

## **ROMERO AND THE SOCIAL GOSPEL: THE CHALLENGE FOR US TODAY**

**By Juan Hernández Pico, S.J.**

Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador is no stranger to the United Kingdom. Some years ago Romero's statue was placed above the Great West Door of Westminster Abbey among other twentieth century martyrs. Romero and those other holy persons have not been canonised according to the procedures of the Roman Catholic Church. Rather the Anglican Church has followed other procedures similar to that mentioned in the famous verse of Bishop Pedro Casaldáliga's poem "Saint Romero of America, our shepherd and martyr": "...and the people have already placed you in the glory of Bernini". Certainly this is a notable acknowledgement of great ecumenical value. However we shouldn't be astonished. For more than one thousand years a martyr was automatically venerated in the Church as a saint.

In the text of Romero's Sunday homilies, the United Kingdom is mentioned quite a few times. On the 9th of April 1978 Romero tells his congregation in the Cathedral that he wants to be in communion with "the episcopal college all around the world; and he thanks especially" a message that Cardinal Basil Hume, archbishop of Westminster, has sent him. In that message – as told by Romero – Cardinal Hume expresses his own admiration and warmth for him and invites Romero to visit his Diocese in Westminster. Then in November of that year Romero tells his congregation once again during the Sunday homily that he wants to thank the United Kingdom, for having nominated him as a candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Hence Romero was no stranger to the United Kingdom.

Speaking of "the glory of Bernini". When Romero was granted an honorary doctorate at Louvain in Belgium, a month and a half before he was to be murdered, he tried to find the best words for his own form of pastoral action in his acceptance speech, and he said: "The glory of God is life for the poor." In pronouncing such a famous patristic phrase he was actually rewording a quotation from Ireneus which says: "The glory of God is life for man". In other words, he was pointing to the option for the poor, which the Bishops of Latin America, at Puebla in Mexico had included as the central message of its final Document "Communion and Participation".

Poverty continues to be the same scandal in this world as it was more than thirty years ago during Romero's time as Archbishop. If anything, poverty has even worsened because globalisation has paradoxically added further social exclusion on top of poverty. Exclusion polarises the world between people who count and people who don't count, people with hope for development living in so-called "emerging" countries and those other hopeless people who live nowhere, as it were.

### **Fr. Rutilio Grande's blood and Romero's conversion to a prophetic courage**

In February 1977 there began in El Salvador what we can call with hindsight the Romero phenomenon, an impressive religious phenomenon with political consequences where the archbishop, whose appointment had been so eagerly anticipated by the few wealthy people of El Salvador, was converted – most unexpectedly – from being a model of spotless rectitude to one of prophetic courage. Where did that conversion start? Actually in the little rural town of Aguilares during a long night of contemplation, touching and watching over the body and blood of his own murdered friend, the Jesuit Rutilio Grande, who was the parish priest there, and those of Manuel Solórzano, the peasant sacristan and Nelson Lemus, an adolescent boy.

Some time later the other Jesuit priests in the parish of Aguilares were kidnapped, imprisoned and exiled. The army occupied that rural town and committed sacrilege by violating the tabernacle, throwing away the hosts and trampling on them. No priest was allowed into Aguilares for two months and the army committed many crimes against catechists of the parish and peasant organizers of the region. Finally the archbishop was notified by the government that he could appoint a priest again to the parish. On the 19th June Romero himself drove to Aguilares together with many priests and religious women. During the Mass he spoke words that demonstrated the prophetic character of his episcopate: "It has fallen to me to go around picking up dead bodies and everything else that this persecution of the Church brings with it. Today it has been my lot to come over to pick up a destroyed tabernacle in this desecrated parish and, most important of all, to comfort these people who have been so outrageously humiliated and sacrificed. Hence...I bring to you the word that Christ has commanded me to tell you: a Word of solidarity, a Word of courage and guidance and, finally, a Word of conversion."

Romero was convinced that "even bishops and the Pope, and all Christians" were in need of conversion. "May we all live with that tension that Christ left in the world, conversion." Two months later he said again: "I need to become converted all over again... It is the Church that has to convert to what God wants in this period of history in El Salvador... I know that I have gone down badly with many people, but I know that I have gone well with all those who are sincerely in search of the Church's conversion... We all are in need of conversion and I am the first, regardless of the fact that I am preaching to you now." No wonder that when he started to be opposed by the press, the government and most of all by the wealthy few of El Salvador, and even by some of his former friends who said that he "had changed, that he was now preaching revolution, hate, class struggle, that he was now a communist", he answered back by appealing to his own congregation which knew very well that Romero's language "wanted to sow hope, and boldly denounce injustices of land and abuses of power, not with hate, but rather with love and calling for conversion."

