

The Relevance of a Contemporary Saint

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INTRODUCTION

From a superficial, although relatively widespread, way of thinking, holiness refers only to the private sphere of religious persons and their practice of individual virtues. Officially there are martyrs of chastity, or persons declared saints for their charity or prayer. But practically there are no official martyrs or saints who have reached this qualification for their dedication and defense of the structural aspects of the Social Doctrine of the Church. In 1989, after the assassination of the Jesuit university students in El Salvador, Cardinal Silvestrini insisted that "we have to call these students martyrs now, we cannot wait 50 years". And he added that they were martyrs of the Social Doctrine of the Church. At the moment, the times were not opportune, and it was necessary to wait for Bishop Romero to open the door to that style of sanctity. Romero's case opens new dimensions in this regard. His martyrdom and personal holiness soon transcended into the public sphere and made him a new model of holiness, a paradigm of social responsibility and transforming action in the world in which we live. With obstacles within the Church, the process of recognition began to open up beyond ecclesial borders. With less bureaucratic red tape and less discernment processes, other Christian Churches, such as the Anglican and Lutheran Churches, as well as international lay institutions, began to point out aspects of this new style of holiness, so necessary for today's world.

In fact, on December 21, 2010, the United Nations General Assembly declared March 24 as "International Day for the Right to the Truth concerning Gross Violations of Human Rights and for the Dignity of Victims". The United Nations website adds that "with this International Day we pay tribute every year to the memory of Monsignor Óscar Arnulfo Romero, assassinated on March 24, 1980". According to the UN publication, the day seeks to promote the memory of the victims, highlight the importance of the right to truth and justice, honor those who defend human rights or have lost their lives defending them and recognize in particular the work and values of Monsignor Romero in defense of the dignity and rights of the most vulnerable. And finally, it invites us to follow the pacifist example and deep humanity of Romero, describing as exemplary "his constant calls for dialogue and his opposition to all forms of violence to avoid armed confrontation (which) cost him his life on March 24, 1980"¹. If there were a lay canon of exemplary human behavior, we could say that the United Nations would have canonized him before the Church.

Taking into account the universal repercussion of his work and his evangelical dedication to the victims of socio-political confrontations, both in El Salvador and at the worldwide level, it is evident that St. Oscar Romero is a saint for the present time. A saint in his historical era, so close to the Second Vatican Council and the documents of Medellín and Puebla, and a saint for our present time, in which the awareness of the need to fight against human suffering has grown strongly, especially when it is human beings, our decisions or our own social and cultural structures, that cause suffering to our fellow human beings. Romero's words had an impact and gave hope especially to the poor and to all people of goodwill. Those who came close to him in those tragic years admired and proclaimed his prophetic

¹ <https://www.un.org/es/observances/right-to-truth-day>

courage and his permanent solidarity with the victims, his systematic proposal for peace, and respect for the rights of the poorest and most marginalized. Today, his personal testimony of simplicity and poverty, living in a humble apartment in the Hospital de la Divina Providencia, where he was welcomed by some Carmelite nuns caring for terminally ill cancer patients, continues to have an impact.

Although both the Word of the Lord and the ecclesial documents supported the evangelical option of Bishop Romero to defend the victims of history, not all Salvadoran Christians were in tune with him at that time. The conservative environment, dominant in a good number of Salvadoran bishops and some Salvadoran priests, was undoubtedly the cause of the bishop's freedom and prophecy entering into a clear confrontation not only with the oppressors and violators of human rights in El Salvador but also with some of his brothers in the episcopate. Bishop Aparicio, bishop of San Vicente, a neighboring diocese of San Salvador, did not hesitate to tell him in the midst of discussions in the Episcopal Conference, two years before our martyr was killed: "You are dividing the country and have confused the nation"². Others, priests, and bishops accused Bishop Romero of having a weak personality that made him repeat what he was told by a group of priests and religious who had him practically kidnapped in the offices of the archbishopric, practically dedicated to brainwashing him.

As if this were not enough, four Salvadoran bishops also sent a letter to Rome accusing Monsignor Romero of being dominated by an alleged "ideology of the Popular Church" contrary to the right ecclesial doctrine: "The archbishop not only allows it, but he himself demonstrates with his attitude, and more than once in his homilies, that he himself is infected by that ideology"³, said the four denouncers, almost declaring him a heretic. It is not strange, in this context, that the canonization process moved slowly and that the human value and evangelical radicalism of Bishop Romero was officially recognized earlier by other Churches or by the United Nations. It was at the beginning of the present century when the Anglican Church placed in one of the porticoes of Westminster Cathedral the image of Monsignor Romero, together with nine other martyrs of the 20th century. The novelty of Romero's sanctity was making its way beyond a tradition that left the Social Doctrine of the Church for the showcase of doctrines and refused to think that in Christian societies there could be hatred of the faith or of the attitudes and works that stem from the faith.

