

## **Text: Archbishop Romero - a saint for the 21st century**

I met Monseñor Romero a few days after he took office as Archbishop on February 22nd, 1977. I had not attended his installation because I did not feel honest about being there, since he was not the archbishop that I, like many others, had hoped for.

The first time we met was purely by chance but it left me with an unforgettable memory. We physically bumped into each other as he was leaving and I was going into the seminary. Of course I said hello to him and he answered me with a single word - *ayúdeme* (Spanish for "help me") - something that he'd not only said to me but to everyone who met him. I was impressed by his humility, a trait that always distinguished him. Many times he would publicly or privately ask forgiveness for mistakes he had made.

His death three years later was not an ordinary death. It was the death of a saint, of a prophet and of a true Christian. He was a martyr for the faith and the magisterium of the Church. He died because he believed in God: he died for the Gospel, for the people in whom he saw Christ and because he was faithful to the Church's teachings. He knew how to maintain a dual loyalty in his life - loyalty to God and to the human person - which must be the defining criterion of every authentic Christian.

Remembering him twenty seven years later, means making him come alive again among us: not only to admire him but to follow the example of his life. It also means remembering many others in our country along with him: rural people, teachers, labour leaders, priests and religious - an entire people that was massacred and crucified.

### **MONSEÑOR ROMERO: A MAN ROOTED IN GOD**

I recall Monseñor Romero telling me once "It is so striking that in his teachings Jesus had the poor in mind in a preferential way. In two of his speeches, the Sermon on the Mount and at Nazareth, he refers to the poor and to those who suffer". That is how the Lord begins his public life, keeping in mind the poor multitudes that he cured and fed. The disabled, the blind, the lepers and the needy were always in his company. Does this not then say something to his Church and to its Shepherds?

Monseñor Romero absorbed this completely: I don't know how many bishops in the world would have done what he did on one occasion when he was the bishop of a rural diocese before coming to San Salvador. When he learned that miserably paid labourers in the coffee harvest had been sleeping outdoors in a local park after finishing their work, he threw open the doors of his bishop's residence to give them a roof over their heads. He had learned this from Jesus. The prime teacher for our Christian life. One day while preaching in his homily he said:

"Inside the heart of every man there is something like a small intimate cell to which God comes down for a private conversation. And it is there where man decides his own destiny, his own role in the world. We live too much outside of ourselves. Very few people really look inside themselves, and that's why there are so many problems. If all of us who are burdened by so many problems were to go into that little cell right now, and from there, hear the Lord's voice speaking to us in our conscience, how much could each of us do to improve the environment, society and the family we live in? (July 10, 1977)

I had several opportunities to become aware of his great prayerful spirit, of his soul rooted in God. In December 1979, Cardinal Lorscheider of Brazil and an important man from the Salvadorean government were visiting him, and I was also present. They were conversing among themselves, and at one point, Archbishop Romero excused himself and left the room. The minutes passed by and he did not return.

It occurred to me that the visitors had not come to see me but to see him, and, after a few minutes, I also excused myself and went to look for him. I went to his rooms, but he wasn't there: I looked in the visiting room and he wasn't there either. I looked out into the small garden of the hospital and I couldn't find him. I decided to go back to the meeting and it suddenly occurred to me to look in the chapel. And there, inside, was the Archbishop, kneeling in the third pew before the Blessed Sacrament which was exposed there. I approached him and said, "Monseñor, the gentlemen are waiting for you". "Yes, I'll be right there". My understanding is that he had gone to the Lord to consult him about how to respond to the Cardinal and the government representative, and that he never said or did anything without first consulting God.

After his assassination delegations would arrive from various countries that admired Archbishop Romero very much. Some asked if it was true that he had been manipulated, either by a group of priests, or by the left, or by some Jesuits. And I would answer, yes, it is true. He was manipulated - but manipulated only by God, who did with him as He pleased.

To follow Christ is, of course, to be one with him. But as we know, spirituality means having a spirit of prayer and the compassion of Jesus when he fed the hungry and when he said that there is no greater love than the love shown by the one who gives his life for his friends. And Monseñor Romero also had Jesus' spirit because he prayed deeply and shared the suffering of the hungry, abused and murdered multitudes. That is how he learned from the teachings of Jesus.