Referring to people murdered by the security forces in August 1977 he forges one of his most famous and momentous sentences: "I want to be near the grief of [their families] and to **be the voice of those who are voiceless**: to cry out against such abuses of human rights, that justice be done..." And "I'd be a traitor to you if behind your backs I were to come to an understanding with those who do not respect human rights."

Coming to the end of that year of 1977, the first of his episcopate, he tells the people in his Cathedral according to his own experience: "Brothers and sisters: do you want a test to prove whether you are a true Christian? Here is your touchstone: who gets on well with you? Who criticizes you? Who rejects you? Who flatters you? Remember what Christ said one day: I haven't come to bring peace but division; and there will be division even within your own families." As regards himself he was sure that "it was the Spirit of the Lord who helped him say whatever he had to say and that his conscience was at peace telling him what he ought to say." (13th November 1977).

In February 1978 Romero was granted an honorary doctorate by the Jesuit University of Georgetown in Washington. He wanted that

honour to serve "as an encouragement to all those who work for a more just order in this world". A few days later he was honoured for having reached his first anniversary as archbishop of San Salvador. This time he went further and said in his weekly homily: "Brothers and sisters, I don't want to be an idol. I won't ever allow myself to become an idol of crowds... Every homage paid to me is really homage to Christ the good shepherd and to your own faith". It is very consoling to hear Archbishop Romero call himself alongside his clergy and his people "a pilgrim searching for truth." At the end of April he tells his congregation: "Bishops don't command in a despotic way. It shouldn't be that way. The bishop is the most humble servant of the community. Christ made it very clear to the apostles...: whoever would like to be first among you... should be your servant. Our mission is service. Our leadership and our word is just service." Certainly nobody could over-estimate the relevance of this aspect of Romero's self awareness.

Very often we listen to leaders in the Church relate with real conviction that there is no democracy within the Church because the Church is not a democracy. This is true when we consider that there is only one head in this "body of Christ in history that is the Church" - in the words of Romero's 2nd pastoral letter - and that the only Head is Jesus Christ crucified and risen from death. Nevertheless, it is also true that until Pope Innocent IIIrd, during the twelfth and thirteenth century, no Pope had given himself the title of Vicar of Christ. They used to call themselves Vicars of Peter. And at the end of the sixth century a great pope and saint Gregory the Ist had given to the Papacy an authentic interpretation "servant of the servants of God". Very true and authentic because one should remember that Peter himself learned to be a servant the hard way, by refusing to let his feet be washed by Jesus himself and hearing that refusing to acknowledge the Lord as a servant was the equivalent of not sharing his friendship (Jn 13, 6-17).

Romero took great pains to show that the archbishop was the servant of his people and a very true listener to them. In July 1978 he said: "my greatest satisfaction and joy comes from listening to the people... The preacher's duty is not only to teach, it is to learn as well. You teach me. Your attention is for me inspiration from the Holy Spirit as well. Your rejection would be for me also God's rejection." And it was a month later when he made very clear his own guideline of

discernment in matters of dealing with the State authorities, something like his own version of giving either to Cesar or to God: "I do not confront anybody, I am just trying to serve the people, and whoever is in conflict with the people will also be in conflict with me".

In this same context Romero gave a succinct definition of his own role as a preacher. "I study the Word of God that we are going to read on the coming Sunday; I look around me, at my people and shine the light of the Word upon them, and then I come up with a synthesis to be able to convey it and to enable this people to become the light of the world - that they don't allow themselves to be guided by the norms and the idols of this world. But naturally these worldly idols and idolatries feel that the Word I preach is an obstacle and would rather like for it to be destroyed, silenced, killed. Whatever might happen, whatever might be the will of God, His Word is not in chains, as Saint Paul wrote (2Tim 2,9)."

In September 1978 the Archbishop told the people at the Cathedral that he was accused of preaching politics and subversion. He said plainly: "What I want to say here, from this Cathedral seat, is the way the Church is, and from that Church, I want to support everything that is good, console the victims of abuses and injustices, and also bravely denounce all abuses and torture, the disappearance of persons. And social injustice. This is not politics. This is to build the Church and to fulfil the Church's duties which are intrinsic to her identity." On the same day Romero elaborates on ecclesiastical authority following the line of the Gospels: "The Church's authority means not to command, but rather to serve... I am not chief, I am not a boss, I am not an authority who has been imposed or forced upon you. I want to be God's servant and your servant." Then, on the 15th of October he completes this idea of his own authority: "I never aspired to be other than a humble catechist, and an evangelizer of the people, nothing else."