In the 2003 Synod, dedicated to the episcopal function in the Church, Bishop Romero was mentioned and the horizon began to become clearer. Cardinal Gregorio Rosa Chavez presented the qualities of today's saint Romero. John Paul II, in the apostolic exhortation *Pastores Gregis*, gathered the feelings of the bishops gathered in Rome and made a definition of bishop in the face of the challenges of the contemporary world that helped to glimpse the new style of sanctity. To begin with, the Pope defined the current situation as a world in which there was a "war of the powerful against the weak" that produced "very strong structural dissonances", aggravating day by day the situation of the marginalized. In this context, the way of Jesus was an example for all, for he came "to proclaim freedom to the oppressed and the year of the Lord's favor (*Lk 4:16-21*)," teaching us "that Christian hope is intimately linked to zeal for the integral promotion of man and society. For this reason, in situations of injustice, the Pope said, the bishop "is a defender of human rights... he takes up the defense of the weak... he is a defender and father of the poor, he is concerned for justice and human rights, he is a bearer of hope." And in a phrase that reminds us directly of Romero, he concludes by

² James Brockman, *The Word Remains*, San Salvador 2015 pg173

³ *Ibidem*

saying that the bishop must become "the voice of those who have no voice to assert their rights"⁴. A dimension of socio-political holiness was making its way into the Church's thinking.

Benedict XVI, still under pressure from cardinals of the Curia clearly opposed to the beatification of Archbishop Romero, began to unblock the process of canonization, and Pope Francis gave momentum and speed to the process whose culmination was already expected by many people, and not only in Latin America. The date of his beatification finally arrived in 2015 and his canonization in 2018. Once the door to a new model of sanctity with a personal, social, and political dimension was opened, he was soon followed in the beatification by other martyrs, also from El Salvador, such as Rutilio Grande, a Jesuit, his two lay companions, and Cosme Spessotto, a Franciscan. Other Latin American cases are opening up. The existence of martyrs in Christian societies, where hatred of the faith was primarily political, even if it also had religious connotations, was opening up after a long process in which the socio-political dimension of Christianity had created strong clashes in Latin American and world ecclesial life. On this political sanctity, capable of generating repudiation and even persecution on the part of Christian sectors, we will reflect briefly before moving on to other aspects of the life of Bishop Romero that show us paths of responsibility for the times in which we live.

POLITICAL SANCTITY

To qualify as political forms of the holiness of profound actuality may at first disconcert us. But in a society where social structures have an enormous weight on people's conscience, and where power, possessions, and pleasure have an enormous social weight and replace ancient divinities in a secular way, Christianity necessarily has political repercussions. Although it was neither the only one nor probably the fundamental reason, the persecutions in the first centuries of our era had also partially their political dimension. The emperor, Caesar as a person and as an institution, was practically deified. He was entrusted by the gods to be the Lord of history and deserved the respect of a being with a halo of divinity. In the third century persecuted Christians could escape persecution by saying before a statue of Caesar that Caesar was the Lord of history. Christians had the radical faith and conviction that the only Lord of History was the Lord Jesus. And they often accepted to die rather than repeat those words of adherence to Caesar. So much so, that at times the Caesars did not accept Christians in their armies, and the Christians themselves saw it as wrong for a convert to take up the profession of arms. Although the reasons for the persecutions were multiple and diverse, there is no doubt that the divinized dominion of history that the emperors attributed to themselves as a source of confrontation and clash, especially in the third century, the hardest time of the persecutions and the time of the greatest growth of Christianity, especially during the times of peace.

Today, if we take seriously not only the Gospel but also the Social Doctrine of the Church, clashes with ideologies and secular powers can easily arise. Putting the lost sheep above the 99 docile and concentrated in the temple may not please the majority, if the conversion is not adequate. That the poor should be the object of preferential options often offends those who, from their comfort and even their charitable contributions, consider themselves, like the eldest son in the Gospel parable, superior and with more rights than the one who arrives with nothing at the door of the community. The universal destination of goods, if we were to apply it with concrete measures to the serious international differences between poor and rich countries, would undoubtedly produce strong tensions. We need only look at the resistance to establishing a decent percentage of international aid within the GDP of the rich countries. The priority of labor over capital, taken to the field of taxation and in favor of workers, to finance social security, health, etc., is not easily accepted in Christian societies. The