Another illustration of his prayerful spirit happened when I accompanied him to Rome, when he made his visit to Pope Paul the Sixth in March 1977. He went to explain the situation in the archdiocese on the occasion of the single Mass that was celebrated for the burial of Father Rutilio Grande. He had been Archbishop for just over a month. When we arrived in Rome it was 8.30 in the morning: we had been flying the whole night with no sleep at all. We went to the Priests' House, close to the Vatican. I went to my room, unpacked and I was looking at my bed, looking forward to some rest. Suddenly someone knocked at my door. I opened it and there was Monseñor Romero. He said to me: "Would you like to go for a walk?" "Yes, Monseñor", I said. We left the house and we went directly to St Peter's Basilica, went down through the central nave and the first thing he did was to kneel before the confessional altar of St Peter and the other Popes. I was kneeling too. After about seven minutes I stood up and saw him praying with such deep devotion, that I said to myself: "This is a man to follow, because he is following God". On Wednesday, March 30th, he was received by the Pope and Monseñor Romero explained to him how he was trying to put into practice the Gospel and the Second Vatican Council, the conference of Medellin and what Pope Paul VI himself had proposed in *Populorum Progressio*. He felt encouraged by the Pope's words: "Take courage, go ahead, you are the one in charge".

### **ARCHBISHOP ROMERO: A MAN FOR THE PEOPLE**

The archdiocese was living through a "paschal hour", Monseñor Romero wrote. In his pastoral work, Archbishop Romero was trying to bring into being what the Pope and the Latin American bishops had urged at their meeting in Medellin in Colombia. "That the Church in Latin America should be manifest, in an increasingly clear manner, as truly poor, missionary and paschal; separate from all temporal power and courageously committed to the liberation of each and every person."

I deeply believe he was faithful and free. Being faithful and free is not an easy thing. But he was faithful to God and faithful to the people. That is the double fidelity of the people of the Church. He loved God with such intensity and saw things and events with the eyes of God. Not always do we see with the eyes of God.

I believe he died for being faithful to the Gospel and to the teachings of the Church in social matters. He is a martyr to these social teachings. If the Church in its documents didn't speak the way it does, he would never have felt all the support that he found in them.

And he was faithful to the human person that the Gospel and the church have placed as the high point of God's creation, in His image and likeness. And he clearly saw that in his country of El Salvador, people did not look like God and people were not treated as if they were His image. That oppressed his soul and he couldn't bear it inside, unlike others who know how to store in silence even the greatest infamies. The more we keep quiet the more "prudent" we are. We have made prudence the queen of the cardinal virtues, and justice and fortitude are subordinated to it. And that is why Monseñor also felt free, because Jesus told us: "*If you live according to my teaching, you are truly my disciples: then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free*". And he was able to discover the truth about the people in his country.

In addition to the Fathers of the Church's first seven centuries, who decisively defended the poor in their writings, Monseñor Romero was familiar with the systematisation of the Church's social doctrine, including social encyclicals such as *Rerum Novarum* of Pope Leo XIII and *Quadragesimo Anno* of Pope Pius XI. Later, the Second Vatican Council and the documents of the Pope and the Latin American bishops from Medellin and Puebla gave necessary support to his pastoral work.

One day I was visiting him in his rooms. He had a book in his hands. "Read this" he said to me, and I read: "Do you want to honour the body of Christ? Don't ignore Him then, when you find him naked in the poor. Do not honour him in the temple with clothes of silk if, on your way out, you abandon him in his cold nakedness. Because the same one who said: "This is my body", and with his words made real what he said, also stated: "Every time you did not do this to one of these little ones, you did not do it to me." () Is it good to decorate Christ's table with vessels of gold if the same Christ is dying of hunger? First, feed the hungry and then, with what is left over, you may decorate Christ's table.

After I had read it, Monseñor said to me: "It is from St John Chrysostom, from the fourth century. He was canonised. He is a saint. The Church needs saints like him", he said. And Monseñor Romero became one of those saints. He loved God and he loved the people, particularly the poor.

I would argue that if Archbishop Romero had not felt the great support of these social documents he would have felt less equipped to develop the enormous work in defence of the poor which he carried out in his pastoral ministry. When he was named auxiliary bishop in 1970, the motto that he chose for his episcopate was "*Sentire cum Ecclesia*", which means: to feel with the Church, to be at one with the Church.

To be at one with the Church meant three things to him. First, it meant continuous closeness through constant and fervent prayer. He confessed that in God he found the strength to keep on going. Second, it meant decisive love and service to others, whatever the consequences, including offering his life on God's altar for the people that he loved and defended until his death. Third, for him it meant filial fidelity to the teachings that emanated from the Church.

