



**Monsignor Romero:
A Bishop for the Third Millennium**

Oscar Andrés Cardinal Rodríguez Maradiaga, SDB,
Archbishop of Tegucigalpa, Honduras

In a pastoral leadership course for bishops organized by CELAM that took place in Zipaquirá, Columbia, Father Anthony D’Souza asked: “What bishop from Latin America do you believe epitomizes the qualities of pastoral leadership?” Without hesitation, a Panamanian brother responded: “Monsignor Romero.” Everyone was in agreement. I was responsible for teaching these courses throughout the continent - with fruitful results. CELAM’s Publication Center has edited this material and published it in three volumes, the titles of which alone are enough to awaken the intellect: *Discover Your Power for Leadership; Success in Leadership; Effective Leadership*.

One of the present problems in our society, especially in the political sphere, is the absence of authentic leaders. The bishop, as the pastor and guide of a community, is called to be a leader in the local church. But leadership cannot be improvised. The fact that many pastors from the [American] continent could feel like students, and not teachers, reflect together and listen to what a leader is, was a very enriching experience. We could synthesize this insight from three basic elements: A leader is:

- someone with a clear idea
- someone who can communicate it
- and someone who moves forward giving witness to it.

We could say that from this perspective, that the blessed John XXIII and Monsignor Romero are excellent examples.

It would be interesting to examine this topic from the perspective of the life and work of Monsignor Romero. We could also begin with the intriguing concept of “creative leadership” which Francois Houtart, the noted sociologist of the Catholic University at Louvain, has applied to Pope John XXIII’s remarkable intuition to convoke an ecumenical council. According to Houtart, the existence of the social climate needed for a change in the Church to take place would have been useless were it not for someone who could incarnate this “creative leadership.”

A creative leader should not only “institutionally embody the objectives” but also play the role of an educator. John XXIII epitomized these qualities remarkably. So many anecdotes exist that show the “good Pope” to be a man who acted freely in the face of the sometimes stifling institutional pressure, when this freedom was required by the evangelical virtues. His charisma as an educator has left us one jewel: the opening speech of the Second Vatican Council. At such a solemn occasion, the Pope managed to persuade the bishops of the world gathered there that the Church was at a transitional moment, and that the mission of the council was to bring it up to date so that the bride of Christ could complete her mission in the modern world. And did he ever succeed! What has happened, however, is that in many of its teachings and orientations, Vatican II has not yet been implemented.

Despite the various apostolic duties of my pastoral ministry, I have never abandoned my initial vocation, which is teaching. I love to teach class. I hold the Moral Theology chair at the major inter-diocesan seminary, Our Lady of Suyapa, in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. Each time I begin a new class with a new group of students, I ask them: “How many of you have read all of the documents of the Second Vatican Council?” Usually only one or two raise their hand. Then I say, “Don’t consider yourselves modern—you are at least 37 years behind the times!”

And the same thing happens, in a dramatic way, with lay groups. The Second Vatican Council is, in many ways, still brand new. It is for this reason that Pope John Paul II highlights the application of Vatican II as one point in the renewal of the life of the Church in *Tertio Millenio Adveniente*.

Much has been said about Monsignor Romero as a prophet and a martyr, and the testimony of his life has, without a doubt, inspired millions of men and women of all ages, even beyond the Church's borders. Here I wish to take up another, less publicized aspect of his life, but one which has come to the fore after the recent General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, the theme of which was: "The Bishop, Servant of Jesus Christ for the Hope of the World." I would like to share with you some contours of Monsignor Romero's rich personality, which will serve as a basis for presenting him as a model bishop for the third millennium.

The last part of the theme of the Synod—the bishop as a servant of the Gospel of Jesus Christ "for the hope of the world"—moves me. After September 11th, that "black Tuesday" about which so much has been written and that has put before us in a brutal and verifiable way some fundamental questions, it is very difficult to talk about hope. It is also difficult to talk about hope in a globalized world in which even international finance organizations recognize that poverty is increasing and that the painful struggle of the marginalized and the excluded continues to grow in an unprecedented way.