⁴ The quotations are taken from the Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Gregis*, nn 66-67.

affirmations of the Holy Fathers insisted that "when we provide for the needs of the indigent, we are giving them back their things, not giving away what is ours; rather than performing a work of mercy, we are fulfilling a debt of justice"⁵, are not often the most widespread attitudes even among people we consider generous. The words of Pope Francis affirming that "the right of some to freedom of enterprise or of the market cannot be above the rights of peoples, nor above the dignity of the poor, nor above respect for the environment"⁶, are not often the trend in the thinking of large mining companies, to give but one example, especially in the Third World.

In other words, beyond the virtuous life of the individual, there is a dimension of Christian love that leads us to confront the abuse of the weak, to defend what we call social justice, understood as the action of "making all human beings equal in fact with regard to the rights of humanity"⁷ or basic rights. Money, power, fame, and prestige, as well as the selfish pleasure that transfers consumption even to human relationships, acquire in our time tints of absolute that recall the veneration of ancient pagan divinities. To oppose contemporary idolatries can be seen in some respects as something outdated, but in areas where money and power are present, it can lead to persecution, the attempt of personal disqualification, and in some cases even to death. The imprisonment in Nicaragua of the bishop of Matagalpa, Bishop Rolando Alvarez, shows how complicated it can be in a dictatorship to be a defender of the poor and their rights. The social struggle often awakens in some Christian sectors a kind of fear of hatred and violence, while leading to inaction or to the prudent taking of so many precautions that the word becomes inoperative and inconsequential. Only the new martyrs end up opening our eyes.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Bishop Romero, and so many others, end up sanctifying commitments and actions that many of us did not dare to see as paths to holiness. This type of holiness is clearly rooted in the ancient martyrial tradition, prophetic, resistant, enemy of idolatries, and believer in Jesus as Lord of history. But at the same time, it is novel among us because it is not the confession of faith that is being pursued, but the critical capacity of faith and the ways of acting in confrontation with the established powers. Spiritualizing martyrdom too much can lead to not seeing the strength of political holiness, so indispensable to face the structural problems of the world in which we live. The Lutheran theologian J. Moltmann warns us that "churches that forget their political martyrs (understanding the term in this sense) are in danger of accommodating themselves to the political religion of the society in which they live"⁸. The temptation of every religion is to become an instrument of justification of the existing and dominant. The martyrs always speak to us from another dimension and question the power that oppresses or that believes itself to be above human dignity. From this evangelical and prophetic style of Romero and others with him, we can draw some lines of evangelical commitment that help us to influence the world and contemporary culture.

DISCERNMENT AND CHOICE

If anything is striking about Bishop Romero, it is the leap he makes from a traditional religious position to a prophetic commitment, flooded with evangelical freedom. So much so that there has been discussion of a kind of conversion, especially after the assassination of Rutilio Grande, the Jesuit parish

⁵ St. Gregory the Great, PL 77, p.87

⁶ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 122

⁷ The phrase in quotation marks corresponds to the first mention and definition of the concept of social justice, in a treatise on natural law by Father Luigi Tapparelli in 1843.

⁸ J. MOLTSMANN, *La Iglesia fuerza del Espíritu*, Salamanca 1978, pg 118.

priest of Aguilares, a town near San Salvador, and a personal friend of Romero. Although the archbishop's change was remarkable since he took office, in my opinion, it was the fruit of discernment. Even before arriving in El Salvador, he was very concerned about the situation of political and social violence, which had been worsening in the years preceding his appointment. In his small diocese of Santiago de Maria there had been a massacre of peasants attributed to military sectors and death squads, and his pleas for investigation and justice had fallen on deaf ears. In El Salvador, two priests had been deported and mistreated shortly before he took office. Military repression was becoming widespread and protests against a presidential election marked by electoral fraud were being suppressed by gunfire. Taking office as archbishop led him from the first moment to ask for support from priests open to the lines of the Second Vatican Council and the documents of the Latin American bishops gathered in Medellin. He knew, in short, that he could not resolve a complex situation alone, much less by supporting repressive violence, which was becoming more intense and cruel every day.

