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"If I am killed, I shall rise again in the salvadoran people" – archbishop romero lives on

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*"Thus, the poor have shown the church the true way to go.
A church that does not join the poor
in order to speak out from the side of the poor
against the injustices committed against them
is not the true church of Jesus Christ."*

Archbishop Oscar Romero, February 17, 1980^[1]

A new way of being bishop

Oscar Arnulfo Romero (1917-1980) is one of the most important symbols of Christian love and solidarity. During his time as archbishop of San Salvador he developed into a brave advocate of justice, and a source of strength and hope for poor people in El Salvador. This bishop, that refused to abandon his people, was killed during a mass in a small chapel in San Salvador March 24, 1980. Romero was paying the price for being on the side of the poor people and defending them.

For Romero the poor was the key to understand the Christian faith. He reformulated the maxim "Gloria Dei, vivens homo" – the glory of God is the living person – of St. Irenaeus, into "Gloria Dei, vivens pauper" – the glory of God is the living poor person. ^[2] The meeting with the poor of El Salvador also made Romero redefine what it meant to be a bishop in the church. In one of his most important homilies spoken on June 19, 1977, after retaking the possession of an occupied church in the village of Aguilares he said:

"It has become my job to tend all the wounds produced by the persecution of the Church – to record all the abuses and pick up the bodies."^[3]

This is a totally new way of seeing the office of a bishop in the church. To pick up dead bodies turned out to be the job of the archbishop of San Salvador – not only to hold mass, to give communion and to preach, but also to pick up dead corpses. Says Jesuit theologian and one of Romero's ghostwriters, professor Jon Sobrino at UCA^[4]:

"That is a symbolic statement, but that is a new definition of a bishop. In time of repression, war and tragedy, he felt that his...obligation was to pick up corpses, to be incarnated in reality."^[5]

This incarnation into reality was going to be a characteristic of Romero's ministry as bishop. When he was named archbishop in February 1977, replacing the progressive Luis Chávez, the majority of the church of El Salvador were deeply distressed and saw the nomination as a disaster. At that time Romero was known as a strongly conservative bishop, more or less out of

touch with the reality of the country. He was most certainly a compromise between the broad-minded bishop Arturo Rivera who was the preferred choice of the Salvadoran clergy and the ultra-conservative military vicar, Eduardo Alvarez.^[6] While the priests and faithful in the church of El Salvador were discouraged and upset, the Vatican and the Salvadoran oligarchy were convinced that they now had a bishop that would strengthen the relations between government, military and the church. It was well known that Romero had very good relations with government representatives, and people in power thought that Romero would get the church "back on track" after archbishop Chávez, who was labelled as a communist by the Salvadoran press. However, both the church and the government were in for a surprise when judging the new archbishop. Romero turned into a leader that nobody had foreseen. Slained Jesuit professor Ignacio Martín-Baro expressed it in the following way:

"To the delight of the poor, however, and to the fury of the powerful, to the amazement of the government of El Salvador, the discomfiture of the Vatican, and the disquiet of the United States State Department, Romero became simply Monseñor loved and cherished by the masses."^[7]

The importance of human life

From being looked upon as a disaster by the progressive wing of the Salvadoran church, Romero developed into the most loved (and hated) archbishop of San Salvador. Romero became more than anything the defender of the poor, or the voice of the voiceless as is often said about him. Courageously he took the side of the poor people, and made them the focus of his faith. As mentioned previously, he saw the poor as the glory of God, or in other words:

"Nothing is so important to the church as human life, as the human person, above all, the person of the poor and the oppressed, who beside being human beings, are also divine beings, since Jesus said that whatever is done to them he takes as done to him. That bloodshed, those deaths, are beyond all politics. They touch the very heart of God."^[8]

Expressed in this statement is the interpretation of Jesus as so present in the people that it is impossible to separate the suffering, crucified people and the Saviour sent by God.^[9] It goes back to the words of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, where he states that what is done to the marginalized people in society is done to him (Matt. 25:35-46). Concretely this means that when human beings walk by a poor person without helping him or her, they not only pass a fellow human, but also Jesus himself.

This presence of Jesus among poor people is commonly acknowledged by most (Latin American) so-called liberation theologians.^[10] Through the Gospels it can be seen how Jesus is in solidarity with the poor people, and that he has come to give the good news to the poor (Luk. 4:18, Luk. 7:22, Matt. 11:5). When Jesus performs his public ministry he goes to the poor and marginalized, he is attacking the rich and powerful, and in the end Jesus is killed by the dominant and influent groups. Also, the majority of the first Christians were poor people and when the church preached the Gospel of Jesus it went out in a world where a great number of the people were poor and downtrodden. The poor are thus seen as a theological source to understand Christian truth and praxis, and the physical place where to find God. The Latin American bishops at their meeting in Puebla in 1979 likewise affirmed this. According to the bishops extreme poverty has concrete faces such as the face of kids breathing in poverty, young people who does not find a place in society, indigenous people who are marginalized and live in inhuman conditions as the poorest of the poor, and unemployed persons. These are faces where, according to the Latin American bishops, the suffering Christ can be found.^[11] It is in this light that the

importance of the poor for Romero should be seen.

