

A Prophet for All Ages

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Charles Plock, C. M. is currently a chaplain at St. John's University. For the past two years he has been translating the homilies of Archbishop Romero for the Archdiocese of San Salvador that is advocating the cause for the canonization of Romero. He worked in the Republic of Panama for ten years and at St. John the Baptist Parish in Brooklyn before beginning ministry at the university.

Introduction

During the past two years I have had the privilege of translating the Sunday homilies of Archbishop Oscar A. Romero, a charismatic figure in the history of the Church of Latin America, as well as the universal Church. As James R. Brockman stated in his book, *Romero*:

This was a man who lived his life amid the poverty and injustice of Latin America. He became a priest before Vatican II and a bishop after Medellin. As archbishop of San Salvador, he became the leader of the Church in his native land. But as archbishop he also became a man of the poor, their advocate when they had no other voice to demand justice for them. He suffered and gave his life on their behalf.¹

From a historical perspective, Romero was the Archbishop of San Salvador during a time when most of Latin America was guided by the United States' Doctrine of National Security. As a result of this policy most of the nations in Latin America were ruled by military dictatorships that were backed by the United States government. Civil wars erupted in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala and thousand upon thousand of people were killed and/or disappeared. The homilies of Archbishop Romero are not only important

theological documents but also historically significant documents because this is the only place where many of the persons who “disappeared” are mentioned by name.

In the midst of this tragic drama of upheaval and civil war and violence, in the midst of the implementation of new and radical pastoral approaches to the Church’s ministry, Oscar Arnulfo Romero was installed on February 22, 1977 as the Archbishop of San Salvador in a simple ceremony in the church of San José de la Montaña. He was Archbishop for a little more than three years and his vision of ministry could be summed up by the words that he spoke during his last interview, one that he gave to the Mexican newspaper *Excelsior* just two weeks before his death:

I have been frequently threatened with death. I must say that, as a Christian, I do not believe in death but in resurrection. If they kill me, I will rise again in the people of El Salvador. I am not boasting; I say it with the greatest humility. As a pastor, I am bound by a divine command to give my life for those whom I love, and that includes all Salvadorans, even those who are going to kill me. If they manage to carry out their threats, I shall be offering my blood for the redemption and the resurrection of El Salvador. Martyrdom is a grace from God that I do not believe I have earned. But if God accepts the sacrifice of my life, then may my blood be the seed of liberty and a sign of the hope that will soon become a reality. May my death, if it is accepted by God, be for the liberation of my people and a witness of hope in what is to come! You can tell them, if they succeed in killing me that I pardon them and I bless those who may carry out the killing. But I wish that they could realize they are wasting their time. A bishop will die, but the Church of God --- the people --- they will never die!²

But this is the end of the story so let us now go back to February 22, 1977.

Appointment and Installation of Oscar Romero

The nomination of Romero to assume the position as the Archbishop of San Salvador was backed by the wealthy, the large land owners and the Salvadoran government. He was viewed as a *safe candidate* and his appointment was seen as a great victory for the conservative cause. Romero

appeared to be the perfect man to return the Church to the sheepfold, the priests to the sacristy and Catholic teaching back to the Council of Trent and Vatican I. For their part, a good number of the clergy of the Archdiocese received the news of his appointment with dejection and apprehension. They regarded it as a sign that Rome seemed more concerned about maintaining good relations with the government than to serve the needs of the Christian community in El Salvador. Thus at the time of his installation, one group of priests supported the Archbishop and participated in the ceremonies that took place in the small church of San José de la Montaña while another group of priests held a vocal protest outside the church and refused to enter and express their solidarity and allegiance to their new bishop. All of this would change very quickly.

