



Archbishop Romero and His Commitment to the Church

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We are reflecting today on the commitment of Archbishop Oscar Romero to the institutional Church. It is important that we do this for several reasons.

First, because we cannot understand the prophetic role of Monsignor Romero, or his pastoral commitment, without understanding his commitment to the institution of the Church as specifically expressed in his leadership of the Archdiocese of San Salvador. One of the most significant aspects of his brief tenure as pastor of the archdiocese is the manner in which the institution and the prophetic and pastoral work of the Church became one, became integrated, flowed into each other. The institution was molded to be of service to its mission, and that mission was forged by the history in which Romero and his pastoral workers found themselves: a situation of political violence and military repression that was savage in its expression in a context of inhuman poverty and extremes of injustice and social and economic disparity.

This implied a shift on many levels—in the *óptica*, or perspective/vantage point, from which the Church looked at its historical reality; in its understanding of power and Church authority and how these are exercised in the world; in organizational structures and structures of decision-making; in the role of the

Church within the sociopolitical reality of El Salvador at that time; in the Church's stance in the face of that reality; in the content of the word that it preached.

Second, this reflection is important because Romero presented a challenge of profound importance to the "universal" Church, a challenge whose full implications, I believe, we have only begun to fully appreciate. It is a challenge that emerged from the Latin American Church in the 1970s and was crystallized for many of us in the witness of this great martyr of our hemisphere. It is a challenge for the Church everywhere—to ask itself what this institution is created to be, what its purpose is in the history in which it carries out its gospel mission. It is a challenge to look at the institution in the historical context of our changing times and to put that Church constantly, in an ever-flowing and evolving manner, at the service of the reign of God. That means being willing to look honestly at the world and to immerse the Church into the world—the challenge of the Second Vatican Council and, of great importance to Romero, the Latin American Bishops Conference (CELAM) in its historic gathering at Medellín, Colombia, in 1968.

Third, it is important to reflect on this topic because what Romero did in putting his archdiocese at the service of God's people in a time of terrible persecution and violence revitalized the Church of El Salvador. Overflowing crowds attended his masses at the cathedral; there were record numbers of vocations; hundreds of catechists and delegates of the Word were trained to lead and animate the growing numbers of base communities; and millions of people throughout Latin America listened to his homilies on the archdiocesan radio station, YSAX.

The pastor, the bishop understood as a "good shepherd" in a real gospel sense, was sharing a word that ignited faith in the hearts of his hearers. The institutional leader embodied in his role as bishop and in the structures of the archdiocese a word that his people recognized as the authentic reflection of their own truth. The institution was put at the service of this truth. The result was a flourishing, vibrant Church, willing to follow Jesus even to death on the cross. This is amazing, if we really absorb it. It may be hard for us coming out of our relatively comfortable North American reality to fully appreciate this commitment on the part of thousands of Christians—priests, religious, catechists, delegates of the Word, base community leaders and members—anxious to follow this Jesus,

persecuted and crucified, in the context of truly encountering the Gospel in the Church of the Archdiocese of San Salvador, even if it meant following him to death.

So I want to explore these themes and see how they challenge us here today, call us to follow an example with truly “universal” implications for us and for our Church.

To truly appreciate how Romero molded his institution to the service of its gospel mission, we must understand how he understood “Church.” For him the Church was a living, breathing “space” in which the building of the reign of God was taking place. It was not a static reality but an ever-evolving reality being molded and shaped by the same history that is the subject of God’s saving action. The institution, then, as the organized structure of the Church, was also not to be static. It was to be a “body” of human beings of faith constantly attentive to how God is acting in the world to bring about that reign.

In his second pastoral letter, written for the great Salvadoran feast of the Transfiguration, August 6, 1977, Romero articulates this vision of “Church.” The letter is entitled, “The Church, the Body of Christ in History.” The title is revelatory of his vision.

Romero writes in this letter that

“the Church’s foundation is not to be thought of in a legal or juridical sense, as if Christ gathered some persons together, entrusted them with a teaching, gave them a kind of constitution, but then Himself remained apart from them.”

It is not this kind of static universality that Christ intended, a static truth entrusted to an inflexible, unchanging organizational structure. This concept of Church, Romero believed, killed the spirit; it did not allow for the action of God in history, the continuing unfolding of the history of redemption through the body of Christ which is the Church.