Without downplaying the strong impact of the assassination of Fr. Rutilio Grande, of whom he was a personal friend, on the new archbishop, the change of Romero took place at a time of accumulation of circumstances in which corruption, electoral fraud and the bloody repression of peaceful protests and criticism, both from political and civil society as well as from the Church, came together. From prudence and caution in complex situations, which was the characteristic tendency of Bishop Romero, the shepherd and pastor sees the need to defend the lives of his sheep. If at first, he was afraid that the prophetic denunciation would support ideologies he did not share or contribute to increasing the existing levels of violence, the growing governmental violence convinces him that he must take the side of the victims with all the force of the prophetic word. The choice for the crucified and risen Christ, who continues to be nailed to the cross of victims and the poor who are denied basic rights, leads him to prophetically confront the powers that continue to multiply suffering.

There is a moment of discernment in which the acceleration of repressive policies leads St. Romero, precisely when he was taking possession of the archbishopric of San Salvador, to prioritize the exercise of prophecy as part of his pastoral responsibility - prophecy not only as a manifestation of truth and denunciation of injustice and violence, but also as an analysis of the causes of violence. In his third and fourth pastoral letters, he identified the causes of violence in El Salvador as a triple idolatry: wealth, power, and organization. This last one with nuances, because he considered the popular organization to achieve justice as positive; but he emphasized, before the abuses of the organizations, that these were not above the rights to integrity and life of the people. And the analysis of the causes led him to draw conclusions about the violence that he later linked to the Gospel and its demand to opt for the poor. That is why he did not hesitate to say that "violent conflicts will not disappear until their ultimate roots disappear. Therefore, as long as the causes of the present misery are maintained and the intransigence of the most powerful minorities who do not want to tolerate minimal changes, the explosive situation will worsen even more. Therefore, the construction of social justice is the most urgent task"⁹.

It was this urgency in the face of a historical reality condemned to failure that awakened his prophetic pastoral work. Reflecting on himself, Romero said in his diary: "What happened in my priestly life, I have tried to explain it to myself as an evolution of my own desire that I have always had to be faithful to what God asks of me; and if before I gave the impression of being more "prudent" and "spiritual" it was because I sincerely believed that I was responding to the Gospel since the circumstances of my ministry had not been so demanding of a *pastoral strength* that in conscience I

⁹ (3rd Pastoral Letter August 6, 1978)

believe was asked of me in the circumstances in which I assumed the archbishopric¹⁰. We can say, quoting Fr. Cardinal, that "the episcopal ministry did not take him out of history, but introduced him to its crossroads, there where the life and death of the people were being decided. The Holy Spirit led him to deal with politics in order to transform the history of perdition into the history of salvation and thus he fought to save the history of El Salvador"¹¹. The martyrdom death of Fr. Rutilio Grande, so united in his pastoral care for the people of God, was more a confirmation of the need for prophetic pastoral than a first awakening force that forced him to a sudden change of options.

In the historical moment in which we live, discernment is indispensable not only for each one of us as individuals but also for the institutions that, from their Christian or humanist inspiration, seek to influence the world in which we live. In the face of unjust inequality, in the face of the poverty of millions of people, or in the face of wars, the fight against human suffering must always be a basic option. It is not legitimate to multiply victims in order to supposedly save the monetary values. Nor can we remain indifferent to what the powers-that-be consider collateral damage because war is never a higher value than the human life of non-combatants. Pope Francis has rightly called for a cease-fire in the war provoked by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, in order to be able to negotiate peace without increasing the number of victims and without being pressured by the competitive spiral of violence that war generates.

The Church has traditionally insisted on the creation of a new civilization. The culture of the culture of fraternity, and the way of the Good Samaritan, are permanent sources of discernment for those who have participated in the discovery of the need and pain of others as a source of personal and social growth. Romero is an example of discernment, which goes as far as what Jesus of Nazareth proposed as the way of salvation: "Love one another as I have loved you" and "No one loves more than he who lays down his life for his friend". Two phrases are deeply interconnected when the friend, the neighbor, is under serious threat and in extreme vulnerability. The words of Monsignor Romero leave us in no doubt in this regard: "Nothing matters as much to me as human life. It is something so serious and profound, more than the violation of any other human right, because that blood only denies love, awakens new hatreds, and makes reconciliation and peace impossible. What is most needed here today is a halt to repression" (Homily of March 16, 1980). These words he would repeat a week later, with a more pressing tone, "Stop the repression!", on the eve of his death. The brutality of wars and Christianity are not compatible realities, even if we Christians have historically fallen into serious contradictions.