Of course he knew very well that to be a prophet, to be faithful to the prophetic mission that he considered a duty of the people of God, carried with it a high cost. It was the cost of freedom. On that same day he preached the following: "This is costing our Church a lot, brothers and sisters. This freedom from the idol of Money, from the idol of power, and to appear before the world the way Paul did,

audaciously free. To thank those who give freely to us but without accepting any condition whatsoever.”

At the end of 1978, when threats of death were already starting to reach him, the archbishop responded with some of his most memorable words. First by being prophetic: “Dear Brothers and Sisters, I wish my words had the prophets’ eloquence to shake up those who are on their knees before this earth’s gods! Those who would wish that gold, money, estates, power, politics would be their gods for ever. All that is going to end!” And second, by starting to become aware of the probability of his violent death: “The Word stays and this is the great consolation for the preacher: my voice may disappear, but my Word, which is Christ, will stay in the hearts of those who have taken it in.”

At the beginning of 1979, with the threats against Romero’s life increasing and then the country’s President offering official protection to him, Romero answered in the homily: “I want to tell the President... that much more than protection for my personal security I would wish this week. for security and tranquillity for the one hundred and eight families and their missing relatives, and for all who are suffering. I don’t have any interest in my personal wellbeing or in security for my own life while my people endure the weight of an economic, social and political system, which brings ever wider social differences. What I would wish from the Supreme Government would be an effort to guarantee that real peace that we all desire, but that cannot be achieved with repression and abuse, and only with social justice, which is the most urgent need among us.”

On the 13th of May, returning from a visit to Rome, he told his congregation this: “In travelling to such a very different world I have felt very proud of my archdiocese, because everywhere there is talk about us and people are eager to become aware of our Church’s experience:” And a week later, he said with great sincerity: “There is no right to be sad... A Christian must always move his own heart to the fullness of joy. Just experience this, brothers and sisters, the way I have tried to experience it in times of the bitterest circumstances, when slander and persecution are most intense; become united to Christ the friend, and feel a sweetness which all earthly happiness cannot give.”

On the first of July 1979 he told his congregation: "Murders from one side and the other, this death dance of political retribution is the most horrific indicator of the injustice of our system, which seeks camouflage in repression" And further: "I would rather be silenced for telling the truth and defending justice than keep on speaking under the manipulation of repression." And a week later he goes deeper again into the foundations of his courage: "It is not that I believe myself to be a prophet. It is rather that you and I, we are a prophetic people; every baptized person has received a share in the prophetic mission of Christ... I feel that the people are a prophet to me... My function is just to arouse in the people their prophetic sense. The prophet's success lies not in converting people... but in convincing a stubborn and unfaithful people to acknowledge that a prophet has talked to them in the name of God."

In spite of the dark cloud that loomed over El Salvador, a message of hope bursts out sometimes from Romero's heart like on the 2nd of September of that last year of his life: "There will be a time with no kidnappings and there will be happiness and we'll be able to go out into our streets free from fear. That time will come! Let's listen to our song: 'I am confident that everything will change.' It must change if we truly believe in the saving Word and we put all our confidence in it. And for me this is the greatest honour of the mission that the Lord has entrusted to me: to keep that hope and faith in God's People." And further: "Even if I am killed..., if we died with a good conscience, with a clean heart of having done only deeds of goodness, what can death do to me?" He was already feeling that his own death was hanging in the air. And a week later he talks directly to the poor: "My dearest people... I want to be counted among the poor, because I know that in the midst of poverty we can truly meet with each other, in all sincerity and genuineness. Let's become worthy of God's preference. Let's become worthy of being made by God 'rich in faith' and rich in the love of God. That is our wealth." And further. Romero had heard that some people politically on the left had said that he was the "opium of the people". He answered back: "Never, never! I am saying that precisely these encouragements to transcendence are there to awaken even more involvement in the historical, the social, the economic, and the political. And I am saying that God has not only made heaven for human beings after death, but that he has

made this earth as well for each and every human being. This is by no means opium!”