The context in which Monsignor Romero was called by God to testify to hope was not much different. His people experienced the world this way, and a large portion of humanity continues to experience it this way today. What was his secret? I will try to approach this matter in two steps. First, remembering some elements of Monsignor Romero's personality. And then, exploring the deepest sense of his vision of Church, I will conclude with a reflection on the most radical form of giving witness to Jesus Christ: martyrdom.

Who Is This Timid Little Man Filled With God?

I clearly remember my first encounter with Monsignor Romero. I had been a bishop for barely three months when the Episcopal Conference of Honduras sent me as its representative to a conference on the Devotion to the Heart of

Christ in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. It was in March of 1979, exactly one year before his death.

I was moved by his profound piety, his simplicity, and his humility.

Now after so many years I should admit that at that moment I had no idea that I was in the presence of someone who would eventually become the most famous Salvadoran man in the history of that brother country, and—if you will allow me this daring statement—perhaps the most beloved martyr of the twentieth century and a model who inspires numerous bishops who strive to take up the great challenges presented to us by the beginning of this millennium with faithfulness to God.

The Pope, in his inaugural homily at the Synod, pointed to some aspects of the bishop that are needed in today's Church which I would like to highlight. One of the aspects of this profile is the commitment to the poor. In the Final Message of the Synod, the Synodal Fathers take up this challenge:

“Just as there is a poverty that alienates, and against which we must struggle so that all who are subject to it can be liberated, so also can there be a poverty that liberates and harnesses energy for love and for service, and it is this evangelical poverty that we intend to practice. Poor before God the Father, like Jesus in his prayer, his words and his actions. Poor before all people, through a lifestyle that makes the person of Jesus attractive. The bishop is the father and the brother of the poor. He should not hesitate, when it is necessary, to become the spokesperson for the voiceless, so that their rights can be recognized and respected. In particular, the bishop should act in such a way that the poor feel at home in all Christian communities. “ (Final Message, 50)

Was this not what Monsignor Romero did?

Pope John Paul II describes Monsignor Romero as: “...the jealous pastor who was led by love of God and service to his brothers to the supreme sacrifice of his life in a violent way” (Greeting in the San Salvador Cathedral, 6 March 1983).

His priest friends who knew him from the diocese of San Miguel remember him as a man of God, of fervent and disciplined prayer, with a great spirit of sacrifice, of love of the confessional and an overwhelming passion for the sharing of Jesus Christ and his Gospel through preaching and the written word.

They also recall some of his weaker attributes: a slightly difficult demeanor, impatience, some difficulty in dialoguing with some of the priests of the San Miguel Diocese, and shyness. All of his friends, without exception, remember him as a compassionate man, close to the poor and particularly generous, although still operating out of a model of assistance and incipient promotion of human flourishing. Fr. Romero, in an editorial published in the weekly *Chaparrastique*, of which he was the director, wrote:

“This is the true Caritas. One that is not only content to feed someone out of a noble enthusiasm to give aid in an emergency situation, but one which, looking toward a better future, also teaches the poor how to work in order to earn their livelihood with dignity.” (10 July 1965)

The qualitative leap with regard to social commitment would come when the Lord called him to the Episcopal See of San Salvador. It has become commonplace to call this change the conversion of Monsignor Romero. However, churchmen as close to him as was Monsignor Arturo Rivera Damas, his successor in the Salvadoran capital, and Monsignor Ricardo Urioste, had a different opinion: they insist that his was not a conversion in the usual sense of the term, of turning from the wrong path onto the correct path; it was, rather, the constant seeking of the will of God that led him to face bravely the structural sin that was crushing the little ones of his dear country.

Monsignor Gregorio Rosa Chavez recounts that in a radio interview he asked Romero: “Monsignor, they say that you have converted, what do you think of that?” Monsignor Romero’s response was: “I would not say that it is a conversion so much as an evolution.” It is the natural “evolution” of those who live in a permanent state of conversion in total openness to God and neighbor.