Father Rutilio Grande

On March 12, 1977 Father Rutilio Grande and two companions, a boy and an old man, were killed while they were on their way to celebrate Mass in the village of El Paisnal, the place where Father Grande was a parish priest and where he had been born. The assassination of Father Grande clearly represented more than the elimination of a priest. Since Father Grande had been one of the key figures in the apostolic renewal of the Archdiocese, a pioneer of the application of Vatican II and Medellín to the Salvadoran Church and a leader of Christian work for and with the poor and the oppressed, his assassination was seen as an attack on the pastoral approach of the Catholic Church --- an approach that involved a preferential option for those people who were poor and oppressed. It was an attack against the identification made by the priests and religious with the hopes and sufferings of the People of God.

On many occasions Archbishop Romero would remark that the assassination of Father Grande was the crucial event in his own conversion experience. Father Grande had been a great personal friend, a faithful and close collaborator, a man whose stamina and apostolic clarity he had always admired. In the homily that he preached on the occasion of Father Grande's funeral he said:

I considered [him] a brother and at important moments in my life, he was very close to me and I will never forget his gestures of friendship.³

The Archbishop then turned toward the priests who had gathered to celebrate the funeral rites with him and stated:

My dear priests, I am happy that among the fruits of this death that we mourn and of other difficult circumstances that we confront at this time, the clergy are united with their Bishop and the faithful understand that there is one faith that leads us along paths that are quite distinct from other ideologies that are not of the Church --- paths that offer an alternative to these ideologies: the cause of love ... True love is the gift that Father Rutilio Grande gives us in his death with the two campesinos ... A priest with his campesinos walking to meet his people, to identify himself with them, to live with them --- this is an inspiration of love and not revolution.⁴

At the conclusion of the burial rite for Father Grande, Archbishop Romero met with his advisors and consultants to debate, discuss and analyze what further steps the Archdiocese could take in order to protest the violent attack on Father Grande which was also viewed as a direct attack on the whole Archdiocesan Church. As a result of these meetings and deliberations two immediate actions were decided: first, the Archbishop asked the government to investigate the events surrounding the assassination of Father Grande and then stated that he would not participate in any formal governmental event until he had been informed of the person(s) responsible for this criminal act; second, it was decided to cancel the celebration of all the parish Masses in the Archdiocese on Sunday, March 20, 1978 and that only one Mass would be celebrated in the Cathedral. All the priests and all the people of the Archdiocese would be invited to participate in this one Mass. This action was decided upon to show people that the death of one priest, the death of one member of the community of the Archdiocese, has consequences on all the women and men of the Archdiocese.

On Sunday, March 20th, all the priests of the Archdiocese gathered to concelebrate the one Mass that was celebrated that day. This was a stark contrast to the installation celebration that had occurred just four weeks before when the clergy were divided in their support for the new Archbishop. Conscious of the change that had taken place, Archbishop Romero addressed the priests in his homily:

In light of the unity that has brought us together at this one Mass, I want to publicly thank all of these beloved priests. Many of them risk their lives, and like Father Grande offer the greatest sacrifice ... [applause] ... That applause ratifies the profound joy that I feel in my heart as I take possession of this Archdiocese. I also feel that my own weaknesses and my own inabilities find their complement, their power, and their courage in these united priests. Beloved priests, remain united in the authentic truth of the Gospel! This is another way to say to you, as Christ's humble successor and representative here in the archdiocese: THE ONE WHO ATTACKS ONE OF MY PRIESTS, ATTACKS ME! [applause].⁵

Although the Archbishop had been installed on February 22nd, it is interesting that he spoke about this event as marking the beginning of his ministry as Archbishop. Later he would speak the following words that seemed to characterize so much of the Archbishop's time during the next three years:

It was my lot to go on claiming dead bodies --- these day I have to walk the roads gathering up dead friends, listening to widows and orphans and trying to spread hope.⁶

A Defender of the Poor and the Oppressed

The defense of the poor and the oppressed was the central focus of the Archbishop's pastoral ministry. During the period of colonization, the bishop was by office "the protector of the Indians." On the assumption that the Indians would be marginalized, exploited and decimated, the bishop had the responsibility of protecting them and defending them from exploitation by either the military or the colonists. This insight into the role of the bishop was revived by Romero:

