# The 2026 Romero Lecture
# From Romero to Gaza:
# The Price of Living by Our Principles

**Oscar Romero, a trainee carpenter, a priest, an archbishop, a martyr, a saint, but above all, a pastor, a good shepherd, who in the words of St John's gospel, laid down his life voluntary for his sheep.**

**He was Archbishop of San Salvador from 1977 until his assassination in 1980, we remember him this evening for his defence of human dignity, his opposition to political violence and his insistence that peace and security must be founded on justice.**

**Initially Romero was regarded as a cautious, pious and conservative man of the Church, his approach changed significantly following the assassination of his friend, the Jesuit priest Rutilio Grande, who was killed in March 1977 alongside two companions, an elderly man and young boy. As an immediate consequence of his friend's murder and his increasing exposure to the suffering of his people, he increasingly spoke out against human-rights abuses, defended vulnerable communities and challenged those responsible for repression.**

**On 23 March 1980, he appealed directly to Salvadoran soldiers to stop participating in repression. The following day, he was assassinated while celebrating Mass.**

**Romero's life not only offers Christians an example of how we should be continually open to conversation in our own lives but whatever our personal beliefs it also offers important insights into the relationship between morality, political power, human rights and peace and security. Although he did not address directly the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the principles he applied have direct relevance to the search for a just and lasting settlement that is much needed to end what is now almost a hundred year cycle of violence.**

**Let us begin by looking at the principles demonstrated in his life; then let's see how these can be applied to the current Israel/Palestine conflict**

**The first basic principle that Romero learnt to apply in his own life was <u>the equal dignity of every human being</u>. Every person possesses an inherent dignity that must be respected, irrespective of nationality, religion, political allegiance or social status.**
**In practice Romero increasingly exposed himself to the genuine suffering of poor and marginalised Salvadorans and placed them at the centre of his ministry. He treated the killing, torture and disappearance of ordinary people as matters of public and moral concern, rather than as unavoidable consequences of political and social instability.**

**His concern was not confined to people who shared his political or religious outlook. Human dignity was fundamental to his understanding of justice.**

**He became increasingly aware that peace/ security require justice; a stable society requires respect for rights, fair treatment and protection from abuse.**

**He challenged the assumption that order maintained through fear and repression could provide a lasting solution to El Salvador's crisis. He increasingly recognised that political stability could not be separated from the conditions in which ordinary people lived.**

**His understanding of peace therefore meant more than just ending violence. He realised that peaceful society could only be achieved if the injustice, inequality and denial of rights that contributed to the violence were given priority and fully addressed.**

**The circumstances of the poorest and most vulnerable provide an essential test of a society's moral character.**
**He understood that it was essential to listen to families of victims, and to publicise abuses and give prominence to people whose experiences were often excluded from official accounts.**
**He understood his pastoral responsibility had to include standing alongside those who lacked the power to protect themselves.**

**This was not simply an act of charity. It was a recognition that the suffering of marginalised people had to be taken seriously in public life and political decision-making.**

**In practice this meant that moral responsibility could not be left to the governing authorities.**
**Obedience to a government, military commander or political organisation does not remove an individual's responsibility for one's own actions.**

**In his homily on 23 March 1980, Romero appealed to soldiers to refuse orders that required them to kill innocent people. He challenged the idea that military discipline or loyalty to the state could justify participation in injustice.**

**This was a particularly significant intervention because it challenged the conduct of powerful institutions directly and placed individual moral responsibility above unquestioning obedience.**

**Through his increasing engagement in the lives of others, especially the marginalised and oppressed, Romero realised that there was no short cut to reconciliation; truth and accountability are prerequisites that need to be addressed.**

**Reconciliation requires acknowledgement of what happened, recognition of victims and accountability for wrongdoing.**

**He therefore began to use his weekly homilies to name victims, report disappearances and challenge official accounts that concealed abuses. He believed that remaining silent about injustice would abandon those who suffered and allow wrongdoing to continue.**

**His public witness established a record of events that might otherwise have been denied or forgotten.**

**He was also acutely aware that political allegiance does not determine whether an action is right or wrong. Moral standards must be applied consistently. In practice this meant that although his criticism focused heavily on state repression and the powerful interests sustaining it, he also criticised violence by revolutionary groups. His concern was not to endorse one political faction but to defend human dignity and oppose actions that violated it.**
**Commitment to justice has to come before any political or tribal loyalties if we want to be part of the solution and not the problem**

**Courage and personal integrity are therefore essential if we want to truly address the causes of violence. In practice our responsibility for what's happening in the lives of others may require us to challenge powerful institutions even at the cost of putting ourselves at risk.**

**Romero was fully aware of this and yet continued to speak publicly despite threats to his life and criticism from even within the Church. He regarded his responsibilities as an archbishop as extending beyond the protection of his own position.**

**His assassination on 24 March 1980 demonstrated the risks associated with his commitment. His significance lies not simply in his death, but in the principles he had consistently sought to put into practice.**

**Let's move on now to look at the relevance of these principles to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.**

