upwards, boy!" And that was his salvation. When he looked up, he could no longer see the

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/mgrurioste.html>

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Quoted by Jon Sobrino in the Foreword to *Memories in Mosaic*

churning of the sea that was making him so dizzy, and he was able to finish his task calmly.”<sup>5</sup>

God as the encouraging captain and Oscar Romero as his apprentice sailor fulfilling his tasks in stormy seas: what a lovely image for an archbishop of 62!

It was in the Gospels, above all, that he found the images and truths that helped him to find the freedom to do God’s will in the concrete circumstances to which his life had led him.

With the light of the Gospel, he proclaimed:

“you yourselves can illuminate, not the events I point out to you, but concrete events of your own, those of your families, those in your lives, among your friends, in your job.

Preaching is done so that all Christians who ponder the gospel can, in enlightening their own lives, illuminate with the principles of Christ the events that surround them.”<sup>6</sup>

In the midst of the gospels stands Mary, closest to Jesus, to whom Oscar Romero frequently turned and who was an inspiration in the difficult service he fulfilled. In his own words:

“.....when Mary sings (in the Magnificat) about God lifting up the humble and the poor, the political implications resound. She says, ‘God has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich, He has sent empty-handed away.’ Mary also says a few things that today could be considered downright seditious. ‘Throw the mighty from their thrones’ when they are a disturbance to the people’s well being! This is the political dimension of our faith. Mary lived it, and Jesus lived it. Jesus was a real patriot in a nation of people who lived under foreign domination. Doubtless, it was his dream that his people would be free!”<sup>7</sup>

Free? For Oscar Romero, free in whatever circumstances to live in the light and inspiration of the Gospel. Free not to give in to a disheartening supposition that human reality makes impossible the accomplishment of God’s plans; free to save the person living in history not the soul at the hour of death.<sup>8</sup>

Oscar Romero, as Archbishop of San Salvador, lived the Gospel unflinchingly in the most terrifying political and social circumstances and never sought to

---

<sup>5</sup> Homily. 27 May 1979

<sup>6</sup> August 12, 1979. Quoted in *The Violence of Love*, p.169

<sup>7</sup> Homily. 17 Feb 1980. Quoted in *Memories in Mosaic*, p.349

<sup>8</sup> Quoted by Henri J. M. Nouwen in the Foreword to *The Violence of Love*, p.10

escape their reality. "When we escape from reality", he said, "we escape from God."<sup>9</sup>

Why should he have wanted to escape from God with whom he enjoyed the closest friendship? God, he said,

"speaks with humans as friends speak among themselves.....He has lifted us up so that he can talk with us and share his joys...."<sup>10</sup>

No wonder, then, that he never tried to escape from reality. No wonder he observed that:

"The more full of troubles and problems we are, the more bewildering life's ways, the more we must look up to the skies and hear the great news: 'A Saviour is born to you'"<sup>11</sup>

Yet the temptations to escape were great. He related how, early in his 3 years as Archbishop of San Salvador, attempts were made to induce him to ally himself with the wealthy and powerful. He was offered a large house, a large car, gifts all of which he turned down. "That boy", said those who offered the gifts, "has turned out to have very bad manners."<sup>12</sup>

Over and above all the siren voices, however, in all the turbulent times, he listened to another voice, the voice of the encouraging captain, telling him to look up to the skies and hear the great news that a Saviour is born to us; the same news that Mary heard, the news that gave Mary the freedom to be the fount of Christ's redeeming life; the same news that gave Oscar Romero the freedom to be a saint in El Salvador.

Let's then, this evening, celebrate Mass in thanksgiving for Oscar Romero's life: let's ask him to pray with us that, hearing the same encouraging voice as he did, we may have the freedom (and, possibly, the bad manners) to be close to God, who speaks to us as friend, so that we, in our turn may speak and be as friends to the poor and suffering whom God loves.

*"You see before you the Lord's servant,  
let it happen to me as you have said."*

*Gero McLoughlin S.J.  
Sacred Heart Church  
Edinburgh  
24 March 2009*

---

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/mgrurioste.html>

<sup>10</sup> August 13, 1978. Quoted in *The Violence of Love*, pp.92 and 93

<sup>11</sup> Quoted by Henri J.M. Nouwen in the Foreword to *The Violence of Love*, p.7

<sup>12</sup> *Memories in Mosaic*, p.121