Romero writes:

“Christ founded his Church so that he himself could go on being present in the history of humanity precisely through the group of

Christians who make up his Church. The Church is the flesh in which Christ makes present down the ages his own life and his personal mission.”

The Church is flesh. It is testimony to God’s incarnation—God taking on our humanity, coming into our history and sharing our destiny with us.

“The Church can be Church only so long as it goes on being the Body of Christ. Its mission will be authentic only so long as it is the mission of Jesus in the new situations, the new circumstances of history. The criterion that will guide the Church will be neither the approval of, nor the fear of, men and women, no matter how powerful or threatening they may be. It is the Church’s duty in history to lend its voice to Christ so that he may speak, its feet so that He may walk today’s world, its hands to build the Kingdom, and to offer all its members ‘to make up all that has still to be undergone by Christ’ (Col. 1:24)¹

The Church, he says in this letter,

“is a community of faith whose primary obligation, whose *raison d’être*, is to continue the life and work of Jesus. (It)...principally exists for the evangelization of the human race. Yes, it is an institution; it is made up of persons, and it has forms and structures. But all that is for a much more basic reality: the exercise of its task of evangelization.”

When the Church does this, when it continues, “in the course of history, the work that Jesus carried out,” then it is truly “the Body of Christ in history.”²

Jesus, he reminds us,

“fulfilled his mission in a particular kind of world, in a particular sort of society. Like him, the Church does not simply proclaim the reign of God in the abstract. It also has to promote ‘the solutions

that seem most likely to bring the kingdom into being, that are most just’.”³

The Word is not static; the body of Christ cannot live within a static institution. It lives in history and is shaped by that history. If it is not, if it tries to remain outside history—”above” it, if you will—concentrating only on the transcendent reality of God, it will have little authentic to say to history, no substantial word of denunciation of sin within it or of the redemption taking place through it. The Church’s role, as it models the example of Jesus, is to live immersed in its world and to speak to its particular reality, as Jesus did. It is to proclaim the reign of God within the particularity of that history and to create a space in which the action of God-saving-us-in-history can be carried out.

The Church, its structures, its pastoral leaders, all of its members, all the community of believers are to be involved in creating that space and in being active agents of God’s saving action.

It is precisely here that the prophetic witness of Oscar Romero is fully integrated with the institutional Church he led, for he put his Church at the service of this saving action of God, of Jesus Christ still present and active in history.

This commitment to put his Church at the service of the history of salvation meant a Church on the move, a Church that can change according to the new challenges it confronts in history, a Church evolving, a pilgrim Church.

In his fourth pastoral letter, “The Church’s Mission amid the National Crisis,” written for August 6, 1979, Romero reflects on two essential aspects of the Church’s mission: the Gospel message we preach, and the changing reality of peoples, times, and places in which the Church finds itself, and where it has to fulfill its mission. He challenges the Church to “shake off our laziness and bring ourselves up to date,” to use every means available to help us understand the real situation in which we find ourselves and—here he quotes from the CELAM conference at Puebla, Mexico, in January 1979—“to adapt the gospel message to today’s human beings in a dynamic, attractive, and convincing way.”

Then he writes:

“In this attitude of search, let us recall that the Church is historical, that it is moving forward. It is not something fixed and determined. It does not have a closed system for interpreting the gospel, applicable to each epoch and every circumstance. The Church is a pilgrim. The word of God is inexhaustible; it forever discloses new facets that have to be more deeply understood. So the Church goes on evolving in the way it presents the unique message of the gospel, in keeping with the particular period in which it is living. We believe in the Lord of history, and in his Spirit who makes all things new.”⁴

Echoing the words of Pope Paul VI in his encyclical, *On Evangelization in the Modern World* (9, 30), Romero reflected that the Church is challenged to preach a “liberating evangelization.” In posing the question of what evangelization the Church “ought to offer” to El Salvador, he expressed his firm faith that through the Church’s evangelization: “the full force for liberation with which our divine Redeemer has endowed [the Church] may run its course.”⁵

This, then, is the space that he sought to create within the institution of his archdiocese, of his Church—a space where the full force of God’s liberation may run its course. I continue to be moved and awed by the faith of this man in the God of history and the enormity of his hope that the Church could rise to such a challenge.