When we say "for the poor," we do not take sides with one social class. What we do is invite all social classes, rich and poor without

distinction, to take seriously the cause of the poor as though it were their own. The cause of the poor is the cause of Jesus Christ ---
“whatever you did to one of these poor ones: the neglected, the blind, the lame, the deaf, the mute, you did to me.”⁷

As the *campesinos* left their homes in search of work during the harvest season, they turned toward the Archbishop and sought his assistance in negotiating just work contracts. Factory workers frequently sought his help in mediating grievances with management. When the National University became an armed camp the students asked the Archbishop to intervene on their behalf so that the University could once again become a safe institution of higher education. Mothers and wives visited him and sent letters to him begging for his assistance in finding their husbands and children who had disappeared. So many people and groups came to him and, as their protector, the Archbishop felt duty bound to put the full weight of his Episcopal authority at the service of the poor and the marginalized:

three men abducted, four victims of a tragic air accident, two campesinos murdered after a demonstration --- in recent days these are the expressive emblem of human suffering made more tragic by human wickedness.⁸

At the same time Romero took most seriously the Church’s exhortation to make a preferential option for the poor:

There aren’t two categories of people. There aren’t some people who were born to have everything, leaving the rest with nothing and a majority of people who have nothing and cannot taste the happiness that God has created for all. The Christian society that God wants is one in which we share the godness that God has given to everyone.⁹

Thus, during the three years that he was the Archbishop of San Salvador he became known as the voice for the voiceless:

Give the people an opportunity to organize, repeal the unjust laws, grant amnesty to those who have broken laws that are not for the common good, stop intimidating the people, especially the rural population. Set free or arraign in court those who have disappeared after their arrest or are jailed unjustly. Grant those who have been expelled or kept from returning for political reasons the chance to return to the country.¹⁰

As a Vincentian this aspect of his ministry is most attractive and also most challenging. First of all, Romero is clearly imitating Jesus who spoke of his ministry in terms of bringing *Good News to the poor, liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed* (Luke 4:18-19).¹¹ Jesus' vision of ministry inspired Saint Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac (the founders of the Vincentian Community and the Daughters of Charity) and continues to inspire the followers of Saint Vincent de Paul at Saint John's University. In the University's mission statement we read:

Saint John's is a Vincentian university, inspired by Saint Vincent de Paul's compassion and zeal for service. We strive to provide excellent education for all people, especially those lacking economic, physical or social advantages ... Wherever possible we devote our intellectual and physical resources to search out the cause of poverty and social injustice and encourage solutions which are adaptable, effective and concrete.¹²

Yes, like Jesus, like Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, like Archbishop Romero, we, as members of the Saint John's University community, are invited to be the voice of the voiceless.

Conflicts with the Bishops and the Vatican

After Vatican II, the bishops of the world formed Episcopal Conferences:

In these days especially bishops frequently are unable to fulfill their office effectively and fruitfully unless they develop a common effort involving constant growth in harmony and closeness of ties with other bishops. Episcopal conferences already established in many nations have furnished outstanding proofs of a more fruitful apostolate. Therefore, this sacred synod considers it to be supremely fitting that everywhere bishops belonging to the same nation or region form an association which would meet at fixed times. Thus, when the insights of prudence and experience have been shared and views exchanged, there will emerge a holy union of energies in the service of the common good of the churches.¹³