RESISTANCE AND STRENGTH

St. Thomas Aquinas affirms in the *Summa Theologica* that fortitude is the virtue proper to martyrdom. The martyrial tradition had insisted on a Greek word frequently used in the New Testament, "hypomania", which St. Jerome translates in the Vulgate as patience or as perseverance on other occasions. The original sense of the word speaks more of steadfast abiding in what one believes or is, in the midst of difficulty or serious adverse situations. This is how St. Paul uses it in his letters, giving it a clear tinge of endurance in the good when evil attacks. It is not strange in this sense that Aquinas said: "It belongs to the rationality of martyrdom that one should remain firm in truth and justice in the face of the persecutor's impetus"¹². Romero's endurance and fortitude were permanently

¹⁰ O. A. Romero, *Diario*, p. 182 (San Salvador, 2000), quoted by M. Maier.

¹¹ Rodolfo Cardenal, El discernimiento en Monseñor Romero, article published in a magazine of the archbishopric dedicated to the beatification of Rutilio Grande.

¹² SAINT THOMAS, STh, II-II, q. 124, art 1

shown in his words and in his activity in defense of the poor, even in the midst of the incomprehension of a good part of the hierarchical Church itself.

And it was not for less. It is impressive to listen to him when he said that "It is my turn to collect atrocities, corpses, and all that is left by the persecution of the Church. Today I have to come and pick up, in this church, in this profaned convent, a destroyed tabernacle, and above all, a humiliated people, unworthily sacrificed. For this reason, as I come, finally - because "I wanted to be with you from the beginning and was not allowed - brothers, I bring you the word that Christ commands me to say to you: a word of solidarity, a word of encouragement and guidance and, finally, a word of conversion". Romero said this on June 19, 1977, practically two months after the murder of Rutilio and his two martyred companions in March, the murder of Fr. Alfonso Navarro in May, and the desecration of the church in Aguilares and the murder of the sacristan, together with the expulsion from the country of three Jesuits who lived in the adjoining rectory. A few months after the assassination of Rutilio, already in October of the same year and always reflecting on reality, Romero commented on the strength of the martyrdom: "The fact is that when they wanted to extinguish the voice of Fr. Grande so that the priests would be afraid and not continue speaking, they have awakened the prophetic sense of our Church"¹³. Discernment about reality was permanent, and resistance and fortitude grew even in the midst of pain and repression.

Two years later, in 1979, three more priests were murdered, all of them secular clergy and in different circumstances. In this context, he commented in one of his homilies that "it would be sad if, in a country where people are being murdered so horribly, we did not count priests among the victims. They are the testimony of a church incarnated in the problems of the people. Such are the feasts of the church. With the blood of martyrdom, with the hope of Christianity"¹⁴. He knew that the next one could be him since he had received threats and warnings in this regard, he felt a natural fear at times, and he preferred to walk alone on his trips to the parishes because he did not want someone else to suffer an attack together with him from those who could attack him. But he resisted his parrhesia and in his prophetic pastoral work, trusting in God. The pressures were great against his prophetic message and solidarity with the poor, and even from Rome, he felt pressures, given the fear that the defense of the poor could serve the pro-communist tendencies of some of the popular organizations. Faced with the Roman insistence to walk in unity with the Episcopal Conference, dominated by bishops of a highly conservative and pro-government disposition, he wrote in his diary the following, a few days before his death: "I am ready to yield for the sake of peace, but never my convictions of fidelity to the Gospel and to the new lines of the Church and to my dear people"¹⁵.

To remain faithful to the Gospel today is not easy, when consumer individualism and the priority of personal interests invade us, when from the networks we receive stimuli and attacks of all kinds, and when post-truth deforms reality to turn it into propaganda. Today, "fake news" can acquire the title of absolute truths, sometimes with almost imperial power. When in the great institutions, whether social, religious, or political, we grow and develop by aggregation of merits, we can forget that previous and fundamental step that roots us as Christians. The apostle Paul, who experienced that the Lord had become poor in order to enrich us with his poverty (2 Cor 8:9), knew that his accumulated qualities, a Pharisee and Bible scholar, Greek speaker, Roman citizen, and with a trade that allowed him to travel, could be considered garbage next to the knowledge and conversion to Jesus Christ (Phil 3:7-8). To resist in the truth of the Lord Jesus, in his generosity and love, to live from his love the

¹³Homily of October 9, 1977.

¹⁴ Homily of 6-24-1979

¹⁵Óscar Arnulfo Romero, His Diary, pg 456, San Salvador, 1990.

preferential option for the poor of this world, to defend the victims of a power that exalts itself and believes itself capable of classifying human beings as superior or inferior, requires a fortitude that we Christians can only find in the grace of our own permanent conversion and in the following of the Lord.