And yet, in all he wrote and preached, he stood on the firm ground of the Church’s doctrine, its deposit of faith, and its social teachings. He quoted Pope Paul VI often and referred repeatedly to the Vatican Council, to Medellín and Puebla. He said over and over that what he sought to do, simply, was to make real in the archdiocese of San Salvador the teachings handed down through these important channels. He pointed especially to Pope Paul’s encyclical as being the pastoral model that he was implementing in his archdiocese.

And maybe that is what is so astounding—that Archbishop Romero, believing that the social teaching of the Church was fundamental to its identity, sought to embrace it not just in word and teaching, in pastoral letters or official Church statements that no one reads or puts into practice, but in the very institutional structures of his archdiocese—even when that meant the risk of

persecution for the faith. Where else have we seen anything like it? He brought together all the dynamism of the original gospel story within the urgency of his moment in the history of El Salvador and wedded his institutional Church to that force for life. The Church and the Gospel were truly one.

And he did this as archbishop, as a member of the hierarchy. He saw the archbishop's role as one completely of service to, and the Church's role as a servant of, the suffering people. The liberating Gospel, the announcement of God's redeeming action in history, was being revealed through the journey of cross and resurrection of the Salvadoran people, so the Church had to go there, to the suffering people, to hear and to announce this good news. This had important implications for the institutions of the Church, for the hierarchy, for pastoral workers, for catechesis, for sacramental ministries, for religious training—in other words, for how the institution organized itself to reflect this dynamic call to follow Jesus into the world. It meant taking on an attitude of humility—not just personally but institutionally—in order to listen to history through the voices of those marginalized, oppressed and repressed—a humility that allowed those voices to change him, to affect his role as archbishop, to influence the word he spoke, to help shape that space in which the full force of God's liberating action could run its course.

The result was a Church fiercely relevant and alive, at the service of its people, a voice so authentic that its message was immediately recognized—both when it denounced sin and when it announced the good news to the poor, when it announced the coming of salvation into the world and in what way it was coming about. That, of course, is why he was so loved—and so hated. As with the case of Jesus of Nazareth, salvation was not a neutral word.

This commitment to total honesty with history, with the conditions that existed in his country, and to bringing the light of the Gospel to that history, implied a shift in orientation for the Church of El Salvador. As in much of Latin America, the Salvadoran Church had been historically tied to the economic and political elites. Church leaders appeared at inaugurations of military dictators to bless their regimes. Romero was the first to refuse to do so, and this after the murder of Fr. Rutilio Grande, S.J., just weeks after Romero's installation as archbishop.

But when Romero looked at his world of El Salvador and saw there, as he described so eloquently in his famous address to Louvain University, February 2, 1980:

“the real faces of the poor, about which Puebla speaks” (the landworkers living in misery), “factory workers who have no labor rights...human beings who are at the mercy of cold economic calculations...the mothers and the wives of those who have disappeared or who are political prisoners...the shantytown dwellers, whose wretchedness defies the imagination, suffering the permanent mockery of the nearby mansions” (then it was) “within this world devoid of human face, this contemporary sacrament of the suffering servant of Yahweh, that the Church of my archdiocese has undertaken to incarnate itself.”⁶

In other words, this encounter with the poor of El Salvador meant a shift in the position of the Church within that history. It meant breaking with structures of sin that cause this massive human suffering, this defacing of the image of God in the human person.

This incarnation is not an action that comes from outside the world but from within it, modeling the incarnation of the gospel. Following Jesus' action, this Church goes close to the world of the poor, the ones who are suffering the inhuman violation of their dignity, a dignity made sacred not only by the incarnation but in God's very act of creation when the human being was made in the image of God. It goes to the outcast, the Samaritans, the lepers, the prostitutes, and the tax collectors, and from there it searches for the truth of how God is acting in history to redeem this situation and to liberate the human person.