In a book about Monsignor Romero written by Fr. Jesús Delgado, Monsignor Rivera writes in the prologue that he is not satisfied with the

biographies written about his illustrious predecessor until this one (*Oscar A. Romero, A Biography*):

“Ten years ago Monsignor Romero was assassinated. During these years, many have written about the person, the work, and the words of the illustrious archbishop of San Salvador. None of these writings has completely satisfied me. Some authors have presented Monsignor Romero as a model Christian, who lives out his preferential option for the poor to the ultimate consequences, but they have erred in presenting this option as a political-revolutionary weapon. Others attempt to defend the personality of the archbishop against his enemies’ attacks at the price of denigrating their personalities. Almost all the writings that I have read to date situate the archbishop, who was the voice of the voiceless, in the political context of his time, which is not incorrect; however, they highlight this aspect so much that they lose sight of the essential dimension of his personality, the priestly dimension”

It is also interesting to note the opinion of the Archbishop of Santiago de Maria, Monsignor Rodrigo Orlando Cabrera, who worked very closely with Monsignor Romero when Romero was the bishop of this small diocese in eastern El Salvador. In his book, *In Santiago de Maria I Happened Upon Misery*, the pastor from Santiago writes:

“When I returned from Medellín, I found him to be quite different. You could now speak to him about the social and political problems in the country. The authors of this book rightly affirm that the change in Monsignor Romero began in Santiago de Maria.”

What happened next? Like John XXIII, Monsignor Romero allowed himself to be guided by the Holy Spirit.

To Feel with the Church

I began this speech by talking about leadership and to that end I indicated that a good leader has a clear idea and knows how to communicate it. Monsignor Romero chose as the theme of his episcopate *Sentire cum Ecclesia*. What image of Church did he have, and how did he communicate it to his flock? He did it, of course, through ordinary preaching, because as we read in the Pastoral Plan of the Archdiocese for 1998-2003 “the words of Monsignor Romero resonated every Sunday from the Cathedral of San Salvador.”

The next line adds: “But he also gave shape to his insights through four pastoral letters, and although they were addressed to the laity, they all speak of the Church: “The Church of Easter” (April 1977) is the presentation of the new archbishop to his diocese. The three remaining letters were published on the occasion of Christ the King: “The Church, the Body of Christ in History” (August 1977); “The Church and Political and Popular Organizations” (August 1978), written together with Monsignor Arturo Rivera Damas; and the last one, which illumines the path of the archdiocese with the light of Puebla, which is entitled (The Mission of the Church in the Midst of the Country’s Crisis) (August 1979).”

I will focus on the first pastoral letter because it was written by him from beginning to end. It was published only two months after the beginning of his pastorate in San Salvador. Through this, the archbishop’s first official publication, we can clearly see the thinking of Cardinal Eduardo Pironio, with whom Monsignor Romero had a very close friendship. Actually, the letter contains many ideas from the retreat that the beloved Argentinian pastor offered the Central American bishops at Antigua, Guatemala, while he was the Secretary General of CELAM. It was the same retreat that Monsignor Pironio had offered at the Vatican for Pope Paul VI in 1974. The talks were published by the Library of Christian Authors (BAC) with the title, *We Want to See Christ*.

In the prologue, Pironio highlights what the Church described in the documents of Medellín is like. The expression “Easter Church” sums it up- a Church of cross and hope, of poverty and contemplation, of prophecy and service. This was the Church of Monsignor Romero’s dreams—a church that exists to embody here and now the liberating force of Jesus’ resurrection:

“The church of Christ has to be an Easter Church. That is, a Church that is born of the Easter event and lives to be a sign and an instrument of that Easter in the midst of the world.”

Focusing the Church on Easter is a brilliant move. The same thing happened with the writing of the Gospels, which are composed from the perspective of the Paschal Mystery and from this summit of the mystery of Jesus, the evangelists approach His teachings and His marvelous works. Romero writes that the Church is born of Easter, lives off Easter, and exists to proclaim and make present today the grace of Easter.