THE JOY OF THE CROSS

To think that the cross can bring any kind of joy is very difficult. Evidently we Christians, since the resurrection of the Lord, can even say "oh happy guilt that deserved us such a Redeemer"¹⁶. But in everyday life, the joy of the cross is only possible if we are convinced that powerlessness can defeat power, that peace is always more important than war, that being a slave to others is more important than dominating them. Romero was one of those people who was convinced of the Gospel words that invite us to follow the Master who did not come to be served but to serve. In the face of the arrogance of money and weapons, of the so-called instrumental reason and of knowledge placed at the service of power, Romero invites us to deepen our Christian hope, which can convert even death for love of neighbor into a multiplying seed of goodness and transforming force. This conviction has been a constant in the martyrdom tradition of the Churches. And the life and dedication of Monsignor Romero demonstrate it once again.

St. John Chrysostom, a fourth century bishop and Doctor of the Church, very similar to Monsignor Romero in his denunciations against the cult of wealth and the power that it entails, said about martyrdom some words that can easily be applied today to Monsignor Romero: "In war, the fall of the combatant is defeat; among us, that is victory. We never win by doing evil, but by suffering it. And the victory is justly more brilliant, because by suffering it we can do more than those who do it. This proves that the victory is God's, for it is a victory contrary to that of the world. And that is the best proof of strength"¹⁷. To have the certainty that we can overcome evil by suffering it peacefully is undoubtedly a grace of the Lord, as is martyrdom, which Monsignor Romero said he did not deserve. But it is at the same time a force that expands. Romero himself said that "there is a violence far superior to that of the tanks and also to that of the guerrillas; it is the violence of Christ: *Father forgive them, for they know not what they do*". It is definitely "the violence of love, the violence of fraternity, the violence that wants to turn weapons into sickles for work"¹⁸. When 43 years have passed since his assassination, the person accused of being the intellectual author of his death has gone from being a powerful symbol of the Salvadoran political right to becoming a shadow of the past smelling of darkness and oblivion. The peaceful and defenseless Monsignor Romero, who was violently torn from the earth and from memory, shines today with a singular light.

This hopeful pacifism, this confidence that the absence of material power can overcome the divinized and often brutal powers of this world, always leads us to work from below, from dialogue with the humble and their needs, and from within the problems, suffering them. Romero was not a teacher who pontificated on truth and morality from his distant chair. He walked with the poor, loved the simple, enjoyed human closeness and suffered the pain of others. And from there, moved by the Gospel, he promoted the transformation of society toward justice and toward that social friendship of which Pope Francis speaks in his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*. It is true that the Church, even with the seed of holiness at its core, is always sinful. And every institution that accumulates power also accumulates a certain arrogance in life. Archbishop Romero knew this and also recognized his errors and the

¹⁶ Proclamation of the Easter Liturgy

¹⁷ J Crisóstomo, Homilies on the Gospel of St. Matthew, BAC, T II, pg 161.

¹⁸ M Romero, homilies of January 21, 1979 and Nov. 27, 1977.

structural weight they could have in the life of the Church. He acknowledged this in his Journal and he acknowledged it to his advisors when he told them that "due to deficiencies in my character, I can sometimes cause resentment or divisions". But while agreeing with them, he added that this "had been one of the points of my examination in last week's spiritual exercise and that it was my intention that, with your help, we should try to work more closely together... and that we should mutually correct each other"¹⁹ so that teamwork would be more effective.

If we can focus the joy of the cross on anything, it is on the fact that throughout our Christian history, and even with all our sins, some of them terrible, we have in our history a long and abundant list of credible witnesses of the resurrection. Monsignor Romero is one of them and for many of us to an exalted degree. Again, St. John Chrysostom said that "the really strongest proof of the resurrection of Christ is that, having suffered violent death, he shows so much power after it, that he persuades living men to despise, for the sake of confessing him, country, family, friends, relatives and life itself; and to prefer to present pleasures the scourges, dangers, and death itself. This cannot be the deed of a dead man lying in the tomb, but the work of him who is risen and alive"²⁰. Identification with the Christ who lives in our hearts and in the faces of those who suffer marginalization and injustice makes those who give their lives for his Gospel witnesses to the resurrection. As we would say in simpler language, no one gives his life for a dead person of two thousand years ago. Only the Lord alive and at work in us, inviting us to take up his cross and follow him alongside those who suffer violence or poverty, can make us witnesses of his resurrection.