**The principles above do not provide ready-made answers to achieving a durable peace among these two warring peoples.**

**They do however offer a framework for assessing the causes of conflict, the responsibilities of the parties involved and the conditions required for a sustainable settlement.**

**The essential starting point must be recognition of the equal human dignity of both peoples – Palestinians and Israelis**

**Palestinians have the right to live free from oppression, the fear of daily violent attacks, forced displacement and unjustified restrictions on their freedom - they also have a right to self-determination as a people, to sovereignty and independence.**

**Israelis also share these rights.**

**Regardless of the rights or wrongs of where we are today, any meaningful settlement must protect both peoples' security, rights and political futures. It cannot be durable if the security of one depends upon the permanent denial of the other's dignity and freedom.**

**The causes of conflict, must be addressed and not only the immediate violence we are witnessing today**

**Ceasefires and security arrangements are necessary, but they cannot by themselves resolve the conflict.**

**A lasting settlement must address the underlying political questions, including:**

*** The occupation and the future of the occupied Palestinian territory.**

*** Israeli settlements and the question of borders.**

*** Jerusalem and arrangements for its holy sites.**

*** Palestinian refugees and their claims.**

*** Palestinian self-determination and governance.**

*** Israel's long-term security and recognition.**

**Israeli and Palestinians disagree profoundly on every one of these issues, but failure to address them and leaving them unresolved, like what happened with the Oslo agreement, perpetuates injustice, insecurity, and greatly undermines confidence in the possibility of reaching a peaceful solution. This is not an intractable conflict but it cannot be resolved**

**without creating a framework based upon the core principles of justice and human dignity.**

**International mediation must go beyond efforts to achieve the cessation of violence, as important as that is, and begin a credible political process framed within international law and the ruled-based order that grew out of the horrors of the Second World War. Managing the conflict indefinitely is not the same as resolving it.**

**The current humanitarian needs of the people of Gaza and the protection of the humanitarian organisation delivering aid cannot be postponed until a comprehensive political agreement is reached. It is an immediate obligation and an essential foundation for building trust.**

**Building trust also requires the political courage to hold all parties involved fully accountable for their conduct under international law.**

**Attacks deliberately directed against civilians, hostage-taking and indiscriminate killing cannot be overlooked or justified whatever the political or military objectives if we want any peace process to lead to a durable settlement.**
**Military operations must comply with international humanitarian law, including its rules on distinction, proportionality and precautions. Those who ignore these basic moral and legal norms should be held accountable.**

**Allegations of serious violations require credible investigation and, where appropriate, prosecution.**

**This of course will require Governments and international institutions to apply legal standards consistently, including when alleged violations involve their own allies. Selective accountability weakens confidence in international law and undermines the possibility of a just settlement.**

**The importance of the inherited trauma of both peoples should not be overlooked:**

**For Israelis, the Holocaust, wars, terrorism and the fear of threats to national survival have profoundly shaped national identity.**

**For Palestinians, the Nakba, displacement, occupation and the loss of homes, land and political freedom have shaped their experience as a people**

**The scale of the current violence has added a sense of both collective and individual trauma on both sides.**

**Israel requires effective protection against attacks and credible guarantees of security.**

**Palestinians require a viable political future, including self-determination, accountable governance and an end to occupation.**

**Diplomacy must establish a credible route from immediate de-escalation to political agreement. Without a future that people can regard as secure and just, mistrust and violence are likely to persist.**

**Romero's life demonstrates how principles of human dignity, justice, truth and accountability can be translated into public responsibility. He applied them by documenting abuses, defending vulnerable people, challenging authority and accepting personal risk.**

**Their relevance to Israel and Palestine can be summarised in seven requirements for a sustainable settlement:**

*** Recognition of the equal dignity and legitimate rights of both peoples.**

*** A political process that addresses the underlying causes of conflict.**

*** Immediate protection of civilians and attention to humanitarian needs.**

*** Accountability under international law.**

*** Truthful acknowledgement of suffering and historical experience.**

*** The willingness of each community to confront wrongdoing within its own ranks.**

*** A credible political future that combines Israeli security with Palestinian self-determination.**

**These principles do not remove the difficult questions of territory, sovereignty, security and mutual recognition. They establish the moral and political standards by which proposed solutions should be assessed.**

**The central lesson is that a settlement cannot be considered durable if it provides security for one people while denying the other freedom, dignity and a viable future. A just peace must make it possible for Israelis and Palestinians to live securely alongside one another,**

**with their rights recognised and their disputes addressed through political rather than violent means.**

**Conclusion**

**Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Romero's life is that he was not always the man history remembers. His experience of poverty, his friendship with Rutilio Grande and his encounter with repression transformed his understanding of what his faith demanded.**

**He became willing to risk his life because he believed that faithfulness to the Gospel required solidarity with people whose lives and dignity were being denied.**
**His example leaves us with a question that remains urgent today:**
**Are we prepared not only to condemn violence, but also to confront the injustice that sustains it—and to defend the dignity of people whose suffering challenges our own political or tribal loyalties**