To say Easter is to say unfailing hope, because it is based on Jesus' victory over sin and death, over Satan and his reign of evil. This is why the Pope, in his homily at the Inaugural Mass of the General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops celebrated last year, said that Jesus Christ is our hope:

“The hope of the world is in Christ,” affirms the Pope, “in him the expectations of humanity find a real and solid foundation. The hope of every human being flourished from the cross, a sign of the victory of love over hate, of forgiveness over vengeance, of truth over lies, of solidarity over selfishness. We have the duty to communicate this salvific proclamation to the men and women of our time” (n. 2).

Monsignor Romero, Servant of the Gospel of Jesus Christ Even Unto Martyrdom

The officials and experts of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints have come upon a very complicated reality in studying the cause of Monsignor Romero. Because of this, the Congregation has asked the Archdiocese of San Salvador to describe in detail the social context in which Monsignor Romero exercised his pastoral ministry as archbishop of San Salvador. Those were years of brutal violence which drove him to utter that famous phrase: “It seems that my vocation is to go around picking up bodies.”

We have become accustomed to the fact that in the investigations that are carried out in Latin American and Caribbean countries, the Catholic Church

emerges as the most credible institution in the eyes of the populace. And it seems obvious to us that when there is conflict in a country and all the doors appear to be shut, the pastors of the Church are called upon to utter an authoritative word, to offer their good service or even to assume a mediating role. We do not know of any public opinion polls that were conducted during Monsignor Romero's tenure, but there is one poll that is never wrong, and that is the attitude of the Salvadoran populace, awaiting Romero's evangelical words that illuminated the dramatic reality of that brother country every Sunday.

Romero himself said that the word of God, of which he was a humble servant, is like the light of the sun, which illuminates beautiful things and things which we would rather not see. He would also warn against the temptation to divest the Word of God of its power to transform history:

“The Bible alone is insufficient. It is necessary for the Church to take up the Bible and make it a Living Word again. Not in order to dole out psalms and parables word for word, but in order to apply it to the concrete situation in which the Word of God is preached at this time.” (Homily 16 July 1978)

The people understood this very well, and that is why they were glued to their radios every week. It is said that in towns and villages, during the eight o'clock mass at the San Salvador Cathedral, you could walk the streets and verify that in almost every home Monsignor Romero's mass was on the radio. We are in the presence of truly extraordinary events.

Perhaps one could think I am exaggerating by presenting Monsignor Romero as a model for a bishop in the third millennium. But Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, Archbishop of Milan, is in agreement, as he expressed in a pastoral letter written in 1983, a short time after the death of Monsignor Romero, entitled “Martyrdom, Eucharist and Dialogue.”

With an enjoyable, incisive, and profound style, Cardinal Montini's successor in the Abrosian See recounts that a journalist once asked him which three cardinals most inspired him. In his response, Martini mentions Cardinal Augustine Bea, the great promoter of ecumenical dialogue and one of the “fathers” of the extraordinary conciliar document, that is *Dei Verbum*; secondly,

he mentions Cardinal Josef Mindszenty, primate of Hungary, in whom he admires “his firmness in proclaiming things he considers just and the painful martyrdom he had to suffer for that.” The third figure is not a cardinal, but Monsignor Romero. Martini explains why:

“As bishop he never stopped speaking, making his voice heard among the people, the authorities, and the various political groups. His efforts to make himself heard by all was interrupted by death, which hit him at the most intense moment in the mission of a bishop: the celebration of the Eucharist.”

What follows is exquisitely beautiful:

“He was not made a cardinal by title, but by the crimson of the blood he shed. He had said, ‘martyrdom is a grace of God that I do not think I deserve. But if God accepts the sacrifice of my life, let my blood be a seed of liberation.’”

I cannot read this sentence by the Archbishop of Milan without feeling motivated to share with you something in confidence. I do it as a Christian, as a cardinal who comes from a small, poor country that is forgotten, that only makes news when we suffer catastrophes; a nation that is very close to Romero’s country, not only geographically, but also because of familial and cultural ties.