The month of October seemed to open up new prospects. The President was overthrown. A ruling council of civilians and military people took power...or so it appeared. Romero asked everyone to look with new eyes towards this hopeful horizon. Some organizations aligned with open left-wing and clandestine political parties discredited Romero for trying to be hopeful about this new scenario. Unfortunately massacres of left-wing activists and of peasants and people of the slums of San Salvador, and even of university students kept on happening. It became all too clear that the Junta had no real power over the military and the security police. Something had changed so that nothing fundamental would change. On the 2nd of January 1980 two of the three civilians in the Council resigned, as well as many members of the cabinet. The country was again under the shadow of the most terrible repression, and the left-wing organizations, both political and social, went underground and started to prepare what was going to quickly become the civil war.

Romero tried to dissuade President Carter of the United States from continuing to provide military aid, but Jimmy Carter, in the grips of the challenge of Iran, was not able to get either the Pentagon or Congress to see events in El Salvador in a different way.

In the middle of December Romero had made it very clear that he wanted to keep his freedom and independence from both the state and from the popular organizations, even if he acknowledged that he had an obligation to them. He stated very firmly that he was going to continue defending the right to organize and supporting every just claim of the popular organizations. On the 6th of January 1980, once the ruling government council had failed, he addressed the wealthy families of El Salvador and told them: “I am simply the pastor, the brother, the friend of these people, who knows their suffering, hunger and I raise my voice to tell you”. With a metaphor that he had borrowed from Brazilian Cardinal Lorscheider he told the wealthy: “You must learn to take off your gold rings so that your fingers aren’t cut off.” And Romero went on: “I think here we have a very clear picture. Whoever does not want to give up his rings will be in danger of having his hand taken away, and whoever does not wish to give to

others out of love and social justice, will be in danger of being dispossessed by violence.”

As his violent end was approaching, Romero’s voice was becoming ever more courageous and sincere, ever freer. Thanks to his Diary we know that threats to his life were piling up and that there were moments when he felt fear and anguish encircling him. No wonder. He was no greater than his own guide and master Jesus of Nazareth, who, the night when he was going to be betrayed into the hands of his enemies, underwent anguish and even sweated blood. But just like Jesus, Romero overcame fear and anguish and became ever more audacious in defence of the poor of El Salvador.

“As a pastor and as a Salvadoran citizen I am deeply grieved when I see how our people are being massacred just because they go out into the streets to demand justice and liberty. I am sure that it won’t be in vain.” And he went on: “This people’s cry for liberation is a clamour that goes up to God that neither events nor anyone else can stop.”

Exactly one month before his murder, he spoke out bravely once again: “I hope that this call of the Church does not harden even more the heart of the oligarchs. Please share what you are and what you own. Don’t go on killing those for whom we are trying to achieve a more just distribution of power and resources in this country. I speak in the first person because this week I have received a warning that I am on the list of those who are going to be done away with next week. However let it be clearly understood that nobody can go on killing the voice of justice”.

A week before his murder he told his audience “Those who believe my preaching to be political and provoking violence, as if I were the cause of all the evils in the Republic, they forget that the word of the Church is not inventing those evils but is just shedding light upon them. Light illuminates what already exists, but does not create it.” And he goes on: I have no ambition for power, and therefore in all freedom I tell the powerful what is good and what is bad, and to any other group as well.”

On the eve of his murder he said "I try to preach the Gospel properly before our people. Therefore I ask Christ all week long, while I am picking up the clamour of our people and the suffering caused by so much crime and the ignominy of so much violence, for Him to give me the appropriate word to console, to denounce, to call to repentance. Even if I know that my Words are just a cry in the wilderness, I know that the Church is trying very hard to accomplish her mission."

It was at that same Sunday Mass that he uttered the words that probably turned the plans for his murder into reality since for the powers-that-be his voice was no longer tolerable. Romero told his congregation: "No soldier is bound to obey an order against God's law. Nobody must obey an immoral law. The time has come for you to come to your senses and obey your own conscience rather than a sinful law. Therefore in the name of God and in the name of this suffering people.., I beseech you, I beg you, I command you in the name of God, stop the repression."

The army and the wealthy families could not allow soldiers and the police to be moved by the archbishop's words, threatening their chain of command. On the evening of the next day, while Romero was celebrating a memorial Mass for the deceased mother of a friend, he was murdered.

In this talk, dear friends, I have not tried to theologize very much Romero's life and explain it in different categories. Rather I have followed Romero's footsteps during the three years and one month of his episcopate and I have tried to make his voice come alive among you.

