



Saints – Oscar Romero

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Deuteronomy 30: 15–20 John 3: 16–21

It is a real privilege to be back here in College to give the address on such a significant day. It is 27 years since I was last in this position, having been invited to preach at Evensong by the then Dean, John Bowker, as a final goodbye after spending seven amazing years here, first as an undergraduate reading modern languages and theology, followed by four years of postgraduate research. I left to take up a lectureship in contextual theology at Westminster College, Oxford. My research was on politics and religion in Latin America in the 1980s, looking particularly at liberation theology in Peru and Brazil, involving many visits to both countries, kindly subsidised by the College. I was fortunate enough to get to know and over time become good friends with many of the leading theologians and bishops in the region, as well as work in some of the poorest shanty towns in Lima and Rio de Janeiro. I also had the opportunity to spend four weeks in El Salvador in January 1995 as chaplain to a group of students from an American university where I was briefly visiting professor.

So with that background it is perhaps no surprise that when earlier this year the Dean kindly invited me to contribute to this series on saints that I immediately chose Oscar Romero, or more accurately since 14 October, St Oscar Romero.

What the Dean had not told me at the time of the invitation however was that my contribution to the series was to be on Remembrance Sunday, today when we commemorate 100 years from the end of the First World War. But I think that Romero is a very appropriate figure to be thinking about today of all days, as in his life and untimely death we can see parallels with the self-sacrifice, the service to others and ultimately dying for the cause of justice that we are commemorating today.

Yet this man, the voice of the voiceless as he was sometimes called, was in his early years one of the voiceless himself. Born in August 1917, Romero grew up in poverty, in a small town in a rural community a long way from the capital San Salvador. One of eight children, he trained as a carpenter and then entered a minor seminary in San Miguel, the principal town in the area, before subsequently enrolling in the main seminary in the capital and ultimately studying at the Gregorian University in Rome during the early 1940s. Over the next twenty years he worked as a parish priest in the same San Miguel where he had first entered the seminary. In 1966 he was made secretary of the El Salvadorean Bishops Conference and started editing the newspaper *Orientacion*. In 1970 he was made auxiliary bishop in San Salvador then in 1974 promoted to be bishop of Santa Maria, a poor rural region. In February 1977 he was consecrated Archbishop. At the time it was considered a slightly surprising appointment, as Romero had a reputation then for being on the more conservative side of the church, a deeply spiritual man with a strong respect for the hierarchy of the church, more associated with Opus Dei than with the nascent liberation theologians.

Yet in the months following his appointment, as El Salvador experienced increasing political crisis, Romero began to change as events left their mark on his concept of the church and its role in society. Some commentators wrote of a 'conversion', in particular after the brutal murder by the security forces of Rutilio Grande, a long-time friend of Romero's, a priest working with communities outside the capital. Certainly Grande's untimely death had a major impact on Romero's spirituality, but Romero himself always used the word 'journey' to describe his evolving theology and commitment to the poor, criticising those who said he had had a Damascene epiphany. I think it is reasonable, therefore, to describe Romero as a reluctant radical. His increasingly outspoken sermons denouncing injustice on both sides in what was fast becoming civil war in the country were driven by his profound belief that the church's duty was to stand alongside the vulnerable, the defenceless and the marginalised, as had been set out very clearly by the Latin American Bishops conference at Medellin, Columbia, in 1968. Romero frequently defended his unflinching criticism of the violence used by the regime by referring both to the documents of Medellin as well as Paul VI's papal pronouncements and later the subsequent Latin American Bishops Conference at Puebla in Mexico in 1979.

The signs are clear from his writings in the early months of his appointment as Archbishop that Romero was not going to be like others in the Salvadorean hierarchy, friends of the elites or even, as in the case of one of the Bishops, a full Colonel in the army. As the country started to experience the violence of extra-judicial killings, people being removed at night by the security forces never to be seen again, and as the church suffered itself those same sufferings with priests tortured and killed, Romero spoke out. In May 1977, a few months after becoming archbishop, he said, "What I want to say is, what is the Church? Because as the church defines itself more clearly, the stronger, the more alive it becomes. The church does not have enemies, the only enemies are those who declare themselves as enemies of the church. The spirit of truth is what inspires the church to preach, to write, to speak on the radio, to speak the spirit of truth in the face of lies. From this obligation to speak the truth comes persecution. Persecution is something necessary for the church. Why? Because the truth is always persecuted."¹

It is important to note that Romero's questioning of the role of the church was driven at least in part by the criticisms directed at him from other parts of his own church. Of the six bishops in El Salvador, Romero was only really supported by one; the others, together with the Papal Nuncio, consistently attacked Romero's pastoral line. On several occasions, Romero himself had to fly to Rome to defend himself in the Vatican. Each time, though, he returned refreshed, renewed by the support he had encountered, first from Paul VI and then later from John Paul II.

