



## Martyrs, Heroes and the Contemporary Church: Latin America and the United States

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Sisters and brothers, I was eyewitness to the facts of March 30, 1980 which happened at the funeral of Bishop Romero in San Salvador. Suddenly we heard and saw the explosion of a big bomb in the square in front of the cathedral. We have been witness to the suffering and anguish of the Salvadorian people, but also to their courage and maturity. El Salvador has suffered a long agony.

The assassination of Bishop Romero on March 24, 1980 shocked the world. He was a faithful witness to the Gospel and he sealed that witness with his blood. Bishop Romero's life is a vivid reminder of the price that Christians are sometimes called upon to pay for their faith. He said:

"I know many are shocked by this preaching and they want to accuse us of forsaking the Gospel for politics, but I reject this accusation. I am trying to bring to life the messages of Vatican Council II and the conferences of Medellín and Puebla. Each week, I go about the country listening to the cries of the people, hurting from so much crying. Each

week I ask the Lord to give me the right words to console, to denounce, to call for repentance.”

This is the message of the Vatican Council and the conferences of Medellín and Puebla that Romero preached through his life and words. We know it is the strong affirmation of the mission of the Church defending and promoting the dignity of the human person in light of divine love. The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men and women of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these, too, are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. These are the words of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. These are the griefs and anxieties of our age—that never has the human race enjoyed such an abundance of wealth, resources, and economic power, while a huge proportion of the world’s population is still tormented by hunger and poverty.

People have never been so aware of freedom; yet, at the same time, new forms of social and psychological slavery make their appearance. Romero wished, through the Church and in the light of Christ, to eliminate the misery of human beings and to cooperate in finding solutions to the problems of our time. What is the Christian reaction in the face of concrete oppression imposed on human dignity? The equal dignity of persons demands that just conditions of life be brought about. Excessive economic and social differences between the members of the human family is a scandal and militates against justice, equity and the dignity of the human person. Every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, color, social condition, language, or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God’s will.

We have to provide all men and women with everything necessary to lead a life that is truly human, such as food, clothing and shelter, the right to choose a state of life freely and to raise a family, the right to education and to employment, the right to a good reputation, the right to respect, and the right to achieve these things in accord with the norms of one’s own conscience. Protection of privacy and the right to freedom in matters such as religion are also a basic necessity. This is the message of Jesus Christ which

Romero decided to preach. Jesus commanded his Apostles to preach to all peoples the Gospel message so that the human race might become the family of God in which the fullness of the law would be love. Jesus not only announced universal fraternity—he made us brothers and sisters by participating in life itself, by sharing the spirit through sanctifying grace. His doctrine ultimately is not a question of violence or nonviolence, but of love or non-love. In his preaching he clearly taught the children of God to treat one another as sisters and brothers. He offered himself for all—“greater love than this no one has that one lay down his life for his friends.” Therefore, Romero proclaims the freedom of the children of God and liberation from the bondage of sin.

According to the council we know that Christians who neglect their temporal duties, neglect their duties towards neighbor and even God, jeopardize their eternal salvation. All pastors should remember, also, that by their daily conduct and concern they are revealing the face of the Church to the world in their lives and words. The Church is an unspent fountain of those virtues which the modern world most needs.

Romero always spoke the truth about the situation of oppression and repression being lived by the poorest of poor—even risking his life to do so. He sought to bring out this conflictual reality from a perspective of faith, of response to the cries and hopes of his people, and especially from the perspective of a prayer relationship to the Lord. Romero knew that social injustice is not merely one of the causes of violence—it is above all the first radical form of violence. In efforts to deter the escalation of violence, the Christian conscience excludes resorting to violent ways and includes appealing to fraternity. The permanent firmness of attitude towards the unjust structures involves intelligence, determination, affection, and a capacity to react in a strong but peaceful manner.

Bishop Oscar Romero was a strong defender of justice. Like Jesus, he denounced and called to task those who repress and assassinate the poor who struggle for their life and rights. Therefore, he launched a process of solidarity. He knew how to respond to the reality of the Church in his own faith and in solidarity with others. Romero understood quite well that the root of this process is the solidarity of the Church with the poor and the oppressed, and he stated that in a totally radical way. He said:

“The Church suffers the lot of the poor, which is persecution. Our Church is proud that the blood of its priests, catechists, and communities has been mixed in with the blood of the massacred people. My position, as pastor, obliges me to stand in solidarity with everyone who suffers and to back every effort to promote the dignity of human beings.”