I was also invited to try to point as well to Romero's challenge for us today. This challenge is very different for us, Central American Christians, in comparison with you, Christians here in the United Kingdom. We live in a society that has not yet become secularised. Certainly we live under a Constitution that declares the State to be lay. But the culture among us is still religious. And so we celebrate Romero's anniversary outside our churches with a procession every year on the Saturday preceding the 24th of March. And the

pilgrimage is crowned with a public Eucharist in the evening from the atrium of the Cathedral. Many thousands of the faithful, walk the two kilometres, and among them are many youngsters who were not born when Romero was murdered. Here, you live in a very secular society and culture. Are you not a minority, a rather small flock among multitudes indifferent to religion? It is good that the Churches in Britain of England and the Catholic Church seek together to find a common meaning of God and Jesus Christ in secular society.

Fr. Ignacio Ellacuría, himself a Jesuit martyr, talked about Romero saying that "with Oscar Romero God passed through El Salvador". This he said when he was Vice-Chancellor of the Central American University (UCA) in the speech which granted the posthumous Doctorate in Theology to the martyred Archbishop in 1985. He was trying to point to Romero's pastoral life and testimonial death which lasted only three years, the same length of time as Jesus' public life and death as a martyr. Both were Paschal events or events of passage and liberation. Ten days before his own murder (in 1989) in a speech in Barcelona, Ellacuría said that the challenge for the future was to fight from the present day to try "to roll back history" and make "a civilization of poverty instead of a civilization of wealth", or still in his own words "a civilization of work instead of a civilization of money".

No matter whether we live in a religious or in a secular culture we live in the same civilization. We, like you, have become globalized. And globalization is the work of capital, the work of wealth as opposed to human labour. Both President Obama and Economic Commissioner of the European Union, Joaquín Almunia, talked about this first great world crisis of globalization as "a crisis of greed". And this shocking reality unites us and presents us with the same challenge. In words of the Gospel "we cannot serve two masters, because we'll love one of them and hate the other or will support one and despise the other. We cannot serve God and Money" or in the Aramaic word for the god Money, "you cannot serve God and Mammon" (Mt 6, 24). During one of his Sunday homilies Archbishop Romero talked about a hymn composed in honour of Jesus Christ the Saviour to whom El Salvador is devoted. He was enthused by the truth of a line in that hymn: "But the gods of Power and Money don't want there to be transfiguration" in El Salvador." How true, he exclaimed, how appropriate!

I repeat. This is the challenge: to dislodge the gods of Power and Money, that is to say of the power invested in Money. Tell me

sincerely from the depths of your heart: can there be solidarity from the wealthy countries to the poorer countries without firmly combating that power invested in Money? Must the poorest sectors across our world today pay the bill for the profligacy and grotesque excesses of bankers and speculators who have played the world's markets as if they were a global casino? Courage for equality is finally the mark of an upright heart. In the last analysis to fight for a civilization where human labour is the jewel in the crown as opposed to capital is precisely to search for the justice of the kingdom of God (Mt 6, 33) and not for the Power of Money. This is entirely consistent with Jesus' Beatitudes. And what is the image that wealth has for the majority of Christians? Would it not be consumption? Don't we live in a consumer society? Wouldn't Jesus of Nazareth, the resurrected Christ, wouldn't He tell us today: happy are those of you who don't put consumption at the top of your human agenda because you are thereby building the kingdom of this earth and so the kingdom of God will come to you? And wouldn't He tell us: woe to you who have fallen prey to the race towards ever greater consumption because you contribute to the kingdom of the power of Money?

This is the challenge that the life and work of Archbishop Romero presents us with. Yes, Saint Romero of America, Saint Romero over the Door of Westminster Abbey. If we become fighters for a more austere society, we certainly will frustrate the magicians of globalization, the servants of the power of Money, to the point of calling us utopians as the powerful and rich high priest Caiphas called Jesus blasphemous and a rebel. We will not become martyrs probably, because today the Power of Money needs not to murder in order to prevail, but we will become utopians and so outsiders, outcasts for the best reasons, and not only for our unfashionable faith. This is the way nowadays of being hated by the evil world. And without being hated there is no true following, no true discipleship (Jn 15, 18-21). Being hated is the birth mark of the Christian People of God. But the world, this world so loved by God. this physical cosmos which is in such danger around us in our small planet, and the poor of this world, our sisters and brothers, will in their own way recognize our human solidarity, and most certainly they are in need of it. And since The Son of God's becoming flesh and building his tent among us, all that is human is Christian and Divine. Let us help each other to be up to this challenge in the way that Romero was.

Thank you very much.