In his homily on July 2, 1978, he said: "It is easy to talk about social doctrine, but it is difficult to put it into practice". Here he was undoubtedly referring to the difference between Orthodoxy and Orthopraxis. We Catholics accept the Gospel: we all accept the Second Vatican Council and the different documents of the Church's teachings. Yet, it is one thing to accept them theoretically and place them on the shelves in our libraries, and another, very different thing, to say that if the Gospel and the magisterium tell me certain things about poverty, injustice and human dignity, I am going to make them my own and preach about them - and that I will denounce injustice and defend the poor. It was the Second Vatican Council that said, "The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well" (*Gaudium et Spes, Part 1*). Monseñor Romero took this to heart; he looked at the reality of his people and said to himself: "If the Gospel is asking this of me, I will apply it to the reality of misery, injustices and poverty of my people."

He always kept in mind the Church's teachings, summed up in Vatican II, in the Medellin and

Puebla documents and in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. Nevertheless, he ran into big difficulties in Rome because of his attitude.

So, on November 11th 1979, he said: "I want to assure all of you, and I ask for your prayers to remain faithful to this promise, that I will not abandon my people, but instead will face, with them, all of the risks that my ministry demands."

Monseñor Romero was always ready to listen - He listened to God, to the Church's teachings, and to the people - especially to the poorest. He listened to God, the main source of his inspiration and his life, to the Church, so as always to keep in mind its teachings, and to the people, who were the reason for his service.

Reflecting on how he listened to people, I remember an occasion when he called all the best minds of the Archdiocese together for a consultation. Among those present were pastoral specialists, ethicists, theologians and canon lawyers. Each one gave his opinion on what he was asked about, and Monseñor Romero paid attention and took notes. After the nearly-two hour meeting was over, he was walking down the steps from the place where the meeting had been held. A person was there, who looked like a beggar, and the Archbishop approached him. I thought he was going to give the man something, but to my surprise, he asked him the very same question that he had posed to the expert people at the meeting. That is how he listened to people, in whom he also saw the Church. This, for him, was the Church of the street.

A letter he wrote on June 24th, 1978, to Cardinal Sebastiano Baggio. Then Prefect of the Congregation of Bishops, in Rome, clearly defines his thinking and actions as Archbishop. He wrote: "I have tried to proclaim the true faith without detaching it from life, to offer the rich treasure of the Church, in its entirety, to everyone, and to firmly maintain the Church's unity. For many years my motto has been "To be at one with the Church", "to feel with the Church", and it will remain so always. I have often said to myself: how hard it is to try to be completely faithful to what the Church proclaims in its Magisterium, and how easy, on the other hand, to forget or leave aside certain aspects. The former brings much suffering with it; the latter brings a great deal of security and peace, and an absence of problems. The former provokes accusations and contempt; the latter, praise and very promising human advancements. But this confirms for me what the magisterium, through the Council, says to the Bishops: "Teach the Christian doctrine in a manner that takes into account the needs of the times, that responds to the needs and problems which most concern men and women, and look also to that same doctrine to teach the faithful themselves to defend and propagate it. In teaching it, show the Church's maternal concern for all humankind, faithful or not, and consecrate particular care to the poor, to whom the Lord sent you to give the Good News."

This document seems very important to me, because it allows us to make the connection between Monseñor Romero's death and the Gospel. In it he speaks of the faith, but of a faith that must not be separated from daily life. He speaks of the Church's teachings, but also of the need to take account of it in its entirety. He speaks of unity and recalls what has always been his life's motto: "To be at one with the Church".

Monseñor would later be more explicit about his adherence to the teachings of the Church, saying two things in particular: How difficult it is to be completely faithful to what the Church proclaims in so many documents - justice, the poor, and human rights - and how this is difficult because it brings great suffering. He proved this personally, as the target of accusations, contempt and slander, and finally, with the offering of his own life in martyrdom while celebrating the Eucharist.

In the Bible, (in Amos Chapter three, verse seven), the prophet says: "indeed, the Lord God does nothing without revealing His plan to His servants, the prophets". It is affirmed here that God reveals his secrets to the prophet. Hence, the reference to "nothing" in Amos means no "event, situation or reality". Everyone sees events and situations. Yet most people tend to look at the events from the outside, at their appearance. The prophet, on the other hand, penetrates the outside

and reaches the deep centre that holds its secret and meaning. In other words, he sees God's plan to be carried out in events.