Bishop Romero was the friend, the father, the brother, and the defender of the poor and oppressed, of the peasants, the underemployed workers, the slum dwellers. His fervent faith in God and his total giving of himself to Christ, led him to see these people as Christ himself and to defend the cause of the poor as God’s cause. Therefore, the question that permeates Bishop Romero’s pastoral concern is the question the Lord put to Cain: “What have you done to your brother?” [Genesis 4.] It was his concern with this question that eventually cost Bishop Romero his life.

In Latin America, this is a serious issue because of the institutionalized violence which most of the continent suffers. This violence is the cause for, and the product of a situation where the vast majority of men, women, and children are deprived of the basic necessities of life. This deprivation is not due to natural catastrophes or laziness or the will of God, but is an integral part of the social, economic, and political system which accepts as normal a situation in which the vast majority of people constitute an impoverished sub-force at the service of the privileged minority. Such violence frequently finds its legitimation in the status quo politics, attitudes and values communicated through the media and through many forms of religious expression. The Church, too, is often called upon and expected to give its blessing to this state of affairs. When such legitimation is not forthcoming, or not sufficiently widespread, repressive violence is resorted to by the security forces so as to crush the aspirations of the majority of the men and women who seek a fuller participation in the social, economic and cultural life of the country.

All these should be borne in mind when trying to understand the life and death of Bishop Romero. However, there is one more element which is essential to grasp—the international connection. Stable, anticommunist governments are seen as vital in the event of a communist threat to western democracy. In this sense, any social conflict in Latin America is considered to be potentially

dangerous. We confuse popular aspiration for human dignity and the right to participate in one's own destiny, with subversive communism. The truth is that many of the struggles for liberation in Latin America have little, or nothing, to do with communism. If they eventually become so, it is only after the hope for change has been lost. Liberation struggles are movements of men and women in search of their God-given dignity which historically has been denied them by the violence of the political system. This is the context in which we need to place Bishop Romero's life.

Some people might ask why a churchman need concern himself with such mundane matters. It is precisely the church's religious character and mission, which generate a role, expressed in the *Gaudium et Spes* as "light and energy," that can serve to consolidate the human community according to the Divine Law. It is the task of the Church to gather to itself all that is human in the struggle of the people (above all the struggle of the poor), especially when they seek their legitimate rights. For this reason Bishop Romero, in keeping with the words of Medellín, found himself encouraging all those forces among the people aimed at creating and developing their own basic organizations to recover and consolidate their rights, and to search for true justice. In other words, he believed, with Pope Paul, that the economic, social, political and cultural hopes of humanity are not alien to the definitive liberation achieved in Jesus Christ. Liberation theology was born reflecting on the structurally institutionalized violence that characterizes most of Latin America.

In El Salvador Bishop Romero's position brought him into inevitable conflict with both institutionalized and repressive violence. Why this violence? Some statistics may help to explain it. Of a total population of five million, 2 percent control 57 percent of the usable land, while 91 percent of the people occupy only 21 percent of the land; sixteen families own the same amount of land as is utilized by 230,000 rural families; 75 percent of the children suffer from serious malnutrition; 60 percent of the children die at birth. Only 57 percent of the population have drinking water and half of the people cannot read nor write. Given such a social reality, it is not necessary to invent the phantasm of communism to justify the desire for change. But that is what much of current foreign policy has done. This fact, reinforced by national self-interest in El Salvador, has made any real change impossible. In fact, it has caused a violent

revolution that has claimed about 60,000 lives since 1979. One of the victims of this violence was Bishop Romero himself—shot dead by hired gunmen while saying mass. Even now, no one has yet been brought to trial for this crime, although it is widely known that the intellectual authors of the crime were people in high positions in the El Salvadoran government. But Bishop Romero's work continues in the struggle for justice and liberation which he inspired by his life and sacrifice. He was a man of nonviolence who paid a great price for his solidarity with the oppressed. His exhortation to the soldiers to lay down their arms and stop killing their own people was the last straw. Men of violence could not accept that a man of peace should ask people to stop killing.