A man of the church

Here we also touch upon another important characteristic of Romero, he was not a "left-wing theologian", but first of all a man of the church. When Romero identified Jesus with the poor and marginalized of society, he did it, not only based upon a personally interpretation of the faith, but also supported by his fellow bishops in the Latin American church. What was special with Romero was that he took the texts and the teaching of the church (whether it was the conclusions from the bishops meeting in Medellín in 1968, Puebla in 1979 or papal encyclicals) seriously. There were various bishops in the church that were personally uncomfortable with this pastoral line and tried to interpret it away, or simply overlook it.

However, Romero was not alone. The (preferential) option for the poor is an old tradition in the church of Latin America. Romero is one of many bishops, priests, theologians and lay people that have seen that the church has to be a church of the poor. He belongs to a tradition of Latin American bishops, from Bartolomé de Las Casas in the 16 century up to the modern days bishop emeritus Don Samuel Ruiz, that have sided with the poor. Even though the history of the church in Latin America can be described as a holocaust, with participation in mass-murder and destruction, it is important to recognise that there also exists a historical tradition of defending the poor. During the centuries many of the church's men and women have raised their voice against the injustices committed during the ongoing colonisation of Latin America. Monseñor Romero and Don Samuel are not the only bishops that have brought forward the legacy of Bartolomé de Las Casas. Outstanding examples include: bishop Cristóbal de Pedraza, Honduras (+1547); Mons. Antonio de Valdevieso, Nicaragua (murdered February 26, 1550); bishop Pablo Torres, Panamá (+1554); bishop Tata Vasco de Quiroga, Mexico (+1565); St. Toribio de Mogrovejo, Peru (+1606); bishop Juan del Valle, Colombia (+1562). In our century memorable bishops are archbishop Víctor Sanabria, Costa Rica; Mons. Manuel Larraín, Chile; Mons. Gerardo Valencia Cano, Colombia; Mons. Enrique Angelelli, Argentina; (assassinated August 4, 1976); Don Hélder Câmara, Brazil; Mons. Raúl Silva, Chile; Mons. Leonidas Proaño, Ecuador; Mon. Sergio Méndez Arceo, Mexico and Mons. Juan Gerardi, Guatemala (assassinated April 26, 1998).^[12]

It is impossible to understand the praxis and theology of Romero (and the other bishops mentioned above), without taking into consideration the social situation they were living in. The inhuman social conditions that the majority of the population of El Salvador was suffering opened the eyes of Romero. Like many others in Latin America, he felt that the church had to have an opinion about the world that it existed in, and with this incarnation into reality taking sides with the poor was the only possible solution for Romero if he should be faithful to the teachings of Jesus and of the church. This became a source of intense conflict between the Salvadoran church and the government. People in power, and the U.S. State Department, did not like that the church was entering into the political arena. But for Romero this was not about meddling into politics. It was simply preaching the Gospel and defending human life. The church's defence of the poor led to a persecution of bishops, priests, religious and lay people, that were more faithful to the teaching of Jesus and the church than to various Latin American governments, i.e. the U.S. State Department. At Romero's time handouts with the text Be a Patriot. Kill a Priest. were circulated in front of churches in El Salvador.^[13] It is crucial to notice that Romero was a traditional theologian and archbishop loyal to the teachings of the church, but in his performance he became a radical, one can label him a conservative rebel.

The risen Romero

Some weeks before his death, Romero is believed to have said to the Mexican newspaper Excelsior:

"I have often been threatened with death. I must tell you, as a Christian, I do not believe in a death without resurrection. If am killed, I shall arise again in the Salvadoran people...You may say, if they succeed in killing me, that I pardon and bless those who do it. Would , indeed, that they might be convinced that they will waste their time. A bishop will die, but God 's church, which is the people, will never perish."^[14]

In March 2000, 20 years after the assassination of Romero, about 40 000 people were celebrating his memory in the streets of San Salvador. People of faith from all over the world came to honour this 20th century saint. The "Romero bishops", as U.S. based church commentator Gary McEoin has labelled them^[15], Mons. Samuel Ruiz from Mexico and the poet Mons. Pedro Casaldaliga from Brazil were enthusiastically greeted by thousands of faithfuls. Representing the Roman curia, Cardinal archbishop of Los Angeles, Roger M. Mahoney celebrated an outdoor mass for more than 30 000 people and declared that "we would be betraying the church if we did not continue working for the poor and for the legitimate struggle to get a more just society".^[16] As the commemorations through the past 20 years have showed, Romero has certainly risen in the Salvadoran people, but he has also touched the heart of millions of Christians all over the world. As Jesuit professor Dean Brackley at UCA told me, he is the most universal of all Salvadorans.