Why do most of us fail to see what the prophet sees? Because generally, events come wrapped in a dense layer of ideas and interpretations that prevail in any given system. Those who benefit from a certain system impose these ideas and interpretations and they don't seek change, because change would diminish or put an end to their privileges. People who are dominated by the system have no way of knowing and understanding reality, since those who maintain the system tend to present reality according to their own interpretation of it. And so, the system is perpetuated without question. The prophet simply refuses to accept the manipulated version of reality. In the face of situations and events, he is suspicious of prevailing interpretations, he analyses reality in depth, discovering what God wants to reveal to us through these events.

It is said of Archbishop Romero that he changed drastically with the murder of Father Rutilio Grande, and that his conversion happened less than one month after he became Archbishop. I don't believe that this is so. I believe that Monseñor Romero was someone who always, throughout his life, sought conversion. It was something similar to what Mark tells us about when Jesus cured a blind man. When they arrived at Bethsaida, they brought him a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. Jesus took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. Putting spittle on his eyes he laid his hands on him and asked: "Do you see anything?" Looking up the blind man replied: "I see people who look like trees, walking". Then Jesus laid hands on his eyes a second time and he saw clearly, his sight was restored and he could see everything distinctly" (Mark 8:22-25). Monseñor Romero also began to see gradually, as he discovered more about the Gospel and the painful situation of the people. All of these changed him. He never spoke of himself in terms of conversion; he spoke of evolution. For this reason he wrote: "readiness to change. He who fails to change will not gain the Kingdom." This is why he adds: "When we escape from reality, we escape from God."

In the course of history, three bishops have been murdered in their Churches. The first, St Stanislaus of Krakow in Poland, was assassinated for calling attention to the King's personal sins - that is, for defending morality. The second was St Thomas a Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, who was assassinated for defending the Church's rights and liberties. The third, Archbishop Romero, supported by the Gospels and the Church's teachings, was assassinated for defending the poor. The first two Bishops have been canonised.

Finally, I want to quote from Archbishop Romero's homily of July 2nd, 1978, in which he said: "I have once again confirmed that I will die, God willing, faithful to the successor of Peter. It is easy to preach teachings in theory. Following the Church's teachings in theory is very easy. But when it becomes a question of living out these saving teachings, of embodying them and making them real in the history of the suffering people like our own, that is when conflicts arise. Not that I have been unfaithful - never! On the contrary, I feel that today I am more faithful than ever because I experience the test, the suffering and the deep happiness of proclaiming (and not only in words and with lip service) a doctrine that I have always believed in and loved. I am trying to bring it to life for the community the Lord has entrusted to me. And I beg of you, dear brothers and sisters, that if we are really to be Catholics, followers of a true and therefore, very difficult, Gospel, if we really want to honour the word of Christ's followers, that we must not be afraid of bringing forth blood, life, truth and history from this doctrine. Taken from the pages of the Gospels, it is made current by the doctrine of the Councils and the Popes who try to live the vicissitudes of their time as true Pastors." (July 2nd, 1978)

Monseñor Romero brought forth blood, life, truth and history from what the Church taught him. He died faithful to God, faithful to the human person and faithful to the Church's teachings. For this reason I believe, I affirm, and I maintain that he was a martyr for the Gospel and the Church's teachings and for the love of the poor.

**ARCHBISHOP ROMERO, DEFENDER OF HUMAN RIGHTS**

In one of his meetings with a group of priests, Archbishop Romero asked one of them to keep a record or a diary of what was happening in the Church and in the country. A month later, during the following meeting, he asked the priest to whom he had entrusted the diary, how it was going. The priest answered, saying: Monseñor, I'm a bit disorganised and I haven't started it yet. Monseñor hit the table and said: "With the Church no-one can be disorganised". Months passed by and no-one heard anything more about the diary. When Monseñor Romero died, we went to his room, and to our great surprise, we found that on May 31st, 1978, he had started a diary that he had dictated every day onto a tape recorder, without saying a word to anybody about it. Several editions of his diary have been published in Spanish and it has been translated into English, French, Italian and Portuguese. So, one person's failure is the reason that we now have this treasure. There is no way that one can learn the essence of Monseñor Romero without reading his diary.

I am remembering on purpose this matter about his diary, just to make you see that the first entry in it was about the protection of human rights. On that first day it says, literally: "The most important meeting today was one we had with lawyers and law students we had brought together to explain to them the difficulties that the Church is facing and to ask them for legal help with so many cases of abuse of human rights".