Where does Bishop Oscar Romero live today? In the communities of refugees, of the poor, in the liturgical celebrations, in the meetings and the Sunday homilies at the Cathedral of El Salvador. We remember the unforgettable words he said in an interview with *Excelsior* magazine of Mexico, just two weeks before his 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'm not boasting; I say it with the greatest humility. I am bound as pastor by a divine command to give my life for those whom I love, and that means all Salvadorians, even those who are going to kill me. If they manage to carry out their threats, as of now, I offer my blood for the redemption and resurrection of El Salvador. If God accepts the sacrifice of my life, then may my blood be the seed of liberty and the sign that hope will soon become a reality. May my death, if it is accepted by God, be for the liberation of my people, as a witness of hope in what is to come. You can tell them that, if they succeed in killing me, I pardon and bless those who do it. A bishop may die, but the Church of God, which is the people, will never die. Let us end where we began.”

Romero is a follower of Jesus Christ. Jesus announced a new commandment—the commandment of love—and went to the extreme of proposing forgiveness for offenses and love of enemies. Jesus said:

“I say to you, love your enemies, do good deeds to those who hate you, pray for those who persecute you so that you shall be children of God.”

Romero also followed Jesus and forgave his persecutors. He knew how to condemn the sin and save the sinner. The victory of fraternity over violence cannot be assured without forgiveness—the most precious fruit of mercy. The world can only become ever more human when we succeed in introducing forgiveness in all relationships. Forgiveness proves that love exists in the world and it's far more powerful than sin. A bishop may die, but the Church of God will never die. Bishop Romero is alive. How does Bishop Romero live? He is in our midst today. He lives like Jesus—risen from the dead. He is with his people who are seeking and proclaiming the truth freely resisting manipulation. Those who proclaim the truth live in the spirit testified to by his martyrdom and seek a resolution based on justice and peace to the present conflict. The spirit is present in so many women and men who live and suffer in our communities today, unknown but moved by the Holy Spirit which inspires new witnesses of truth and love, and assures us that an end will come to the war, to repression, to assassinations, to refugee camps, and to the suffering of so many innocent people. We realize that the death of Romero was not an isolated fact, but part of the witness of the Church, which at Medellín and Puebla, made a preferential option for the poor.

Bishop Romero's martyrdom helped us understand better the reality of our people, a reality of death from hunger and sickness, of uncountable crosses which weigh down our continent, where peasants, shanty dwellers, laborers, students, priests, factory workers, religious and bishops, are jailed, tortured and killed for believing in Jesus Christ and for loving the poor.

Why does Bishop Romero continue to live? He lives on to do good, to give testimony to a total love for the people. His Gospel for us is good news for the world today. Can we do anything? There are many forms of solidarity possible. In

the United States several groups are seeking to promote awareness of institutional injustice in Latin America. In this way they are continuing the work of Bishop Oscar Romero by becoming witnesses of love, liberty and justice among the oppressed of the world.

On the 29th of March 1980, we bishops present at Bishop Romero's funeral, affirmed our commitment to complete his unfinished mass cut short by bullets. We committed ourselves to carry on his last homily in which he called for an end to all repression, all over the continent, especially in El Salvador. We begged Jesus Christ to give us the grace to be more faithful in our option for the poor and the oppressed, to remain firm in the struggle for justice, to be faithful witnesses to God and to His Kingdom. Each Christian is called upon to overcome injustice. This victory shall never be definitively conquered on earth because the mystery of evil will always be present in history. But united in our efforts, always more unified by the Spirit of Christ, it will be possible to build a more just and fraternal world. Bishop Romero's life testifies that fraternity can overcome violence, just as love can overcome hatred.

Bishop Oscar Romero was killed. A bishop may die, but the Church of God, which is the people, will never die.

This gathering is for all of us, and for Romero also, a gift from God. And so, I'm saying to you how happy I am. I thank you for this reception and I invite you to end our meeting with a little prayer:

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. We thank you God for all the graces and gifts received. At this moment we remember the people of El Salvador, Nicaragua, Lebanon and other countries who are suffering and waiting for Christian charity, love and peace. Tonight we know that we are united in faith and hope and we ask you, Father, to bless all our sisters and brothers all over the world. Amen.

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