For us today, when wars are a daily reality in various countries and often daily news, especially if they touch our own interests, it is up to us to be peacemakers. Wars, said a poet, make souls cold. And it is up to us, followers of Jesus and Romero, to insist that the victims are more valuable than the production of weapons. And to trust that the permanent remembrance of the victims, in prayer, in solidarity, in denouncing and working for peace, can change the conscience of the world in which we live, too often too busy cultivating the law of the strongest. Paraphrasing Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, we must remember, through thought and reflection, through dialogue and even through shouting, that the madness of pacifism and dialogue (the madness of God, says St. Paul) is stronger than the wisdom of the powerful. And that the weakness of the victims (again of God, always identified with the victims) is much stronger than the might of weapons²¹. Every act of violence must be overcome by compassionate and Samaritan reason. From the abuse of the criminal's force to the death penalty, from racism and machismo to any kind of abuse or suffering of the weakest. Strong institutions such as our universities should dedicate a good part of their efforts to overcome, from intelligence and study, from solidarity, compassionate reason, and dialogue, any type of violence coming from those who believe themselves to be stronger or superior, be it a person, a leader, an army or a State.

THE CREATION OF A LIVING PEOPLE

The Second Vatican Council insisted on considering the Church as the People of God. A messianic people whose head is Christ, who offers us all the equal dignity and freedom as children of God, whose supreme mandate is the love with which Jesus himself loved us and who invites us to bring the Kingdom of God closer to the earth²². That Kingdom begun in history by the same God

¹⁹ His Diary, o.c., pg 443.

²⁰ S. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *Panegyric in honor of St. Ignatius of Antioch*, in *Apostolic Fathers*, BAC, pg 627.

²¹ The original text of 1 Cor 1:25 says that "the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of men, and the weakness of God is much stronger than the strength of men".

²² These four notes of the Church are more accurately described by the Second Vatican Council in *Lumen Gentium* 9

who loves us and of which we must be witnesses and builders in our concrete history. The Synodality of which Pope Francis speaks to us is but an insistence on the equal dignity of all of us who walk towards the Kingdom of God and on the co-responsibility of making true the words of the Lord when he said that "the Kingdom of God is already among you" (Lk 17:21).

St. Oscar Romero, we would say today, was a master of synodality. He walked with everyone, especially with those who suffered the most, whether in the charity hospital (Divine Providence) for cancer patients, or with the relatives of the disappeared, murdered and persecuted, or with those who struggled peacefully for justice and peace. He only found it difficult to walk with some of his brother bishops, who were too exalted and in favor of militaristic solutions for the country. The day he was killed he was resting on the beach in the morning with a group of Opus Dei priests, when he returned in the afternoon he went to confession with a Jesuit and finally he was celebrating mass in the Church of the Hospitalito where he lived and where he was shot. The people who picked him up from the ground to take him to the hospital were simple people along with nuns who served the sick. He was, as Paul says, made for all to win at least some (1 Cor 9:22).

The day before taking possession of the archbishopric, Archbishop Romero sent a letter to the priests of the archdiocese in which he asked for their collaboration and offered them friendship, as well as "the human warmth of understanding, mutual respect and forgiveness", offering "the best of my modest service... always accessible, with the simplicity of a friend to your dialogue"²³. The photographs that remain of him remember him surrounded by simple people, drinking coffee with them, with an image that would clearly reflect "a Shepherd with the smell of sheep", as Pope Francis likes to say. Although those were three extremely difficult years, he never abandoned the task of dialogue, of proclaiming the Gospel and accompanying those who suffered, denouncing violence and abuse. Faced with a situation of civil war, the most painful that a people can experience, because of the hatred and divisions, including family divisions that it awakens, Monsignor Romero insisted on the defense of the poor and reconciliation. Father Ellacuría, martyred rector of the Central American University of El Salvador, said that "with Monsignor Romero God passed through El Salvador". He was saying a basic truth: God walks with his people and not only sends them prophets, but servants who actualize in history the presence of the risen Jesus himself. Weak and even sinners, but by the grace of the Lord, images of the Risen One in awakening the hope of a more fraternal and just world.

When we speak of synodality today, we speak of walking together, united in mutual solidarity and without differences that separate us, that path that the Second Vatican Council defines as a pilgrimage "between the persecutions of the world and the consolations of God, proclaiming the cross of the Lord until he comes"²⁴. In this sense, Monsignor Romero is the path of a synodality that rejects no one, that knows how to tell his enemies, from his most intimate conviction, that he forgives and loves them. When today we absolutize thoughts and ideas that lead us to despise people's consciences, when we speak of God's will as if it were written once and for all in a material reality external to us, and when we opt for a kind of moral liberalism subject to the whim of personal convenience, Romero helps us to recognize our errors and indicates to us the Christian synodal posture: to walk with the poor and to place love for the suffering above all conditions. The only non-negotiable thing for our bishop was the love of God and neighbor in total unity. The rest, even if we have to respect and love basic formulations of our faith, can never be opposed to love. When the present Pope chose the name Francis, and continued to name several of his major writings after phrases or ideas of St. Francis, he undoubtedly had in mind the basis of the rule established by the saint: "the rule and life of the Friars Minor is this; to observe the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ". In situations of complexity and

²³ James Brockman, *The Word Remains*, pgs 19 and 20, San Salvador 2015.