Why do people have this love for Romero? It is hard to give a precise answer to the question, but maybe a recollection from a poor Salvadoran thinking of Romero as his father, might serve as an explanation:

"He made me feel like a person. Because he loved people like me, and he didn 't act like we made him sick. He talked to us, he touched us, he asked us questions. He had confidence in us. You could see it in his eyes that he cared about me."^[17]

Romero saw people as human beings, created in the image of God, and many people have seen the face of Jesus in this timid archbishop that gave hope to thousands of Salvadorans and continues to give hope to people all over the world. Maybe there is no need of an official canonisation of Romero, because in the heart of the poor people he is already San Romero de América.

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^[1] Oscar Romero: The Violence of Love. The Words of Oscar Romero, London: Fount Paperbacks, 1989, p. 224

^[2] Jon Sobrino: Archbishop Romero. Memories and Reflections, New York: Orbis Books, 1990, pp.15-16

^[3] Quoted by Jon Sobrino in María López Vigil: Oscar Romero. Memories in Mosaic, Washington, D.C.: EPICA, 2000, p.170

^[4] Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas, the Jesuit directed university of San Salvador. On November 16, 1989, rector of UCA, Fr. Ignacio Ellacuría was murdered together with Fr. Segundo Montes, Fr. Ignacio Martín-Baró, Fr. Amando López, Fr. Juan Ramón Moreno and Fr. Joaquín López y López. Like archbishop Romero they were murdered because they told the truth about what was happening in the country. Jon Sobrino escaped death that night because he was in Thailand. For a detailed description/analysis of the massacre of the six jesuit priests, see Jon Sobrino, Ignacio Ellacuría and Others: Companions of Jesus. The Jesuit Martyrs of El Salvador, New York: Orbis Books, 1990

^[5] Authors interview with Jon Sobrino, April 15, 1993 at UCA.

^[6] Arturo Rivera had a long history of problems with the Vatican, and was also, as auxiliary bishop of Chávez, the brain behind most of the pastoral line of activity in

the Salvadoran church, strongly disliked by the rich and powerful in El Salvador. Eduardo Alvarez, on the other hand, was perhaps most famous for his blessing of military helicopters before they went on their missions in the Salvadoran jungle (Ann Daly: Oscar Romero. Martyr for the poor, Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1989, p.12). After taking office as archbishop Romero sent a letter to Cardinal Baggio, prefect of the Congregation of Bishops in the Vatican, describing Alvarez as a man that was highly unpopular in his diocese because of his love of the military. According to Romero the Salvadoran Bishop's conference judged Alvarez to be ineffective and damaging as military vicar, and wanted to abolish the vicariate. (James Brockman: Romero. A life, New York: Orbis Books, 1989, p.74)

[7] Ignacio Martín-Baro, Oscar Romero: Voice of the downtrodden, i Archbishop Oscar Romero, Voice of the Voiceless. The Four Pastoral Letters and Other Statements, Orbis Books, New York, 1985, p. 1

[8] Oscar Romero: The Violence of Love. The Words of Oscar Romero, London: Fount Paperbacks, 1989, p. 236

[9] For a broader treatment of the concept of "the crucified people", see Jon Sobrino: Jesus in Latin America, New York: Orbis Books, 1987, pp. 159-165, Jon Sobrino: Jesus the Liberator. A Historical-Theological View, New York: Orbis Books, 1993, pp. 195-271, and especially Jon Sobrino: The principle of mercy. Taking the crucified people from the Cross, New York: Orbis Books, 1994.

[10] See, among others, Jon Sobrino: The True Church and the Poor, New York: Orbis Books, 1984, Gustavo Gutiérrez: The Power of the Poor in History, London: SCM Press, 1983 and José Miguez Bonino (ed.): Faces of Jesus. Latin American christologies, New York: Orbis Books, 1984.

[11] Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano: La evangelización en el presente y en el futuro de América Latina: Puebla, conclusiones de la III Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano, Montevideo: Ediciones Paulinas, 1979, # 31-39

[12] For a brief recapture of some of the mentioned bishops, see leaflet Secretariado Internacional Cristiano de Solidaridad con América Latina: Monseñor Romero no está solo, Mexico D.F.: SICSAL, no date.

[13] For an excellent treatment of this issue, see Penny Lernoux: Cry of the people. The struggle for human rights in Latin America. The Catholic Church in conflict with U.S. policy, New York: Penguin Books, 1991

[14] Quoted in James Brockman: Romero. A life, New York: Orbis Books, 1989, p.248

[15] Gary McEoin: "Romero Presente", in National Catholic Reporter, Kansas City: National Catholic Reporter Publishing Company, April 14, 2000, p.5

[16] Teresa Malcolm: "El Salvador celebrates Romero's legacy", in National Catholic Reporter, Kansas City: National Catholic Reporter Publishing Company, April 7, 2000, p.9

[17] Recollected by Regina Garcia in María López Vigil: Oscar Romero. Memories in Mosaic, Washington, D.C.: EPICA, 2000, p.423

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