



The Empowering Spirit of Archbishop Romero: A Personal Testimony

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On 24 March 1980, Archbishop Romero was shot to death, and today we are probably killing him again. Still, the empowering spirit of Romero might be communicated to a new generation of men and women who were only children when Romero's prophetic words, "Cease the repression!", echoed across the radio waves of El Salvador. Today, thanks to a historic peace accord, the brutal political violence of the 1970s and 1980s has subsided. However, to simply repeat Romero's critique of repression in this context may be to let his words fall deafly on our times.

To keep his spirit alive, we should bear in mind the transformation which Romero himself underwent. Although often characterized as a sudden, radical conversion from cleric to prophet, the change in his relationship with the people of El Salvador was gradual. From the beginning of his service to the San Miguel Diocese, an assignment which was to last twenty-two years, Romero was sensitive to the plight of the poor who form the vast majority of Salvadoran society. He gave shelter to drunken persons on the street and asked the wealthy for money, which he would redistribute to the hungry. However, this was only an "external" relationship to poverty.

All of that changed when Romero became the bishop of Santiago de Maria and began to know the poor not simply as beggars in the street but as working people struggling to survive inhuman conditions. His diocese was flooded every year during the coffee-picking season with peasants who came from all over the country to work in the *cafetales*, and who, after a hard day's labor, would have to sleep on the ground. Appalled, Romero provided them with shelter in empty seminary buildings and began to wonder how the owners of the coffee *fincas* — Christian families who would go to church on Sundays and partake of the Eucharist—could treat their workers in such a manner. These reflections led him to examine the structural roots of poverty.

Romero was also moved by a massacre in his diocese in July of 1975. He visited the scene, and the brutalized and tortured bodies he saw led him to write a confidential letter to President Molina denouncing the practices of the security forces. Nevertheless, he remained unwilling to take a public stand on behalf of the poor.

Finally the National Guard's assassination of one of the priests of his diocese, Fr. Rutilio Grande, completed the transformation of Romero from a giver of charity to a vocal advocate of justice. He no longer saw the poor merely as objects of compassion, but as persons and as agents of change. Though a quiet man, his voice seemed to swell with strength at mass on Sunday when he would publicly denounce injustice and violence, willingly confronting the government and the military. In one Sunday homily, he adamantly critiqued the corruption in the judicial system. Members of the judiciary followed on Monday with a full-page ad in the newspaper denouncing Romero and demanding that he produce evidence for his accusations. I was among the lawyers who subsequently counseled Romero that he stood no chance in court against the court itself, and we advised him to drop the issue in the hope that it would die away. The following Sunday, I listened with extra attentiveness to the Archbishop's weekly radio homily and gasped in disbelief as Romero followed his usual lengthy theological exposition with another attack on the judicial corruption.

How can this voice, which challenged the war-torn El Salvador of the 1970s with the hope and vision of the Gospel of Jesus Christ be a transforming influence yet today? I believe the significance of Romero's life does transcend

the particular historical configurations of his era, and I suggest to you three ways in which his spirit might continue to empower El Salvador.

First, the transformation in Romero's relationship to the poor is a testimony to the importance of attending to the structural and social roots of poverty. Thankfully, the political violence in El Salvador has subsided. The peace accord is a fundamental re-ordering of the Salvadoran public, but—as important as it is—it is only the beginning of the changes the society must undergo. It does not begin to address the economic problems of the country, which now clamor for attention. The trend towards absolutization of the market does not prioritize the provision of bread and basic goods to the majority of the Salvadoran people, and it threatens the persistence of material and cultural poverty. My feeling would be that Romero would not like neo-liberal economics.

Romero's life also speaks to us today by virtue of the Archbishop's tireless call for dialogue and negotiation. In a society that was terribly polarized, a society in which the usual way to relate to persons with whom one disagreed was to assassinate them, Romero always tried to open a space for communication, conversation, and understanding. In 1980, for example, as an attempt at co-governance by military and civilian leaders was about to disintegrate, Romero brought the opposing sides together for four hours of talks, urging that the junta be given another chance. His example of bridge-building can be of particular importance to an El Salvador in which political change is often seen as a process of flipping over the tortilla, so that those on the bottom of society take the place of those on top. Romero's life suggests a different model of societal transformation. As El Salvador enters a critical juncture in the peace process as UN observers prepare to leave and those disgruntled by the accord's outcome may be tempted again to engage in violence, Romero's plea for forgiveness and reconciliation is of paramount significance.

Lastly, Romero can inspire by the manner in which he brought together Christianity and politics. Drawing on Pius XII's theology of the mystical body of Christ, Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes*, and his own living relationship with the Salvadoran people, Romero testified that the church must be the voice of the voiceless and the incessant defender of life. The church must passionately pursue justice—but without identifying itself with any one particular party or any one particular ideology. This can be a very difficult struggle, as the entries in

Romero's diary suggest. To walk this tightrope was especially challenging in the El Salvador of the '70s, which was so highly politicized that people were often not seen as persons, but instead, were identified only on the basis of their membership in political organizations. In this context, I remember that Romero always asked me when I arrived to discuss politics, "How are your children? How is your wife?" And while he tirelessly defended the right of the poor to organize, he was very critical of popular organizations which became overly or one-sidedly political. His wariness of politicization is especially important to El Salvador today, I believe, as the country struggles to move from being a narrowly political society to being a civil community. The testimony of the life of Oscar Romero—a man who addressed the structural roots of poverty and related to the poor as persons, a man who incessantly sought forgiveness and reconciliation, a man who gave his life because he believed both that Christ impels us to seek justice and that our ultimate liberation is not of this world—can thus be reinterpreted for our times. If we fail to do so, we risk transforming the living reality of Romero into a statue.

"Beloved young people," Romero said in a homily in 1978, "the older generation (my own, I regret) is leaving you a heritage of so much selfishness, of so much evil." The living reality of the martyred Archbishop is itself, in contrast, a legacy of compassionate goodness, love in the face of hatred, hope in the face of terrible suffering, deep faith, and homiletic words which can indeed still challenge us today: "Renew, new wheat, newly sown crops, fields still fresh from God's hand. Children, youths: be a better world."

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