And so Romero took his Church to this world devoid of human face—in this case the peasants, the factory workers, the unemployed, the outcast and marginalized, the tortured, the families of the disappeared. And he let the implications of his vantage point change the orientation of his Church, its institutional structures, the mission of service to its people:

“This coming closer to the world of the poor is what we understand both by the incarnation and by conversion. The changes that were needed within the Church and in its apostate, in education, in religious and priestly life, in lay movements, which we had not brought about simply by looking inward upon the Church, we are now carrying out by turning ourselves outward toward the world of the poor.”⁷

In this way and from this vantage point, “the Church makes its option for the poor—for the truly poor, not for the fictitiously poor...for those who are really oppressed and repressed”⁵—an option made from within history, within the society in which the poor find themselves, within a necessarily political reality formed by structures that shape and enforce a situation of sin reflected in the violation of the dignity of the poor person, a sin that defaces the image of God:

“From this vantage point and within this reality, the Church must then respond to the de facto sociopolitical world in which it exists. What we have discovered is that this demand is a fundamental one for the faith, and that the Church cannot ignore it.” He insists that he is not talking here about a political project; instead, “I am talking of something more profound, something more in keeping with the gospel. I am talking about an authentic option for the poor, of becoming incarnate in their world, of proclaiming the good news to them, of giving them hope, of encouraging them to engage in a liberating praxis, of defending their cause and of sharing their fate.”⁹

This after all is what Jesus did and what he called his community of followers to do.

Jesuit theologian, Jon Sobrino, who was a major collaborator in this project of Romero’s Church, has reflected that, in bringing the Church to the world of the poor and allowing the Church, the institution, episcopacy of the archdiocese of San Salvador, to be truly impacted by that, Romero made the Church a space in which the poor found a home, an authentic expression of their

aspirations, a place where their truth could be spoken, where they could become both subject of and collaborator with the pastoral work and prophetic word of the Church, where this word from and of the poor could open space in which the full force for liberation might run its course. Sobrino wrote:

“What he succeeded in doing was ‘institutionalizing’ the preferential option for the poor. To ‘institutionalize,’ in this instance, does not mean to bureaucratize or trivialize. On the contrary, it means that not only should Christians as individuals make this option for the poor but so should the Church as such, placing at the disposal of the poor the resources that the Church, as an institution, has at its own disposal. Precisely because he was the archbishop and therefore the foremost representative of the institutional Church, it became possible to speak of the Church of the poor. Because of him the people could judge the various ecclesiastical institutions by that criterion: the defense of the poor and the oppressed.”¹⁰

This also had implications for how Romero saw the role of institutional power and authority. Romero believed that the Church should be an institution exercising power not from above but from within history and at the service of the people:

“The institutional power of the Church,” wrote Sobrino, “ought to be exercised through means that are proper to the Church, especially through the word that creates awareness, and not through politico-ecclesiastical means, always on the lookout for concessions from the state. It ought to be exercised for the good of the people, and not for the good of the institution to the detriment of the people.”¹¹

Church authority as exercised in its decision-making was affected as well. While Romero took total responsibility for the decisions he made as archbishop and the teachings expressed in his pastoral letters and homilies, these were also

a reflection of broad collaboration with pastoral workers, with base communities, with the theologians. This collaboration was fundamental to his model of leadership and still another reason why his words were spoken with such authenticity and relevance. They were a reflection of the national reality and of the witness of the Church within it gleaned from the varied experiences, sufferings, pastoral efforts, and perspectives of the people God at many levels of society.

What, then, does all of this say about how Archbishop Romero showed a commitment to the institution while at the same time expressing his prophetic and pastoral ministry? Key to answering that question is appreciation of how much Oscar Romero loved his Church. Because of that love, it was essential for him that this Church witness with complete integrity before the people and credibility in the word it preached.

Let me share an example of what I mean.

Romero was often accused by his opponents within the Salvadoran Church hierarchy of creating division, and therefore scandal, within the Church. These complaints, sent to Rome on an ongoing basis, hurt Romero deeply. He understood what it meant to present a divided Church to his people and indeed he struggled almost daily with this problem. Not only were his efforts at dialogue with his opponents within the Salvadoran Bishops Conference rebuffed, but he found himself the target of conspiracies to undermine his efforts, and a campaign to induce the Vatican to assign a coadjutor who would take real authority away from him.