As one army President was replaced by another, as the indiscriminate waves of arrests and killings increased, so Romero's speeches on the radio and his Sunday sermons became ever more popular and ever more controversial. In a sermon in early 1979, he said, "The church feels that this is its mission, to be the image of God in his people. I say to you, the conflict is not between the church and the government, it is between the government and the people. The Church is with the people and the people are with the church, thank God. [...] the church has to have an evangelical commitment if it is not to lose its credibility in our countries, if it does not emphasise an evangelisation ... that denounces frankly arbitrary arrests, political expulsions, torture and above all the painful mystery of disappearances."

¹ All speeches of Romero are from James Brockman *La palabra queda*, the translations are mine from the original Spanish.

By this time, Romero regularly catalogued in his homilies the extent of violence in the country – the institutionalised injustice of the regime, as he described it – in May 1979 115 dead, 55 arrested (of whom 30 were disappeared), 92 wounded, 64 vehicles burned and 28 buildings burned down. The following month, 124 people killed, 46 arrested and 18 disappeared. Gradually the country was spiralling out of control. The church was suffering alongside the general population as priests, lay workers and pastoral assistants were also targeted. By January 1980 the death toll in that month alone was 300.

In his homily of 17 February, a few weeks before his death, Romero said, “In no way am I trying to be political. If because of the needs of the moment I’m shining a light on the politics of our country, it is as a pastor, it is from the Gospel, it is a light which is bound to illuminate the journey of our people. ... God wants to give us life and any man that takes life, that destroys life by mutilation, torture or repression finds that we are presenting an opposite view – the divine image of the God of life, the God who respects the life of his people.”

By this time, Romero himself was receiving anonymous death threats and the radio station which broadcast his homilies was bombed and taken off air. March 1980 was even more violent with a general strike on 17 March in which 70 were killed and many more injured. That Sunday Romero preached what became a famous denunciation of the authorities:

I know that many are scandalised by what I say and want to accuse me of having left aside the gospel to be involved in politics. This is not true. I am simply trying to live out the gospel in this current conflict. I want to make a special plea to the soldiers, the police – brothers, we are the same people, you are killing your brothers and sisters and in the face of an order to kill someone, God’s law must prevail – do not kill. No soldier is obliged to obey an order that contravenes God’s law. Now is time for you to rediscover your conscience and obey your conscience rather than the law of sin. ... The church, defender of the rights of God, of God’s law, of human dignity, this church cannot stay quiet in the face of such an abomination. In the name of God, then, in the name of this suffering people whose ever louder cries of pain rise up to the heavens, I beg you, I implore you, I order you, in the name of God, stop this repression.

The very next day whilst saying mass Romero was assassinated. The turbulent priest was finally silenced. He had given his life for his people. He had developed a clear vision of the role of the church in a world of injustice, of violence, of systematic repression, not because of political philosophy but because that is what he thought was faithfully following Christ and trying to live out his call. His murder reflects ‘the cost of discipleship’ – to use the title of a famous book by the great German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, himself hanged by the Gestapo because of his involvement in anti-Hitler activities.

So how can this saint inspire us faithfully to follow Christ’s call? What kind of Church are we called to be? I think that Romero’s example, and indeed the example of all those who gave their lives in the Great War, selflessly with their death choosing life for others in the face of evil, shows we are called to reflect on the choices we make, on the decisions we take, on the paths we follow in faith. Can we follow the example of those whose untimely death was given that we might live in freedom? It is that sacrifice, that commitment that we do, we must, and should always remember.

Let us give the last words to Romero, particularly powerful in the context of today’s events. In a phone conversation with a journalist shortly before his death Romero said:

I have frequently been threatened with death. I must say, as a Christian I don't believe in death without resurrection. If they kill me, I will rise again in the Salvadorean people. As a pastor, it is my duty, by divine command, to give my life for those I love, for all Salvadoreans even those who might assassinate me. If they manage to do what they threaten, from today I offer God my blood for the redemption and resurrection of El Salvador. Martyrdom is a grace of God that I do not deserve. But if God accepts the sacrifice of my life, may my blood be the seed of freedom and the sign that that hope will soon be made reality. May my death, if it is acceptable to God, be for the liberation of our people and as a witness of hope in the future.

You may say, if they do kill me, that I forgive and bless those who do it. Hopefully they will realise they would be wasting their time. A bishop may die but the church of God, which is the people, will never perish.