A little more than a year ago, when I received this ring from the Holy Father’s hands, I said:

“I dedicate my tenure as cardinal to all the people of Central America and particularly the young, and those well deserving pastors, like Monsignor Oscar Arnulfo Romero, Arturo Rivera Damas, Roberto Joaquin Ramos, and Marcos McGrath, who gave brave and generous witness to their love of the Church.”

My second and last encounter with (Romero) was only one month before his death. A group of us, bishops from Central America, were in Panama working on a sketch of the Church’s Manual for Social Teaching that CELAM subsequently published with the title, *Christian Faith and Social Commitment*.

He had just returned from Belgium where he had received an honorary Doctorate from the University of Louvain. He stopped by to say hello to us, and he told us that he had selected *The Political Dimension of Faith from the Perspective of the Poor* as the theme of his doctoral dissertation. He told us:

“I tried to explain how for us, in El Salvador, the key to understanding Christian faith is the poor. I said there that our Salvadoran world is not an abstraction. It is not one more instance of what is understood as ‘the world’ in a developed country like yours. It is a world which in its vast majority is made up of men and women who are poor and oppressed, and from this world of the poor we say that it is the key to understanding Christian faith, the action of the Church, and the political dimension of that faith and of that ecclesial action. The poor are the ones who ask us, what is the world and what is the service that the Church should offer?”

These were his words on the day before his death, his last Lent before the definitive resurrection:

“Already, in itself, Easter is the victory cry that says no one can extinguish that life, that Christ is risen and that death, all the signs of death, and hatred against Him and his Church cannot win. He is victorious! But, just as he will flourish in an unending Easter, we must also accompany him throughout a Lenten season, and a Holy Week that is cross, sacrifice, martyrdom. And as he said: ‘Blessed are those who are not scandalized by their cross. Lent, then, is a call to celebrate our redemption in that difficult complex of cross and victory. Our people are currently very capable of doing this. Their entire environment preaches the cross to us. But those who have Christian faith and hope know that behind this Calvary of El Salvador lies our Easter, our resurrection. And this is the hope of the Christian community. I have no ambition of power and because of that I freely tell those in power what is good and what is bad, and I do the same with any political group—it is my duty’.”

Conclusion

I wish to finish with a double citation of John Paul II, with whom I have been lucky enough to meet many times in a very friendly environment. In *Tertio Milenio Adveniente* he wrote:

“At the end of the second millennium, the Church has once again become a church of martyrs” (no. 37). And in that same paragraph he adds: “It is a testimony that must not be forgotten.”

What good this instruction of the Holy Father has done us, and how it will inspire us at this tragic beginning of the third millennium!

When economic and cultural globalization seem to be carrying everything away, the witness of the martyrs strengthens us on our journey.

When so many means of social communication are mining our countries' cultures so rich in humane and Christian values, people like Monsignor Romero restore our pride in being Christians and in being Latin Americans.

There is another citation which is less well-known, but just as important. We find it in the encyclical *Fides et Ratio*. I tell you sincerely, that when I read it to share it with all of you, I saw in it a spiritual representation of the pastor whom we are commemorating today. It says:

“I am thinking first of all of the witness of martyrs. The martyr, in effect, is the most authentic witness to the truth about existence. He knows that he has found in the encounter with Jesus Christ the truth about his life and no one or no thing can ever take away that certainty. Neither suffering nor a violent death will force him to separate from the adherence to truth that he has found in his encounter with Christ. This is why the witness of martyrs is accepted, listened to, and followed even in our day. It is the reason why we trust their word; we perceive in them the evidence of a love that has no need of long arguments to be convinced, since it speaks to each person of what they already perceive internally as true and long-sought-after. Certainly, the martyr

produces great confidence in ourselves, because he articulates what we already feel, and he makes evident what we would also like to have the strength to express. “ (no. 43)

In pastors like Monsignor Romero, we have the figure of the “Bishop, who is a servant of the Gospel of Christ for the hope of the world.” With bishops like him, the Church can truly be hope for the world.

Thank you very much.

Archbishop Romero Lecture Series
The University of Notre Dame
March 19, 2002