²⁴ *Lumen Gentium*, 8

division, Romero shows us once again our need to walk together in the unconditionality of the loving and persevering construction of the Kingdom of God, so often united to the cross of a reality that must be overcome through surrender and love.

CONCLUSION

The memory of Archbishop Romero is not and cannot be a celebration of the past. It must always focus us on the reality in which we live, incarnate us in it and work for the liberation from the evil that surrounds it. In his second pastoral letter, Bishop Romero reminded us that "Christ founded his Church in order to continue to be present himself in the history of mankind... The Church is therefore the flesh in which Christ concretizes, throughout the centuries, his own life and his personal mission"²⁵. From the enormous diversity of personalities, cultures, functions, and institutions of this "body of Christ in history", it is up to us, in a communitarian and synodal style, to seek the incarnation of the Gospel in the events and in the reality of our histories and structural dynamisms. Ellacuría, when speaking of the Universities of Christian inspiration, insisted that they were universities for social change. And that being institutions inserted in the world of culture, they should promote a new style of civilization in which, as opposed to the priority of capital, work would be the center of human development and would make possible the full development of people's capabilities. Romero inspired him in dedication and generosity, as well as in the universality of the good to which the activity and life of Christians and their institutions should always tend. Remembering Romero today only makes sense if we seek in him, inspiration and projection towards the concrete history in which we live, trying to promote in it the newness of the values of the Kingdom from our own vocation as producers of knowledge and creators of culture.

Strong institutions, and universities in general are strong, are always in danger of relying on their own strengths and moving in the environment of power, be it economic, political, or cultural. The relationship with that world is certainly a job to be done. But Monsignor Romero also teaches us to listen to and trust in the strength of the weak. Of course, it is not a matter of sacralizing the weak by leaving them where they are, but of trusting in their strength both humanly and religiously. Beyond religion, the human conscience, which may seem extremely weak in the face of weapons and physical power, has always been a generator of change in the history of humanity. In the religious field, there are plenty of examples, besides that of St. Oscar Romero, of how the martyrdom resistance of the defenseless ends up defeating, even in the long term, the fury of power. Universities, as producers of knowledge and wisdom, are key to ensuring that knowledge is not put at the service of the interests of the powerful. To look at the world of the victims and the universality of suffering is indispensable for them if they want to respond to their own origin. They were born in an era in which the configuration of society and power was carried out from the two swords, that of the empire and that of the priesthood. And they managed to add a new element to the configuration of societies: the knowledge produced by a community of friends of knowledge in deep solidarity.

We institutions know that the social processes of human development develop, in general, more slowly than personal processes. These are two dimensions that we must work on simultaneously. We can personally envision a better future with great clarity. But the future will not only take longer to arrive than the time it took us to conceive it, it will always arrive with new failures that we will have to continue working on. To become discouraged because things do not turn out as we dream is tantamount to stopping in that human task of development to which we are called. Utopias of returning to the past or idealizing the present always create obstacles to human development. Also the utopias of the future,

²⁵Oscar Romero, second pastoral letter, The Church as the Body of Christ in History.

to the extent that we absolutize them, end up producing monsters. Romero teaches us to combine the hope of a better future for all with an attitude of service, reconciliation, and generous sacrifice in favor of the weak. Knowing that the fruit of our efforts will inevitably come to the extent that they are not corrupted by alliances that forget the weakest. And knowing also that even the personal failure of one's own hopes, as long as one remains faithful to one's generous ideals, is part of the foundation of a new humanity. Resilience and fortitude, together with our capacity to feel with equal human dignity and its fundamental interests, are part of the fundamental values in planning for a future in which the universalization of basic rights and duties is the basis of a new civilization. Romero, from his religious faith, knew how to live the hope of a reconciled and generous society, and to resist in it until death. That is why today, united to his life and example, we continue to celebrate him. His death, which in the past caused us indignation and tears, we now remember with joy because we see it in faith, united to the passion and death on the cross of the Lord. We see it as a symbol of life and a life-giving impulse for every person of good will.