As painful as this was, Romero did not believe that he was the source of scandal. What hurt him deeply was to see fellow bishops, such as the papal nuncio and Bishop Eduardo Alvarez, the military vicar, wedded to the very elite classes and military leaders who were committing massacres and murders, torture and disappearances, who were killing his priests and defaming the work of the Church. This was, for him, the real scandal to the Church. In his second pastoral letter, we find him lamenting the fact that there were some within the Church who did not contribute to real unity:

“either out of ignorance, or in order to defend their own interests.” He believed some of them to be “anchored in false

traditionalism,” unwilling to “hear the voice of Vatican II and of Medellín. They have been scandalized at the Church’s new face.”

But he believed passionately that real unity within the Church rests not in a superficial unity of authority and structure, but in the authenticity with which it takes up its commitment to follow Jesus Christ. For him this was expressed in part by the tremendous solidarity that his Church was receiving from within and outside El Salvador. He saw this solidarity from so many levels—his own priests, religious, lay pastoral leaders, grassroots communities, episcopal conferences in other countries, a growing international faith-based solidarity movement—as a sign of the real unity within the Church and also a sign of the unifying power of the Church in its true mission. He wrote:

“But, yet again, the events of recent months remind us that Christian unity comes not only from verbal confession of the same faith but also from putting that faith into practice. It arises out of a common effort, a shared mission. It comes from fidelity to the Word and to the demands of Jesus Christ, and it is cemented in common suffering. Unity in the Church is not achieved by ignoring the reality of the world in which we live.”¹²

This represents a fierce dedication to the institution of the Church. Romero saw his role in part as cleansing the Church of its historical participation in the structural sin that had—and still does—oppress the people of El Salvador. This participation had separated the Church from the very people who are the subjects of its mission, subjects of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In the same way, Romero was often criticized for presenting an “exclusive” word, of leaving out of his word the rich, the business classes, the elite families of El Salvador, many of whom saw themselves as patrons of the Church. Not so, said Romero. He invited them to participate in the saving action of God by being converted—like Zaccheus. The word he offered them was also one of liberation from structures that oppress others, by liberating themselves from those structures. He longed for this conversion, longed to be able to

announce as Jesus did on that evening with Zaccheus, “today salvation has come to this house” (Lk. 19:9).

For here, too, there was the scandal of division—division between extremes of rich and poor, between wealthy landowners and the impoverished peasants whose labor they exploited, between factory owners and the workers from whom they withheld a just wage. And in this traditionally Catholic nation the scandal was only deepened by the fact that both sides of the divide often claimed the same Catholic faith.

This was a real and scandalous division, and Romero therefore invited all his people to participate in a liberating project that could heal these wounds among God’s people. It was not a superficial institutional unity that was his focus, but the unity an institution bound by a common purpose: the individual social, political, and economic liberation of the whole person, as articulated at the second Vatican Council and Medellín.

Romero’s commitment to the institution of the Church meant being committed, even to the point of martyrdom, to putting that Church at the service of this project. The depth with which Romero felt this commitment is reflected in the joy and gratification that he experienced after his visits to Rome. For example, Pope Paul VI, for whom he held a deep respect and even reverence, encouraged him to remain strong, to be courageous.

What this support meant to Romero is clearly expressed in the reflections he wrote in his diary regarding these papal visits. For example, he writes of his 1978 audience with Pope Paul:

“The Pope made us sit one on each side of him and addressing himself to me in particular, he took my right hand and kept it between his two hands for a long time. I also took the Pope’s hands in my two hands.”

It was a moment that “expressed such intimate communion between a bishop and the center of Catholic unity”

The Pope told him:

“I understand your difficult work, it is a work that can be misunderstood; it requires a great deal of patience and a great deal of strength. I already know that not everyone thinks like you do, that it is difficult in the circumstances of your country to have this unanimity of thinking. Nevertheless, proceed with courage, with patience, with strength, with hope.”¹³ Which is exactly what he did. Friends and colleagues said he came back revitalized by this message of support from “the center of Catholic unity.”

Romero never intended to take his Church on any course that would estrange his archdiocese from the universal Church committed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Instead, what he tried so hard to do, out of his own deep love for the Church, was to make it more and more reflective of the Gospel, a carrier of the story of Jesus, a living body recognizable by the people. He sought to make it into a space where people could recognize their truth—and say yes to it. Some might hate him for it and want him dead; others would find themselves born to a new life.