For Monseñor Romero, human rights were also divine rights. Men and women created in God's image and likeness should be respected because they are human beings and God's creatures. "I have to go around picking up corpses", he said one day, in the middle of terror and a period of great upheaval in the country. And looking at himself in the face of all that pain, he commented: "The Archbishop has to be where the suffering is."

Monseñor Romero was, in fact, the first human rights ombudsman in the history of El Salvador and its people. He was an ombudsman who knew how to combine the ethics and truth of the Gospel with legal defence and public denunciation. He was an ombudsman who sought, within the limited legal framework available, some means of promoting democracy and one who always made use of solidarity and justice in his ministry of accompaniment of his people.

In acting as he did, Monseñor Romero bound the vast majority of Salvadoreans together in the cause of human rights. No one before him had been able to do this in El Salvador. Nor has anyone since him done it as effectively as he did during those tumultuous years preceding the outbreak of war.

In the history of humankind, Monseñor Romero holds a place among the great defenders of human rights, both for his theory and for his practice. His influence is Salvadorean, Central American, and global. While he was alive his voice was heard around the world, and his Sunday homilies, proclaimed from the Cathedral of San Salvador, turned him into an international paradigm for the promotion and defence of human rights. Each Sunday he would spend more than an hour on theological themes, interpreting the readings from that week's liturgy and delivering a message of reconciliation to a society bloodied and divided by violence. He would then dedicate as much time as was needed to narrate the most important events that had taken place that week. In that "spoken Sunday newspaper" he reported what the national media - controlled and censored by an authoritarian and repressive State - could not report.

Many of the events that Oscar Romero revealed in his homilies were grave human rights violations directed against the poorest Salvadoreans. That an Archbishop would publicly relate these deeds, often in great detail, resulted in something unprecedented. It was the response of a humanist, a democrat and a Christian. And, of course, there were very few who dared to make such a public response in the dangerous El Salvador of those years.

Monseñor Romero's emphasis on denouncing human rights violations had a massive impact on the national community and awoke the interest of the international community, especially those organisations which specialised in the defence, promotion and protection of human rights. In

1978, the International Federation of Human Rights arrived in El Salvador, drawn by Monseñor Romero's denunciations. The Inter-American Commission of Human Rights visited El Salvador in 1979, attracted by the voice of Monseñor Romero. Amnesty International chose El Salvador as the destination for its first large-scale mission to Central America because of Monseñor Romero. From Geneva the International Commission of Jurists, dedicated to promoting the rule of law and justice throughout the world, visited El Salvador to listen to the Archbishop. A congressional delegation from the United States made its first investigation of human rights violations, motivated by the courageous words proclaimed each Sunday by Monseñor Romero from the Cathedral. Also, from Geneva, the protestant Churches and other Christian denominations united in the World Council of Churches encouraged its Commission for International Concerns to accompany Archbishop Romero in his work. Shortly before his assassination, the British Parliament presented Monseñor Romero as its nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize.

In closing, I wish to recall what he wrote in his last spiritual retreat, thirty days before dying: "Another fear of mine is with regard to the risks to my life. It is difficult to accept a violent death that, in these circumstances, is most possible. Father Azcue (Romero's confessor) has encouraged me, telling me that my disposition should be to give my life for God whatever my end might be. The grace of God will see me through unknown circumstances. He has assisted the martyrs and, if necessary, I will feel Him near me when I take my last breath. But what is more important than the moment of death is to give Him my whole life, to live for Him".

Two weeks before his death, in an interview with the Mexican magazine *Excelsior*, he said: "I have frequently been threatened with death. I should tell you that, as a Christian, I do not believe in death without Resurrection. If they kill me, I will rise again in the Salvadorean people. I tell you this without any boasting, with the greatest humility. As a pastor, I am obliged by Divine order to give my life for those whom I love, that is, for all Salvadoreans, even those who will kill me. If they succeed in their threats, from now I already obey God. I offer my blood for the redemption and resurrection of El Salvador. Martyrdom is a grace of God I do not believe I deserve. But if God accepts the sacrifice of my life, may my blood be the seed of liberation and a sign that hope will soon be a reality. My death, if it is accepted by God, will be for the liberation of my people and a testimony of hope in the future. You could say, if they should kill me, that I forgive and bless those who do it".

This is the man who loved God beyond everything, who loved the suffering people and who offered his life for the love of God and for the human person. He was a prophet, a martyr and a saint for this 21st Century.

*Monseñor Ricardo Urios, former secretary to Archbishop Romero gave this talk in Westminster, Roehampton and Aylesford recently.*

*Source: Romero Trust*