

**The Poetry of the Peacemaker:  
Saint Oscar Romero and the Catholic Vision of Peace**

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[ABSTRACT]

A voice from the dark called out,  
‘The poets must give us  
imagination of peace, to oust the intense, familiar  
imagination of disaster. Peace, not only  
the absence of war.’

– Denise Levertov, “Making Peace”

In this paper I examine the contributions of St. Oscar Romero to Catholic social teaching on violence and peace. I attend to his reflections on these themes as he developed them in his Third Pastoral Letter (with Bishop Arturo Rivera y Damas), “The Church and the Popular Political Organizations” (1978), and his Fourth Pastoral Letter, “The Church’s Mission Amid the National Crisis” (1979). I also refer to his famous Louvain address, “The Political Dimension of the Faith from the Perspective of the Option for the Poor” (1980) and his text for an address he was not able to give, “Pastoral Message to the National Council of Churches” (1979).

As I examine St. Romero’s clear summary of Catholic teaching on violence and peace, I will also draw upon an essay I published in 2002 in *The Journal for Peace and Justice Studies* entitled “Archbishop Oscar Romero: Peacemaker in the Tradition of Catholic Social Thought,” along with several other essays of my own, the biography written by James Brockman and his short collection, *The Violence of Love*, the two recent books by Dr. Michael Lee and Dr. Edgardo Colon-Emerich, the essays of Jon Sobrino, and other relevant secondary sources.

For this paper, however, I wish also to draw upon two other primary sources – the homilies and prophetic actions of St. Romero – to show that his “Catholic vision” is not exhausted in the clear and careful language of social ethical argument. It also lives in the beauty and passion of his ministry and his life. To show this, I make an appeal to the art of poetry. I do not claim that St. Romero was himself a poet in the sense that “he wrote poetry.” Rather, in my second section, I seek to uncover the strands of poetic beauty that can be found in his remarkable homilies and in his prophetic living, and to correlate selected examples of his “poetic” exhortations and actions with the themes laid out so clearly in his social teachings on peace.

In the final section of this paper I will draw some comparisons between the witness of the archbishop and peacemaker, St. Romero, and that of the British-born American poet and social activist, Denise Levertov. I will draw especially on the poem cited above, “Making Peace,” along with several others drawn from her magnificent oeuvre, to reflect on the poetic quality of St. Romero’s witness to peace and peacemaking.

## Abstract and Outline

### [OUTLINE]

#### Introduction

1. The Logic of Peace and the Vocation of the Peacemaker
  - a. The Christian peacemaker is not passive, but active and constructive
  - b. Peace is the fruit of justice; justice itself is peace
    - i. Delineating six faces of violence
  - c. Christian peace confronts violence with nonviolence at the cost of a suffering love
  - d. The sanctity of individual and communal human life, not the right to self-defense, is the moral principle that sums up St. Romero's witness to peace
2. A Poetic Voice: St. Romero's Preaching and Prophetic Actions
  - a. The 'única misa of Rutilio Grande's funeral: denouncing repression and persecution while announcing the unity and vocation of the Church
  - b. The symbolic power of the pastoral letters and the letter to President Carter: seeking peace in the grammar of justice and the syntax of solidarity
  - c. Refusing special protection in the face of threats and suffering the fate of the martyrs: the violence of love
  - d. From Aguilares to the unfinished Cathedral: finding the scourged Christ in the suffering people
3. In the Footsteps of Jesus
  - a. Jesus the Poet
  - b. Levertov's political mysticism: the poet as activist, the activist as disciple
  - c. Levertov's libretto, "El Salvador: Requiem and Invocation"
  - d. St. Oscar Romero and the poet, Denise Levertov, on the vocation and vision of the Christian peacemaker

**Abstract and Outline**

**MAKING PEACE**

*Denise Levertov*

A voice from the dark called out,  
'The poets must give us  
imagination of peace, to oust the intense, familiar  
imagination of disaster. Peace, not only  
the absence of war.'

But peace, like a poem,  
is not there ahead of itself,  
can't be imagined before it is made,  
can't be known except  
in the words of its making,  
grammar of justice,  
syntax of mutual aid.

A feeling towards it,  
dimly sensing a rhythm, is all we have  
until we begin to utter its metaphors,  
learning them as we speak.

A line of peace might appear  
if we restructured the sentence our lives are making,  
revoked its reaffirmation of profit and power,  
questioned our needs, allowed  
long pauses . . .

A cadence of peace might balance its weight  
on that different fulcrum; peace, a presence,  
an energy field more intense than war,  
might pulse then,  
stanza by stanza into the world,  
each act of living  
one of its words, each word  
a vibration of light—facets  
of the forming crystal.

from *Breathing the Water*, p. 40  
(New York: New Directions Press, 1987)