When Romero was first appointed to the episcopate, he chose as his episcopal motto the phrase, *sentir con la iglesia*-(to be of one mind and heart with the Church). As he lived out his ministry as Archbishop of San Salvador, we see that this was not a passive following of the institutional Church’s authority, but a commitment to build the Church into the Body of Christ, into a space ever more identified with Christ, into a Church that promotes, as quoted above, “the solutions that seem most likely to bring the reign of God into being.”

What then does Oscar Romero have to say to us in the United States today? What challenge does he pass on to us regarding our commitment to the institutional Church? Were his word and example only for El Salvador at that particular moment in its history, or is there truly some more universal vision of Church embodied here?

Some have tried to minimize Romero’s challenge by saying exactly the former—that his word and pastoral model were only meant for El Salvador and, after all, we live in different circumstances, a different “particularity,” a different

history. But I would challenge us to look more closely at our world, to see its true condition, and ask ourselves what it would mean for our institutional Church here in the US to ever more deeply immerse itself in the reality of the world. On a global scale the circumstances we face are all too similar to those of El Salvador. Disparities in wealth are growing, poverty touches the vast majority of our sisters and brothers. Structures of injustice actively and aggressively promoted, especially in the economic models that now predominate, are pushing millions into death, poverty, misery, and exploitation. The wealth of the minority rests on the backs of impoverished workers and unemployed whose very exploitation supports our ability to consume. Violence pervades this system, with civil wars, massacres, torture, and other forms of degrading human treatment all too common in our world. We are even to the point where our level of consumption is threatening the environment that sustains our human life on this planet.

And in El Salvador we found out that Romero's history was also our history—our story was part of the story of El Salvador.

Along with this history, we also have still the social teachings of the Church, emboldened now in its critique of economic systems that are causing such injustice and misery in our world. So what must the Church look like in this world if it is to authentically be the Body of Christ still present in our history? How must it organize itself in order to have its word immediately recognized as authentic, as the truth about the human condition, about sin, and about the saving action of God within this history?

It is the challenge that I articulated in the beginning—a challenge to ask ourselves once again what the Church was created to be and at the service of what mission. It is a challenge to put the Church at the service of the reign of God in an ever-flowing and evolving manner, to assess the needs and aspirations of the suffering people, whose wretchedness defies the imagination, suffering the permanent mockery of the wealth of our incredible levels of consumption and expectations regarding lifestyle—and to do so from their vantage point.

Finally, I would remind us once again as I conclude these reflections that Romero revitalized his Church. The authenticity of his witness caused vocations to rise, brought the energies of hundreds of catechists and delegates of the word into the pastoral work of the Church, revitalized parishes and gave energy to the base community movement. Thousands upon thousands of Salvadorans

were willing to follow the Word of the Church, even in the face of persecution, because the gospel had become alive for them.

So from this commitment of Oscar Romero to his Church we have a lesson to learn about how to renew life and energy within the institution.

In a speech delivered at Georgetown University upon receiving an honorary doctorate, Romero said:

“The Church has the same task as before—that of redeeming persons from sin and leading them to eternal life—but it starts from the situation in this world where there exists the duty of planting the reign of God now.”¹⁴

This implies making the institution fertile ground where the seeds can be planted and nurtured.

This is what Romero did, and in doing so left us a legacy of great love for and fidelity to the institutional life of the Church.

Endnotes

- 1 Archbishop Oscar Romero, *Voice of the Voiceless* (The Four Pastoral Letters and Other Statements), trans. by Michael J. Walsh (Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1985), p. 70.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 73.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 74.
- 4 “The Church’s Mission amid the National Crisis” in *Voice of the Voiceless*, p. 150.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 130.
- 6 “The Political Dimension of the Faith from the Perspective of the Option for the Poor” in *Voice of the Voiceless*, p. 179—80.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 180.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 182—83.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 182.
- 10 “Theologian’s View” in *Voice of the Voiceless*, p. 31.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

- 12 *Voice of the Voiceless*, p. 81.
- 13 *Archbishop Oscar Romero, a Shepherd's Diary*, trans. by Irene Hodgson (St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1993), p. 69.
- 14 *Voice of the Voiceless*, p. 164.

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