There were six bishops in El Salvador: José Eduardo Alvarez Ramírez, C.M. (Diocese of San Miguel), Benjamin Barrera y Reyes (Diocese of Santa Ana), Arturo Rivera y Damas (Diocese of Santiago de Maria), Pedro Arnoldo Aparicio y Quintanilla (Diocese of San Vicente), Marco Rene Revello (Auxiliary Bishop of San Salvador), and Oscar Romero (Archbishop of San Salvador). During the time that Archbishop Romero was pastor of the Diocese of San Salvador he was continually criticized by the other bishops. He had one ally among the bishops, Bishop Rivera y Damas. In most of the important decisions that were made by the Episcopal Conference the vote was 4-2. Often the planning of these meetings was coordinated among four of the bishops who then presented documents to Bishop Rivera y Damas and Archbishop Romero as an accomplished fact. An example of this is seen in the discussions that took place concerning a letter that was sent to the papal representative, Emanuele Gerada --- a letter that was signed by 200 priests and religious from El Salvador, criticizing the nuncio for disagreeing with Romero's policies and openly supporting a repressive and unjust government. The bishops decided by a vote of 4-1 (Bishop Rivera y Damas was at a meeting in Guatemala and asked the other bishops to wait since the topic required a meeting at which all of the bishops would be present --- this motion was voted down) to publish a harsh response to the priests. In his diary he wrote:

The document was approved and I was subjected to many false accusations by the other bishops. I was told that my preaching is subversive, that my priests provoke a climate of violence among the peasants; and that we should not complain about the abuses that the authorities are committing. The archdiocese was accused of interfering in the other dioceses, causing division among priests and pastoral

unrest in other dioceses. The archdiocese was accused of sowing confusion in the seminary ... it has been a bitter day because of this event and I lament that the division among the bishops will be worsened by this step, which seems to me not to be very wise.¹⁴

At the same time reports were sent to Rome denouncing his pastoral plan and his preaching. He was called a subversive, a communist, Marxist. The situation had become so filled with tension that Romero traveled to Rome in June, 1978 to meet with Pope Paul VI. On Wednesday, June 21, 1978 he and Bishop Rivera had a private audience with the Pope. This audience was summarized in his homily that he gave in the Cathedral upon his return to El Salvador:

I will never forget the beautiful moment when the Pope, after receiving the information from all his advisors who had composed a synthesis of what he would say to the Bishops who had arrived there for their Ad Limina visitation, spoke some words of encouragement and comfort and strength that made us feel as though we were one with the heart of the Pastor. It was as though we had received the same gift that God had given to Peter and his successors: Affirm your people! My dear sisters and brothers, this is what I bring you at this time: an affirmation, a ratification, a word of encouragement and goodness and understanding of the one who is Christ on earth: the Pope.

The Pope stretched out his hands with the warmth and the strength of one who supports all the Pastors and the whole Universal Church. He counseled me and helped me to continue to be faithful in this ministry of service to the people. He spoke many kind words that I would like to communicate to you, but the emotion of the moment makes me forget his exact words. But in substance he told me that since he had worked in the Secretariat of State some fifty years before becoming Pontiff, he knew of the vitality, hard work and the problems of the people of El Salvador. He told me: These people demand that their rights be respected and seek for a more just situation. You must help and love these people. Be patient and strong and help them! Tell them that the Pope loves them and cares for them and is aware of their suffering. Tell them to never seek for a solution to their problems in irrational violence. Tell them to never allow themselves to be caught up in the

currents of hatred. Rather work together to build unity, peace, and justice upon a foundation of love. I was very pleased to be able to tell him: Holy Father, this is what I have preached. I have never preached hatred even though those who slander me are convinced that I preach violence, but I have never done that. Your message that you communicated on the first of January has been central to my preaching: No to violence, yes to peace. The Pope smiled and blessed the people of El Salvador whom he wants to remain faithful to the paths of the Gospel.¹⁵

It is clear that Romero felt that the Pope had affirmed him personally and also approved his pastoral plan for the Archdiocese. The Pope seemed to understand the conflict that he had to endure because the other bishops of El Salvador simply did not understand this new approach to ministry. Romero, however, would have a different reaction after a similar meeting with John Paul II whom he would meet one year later. After a private audience with Pope John Paul II he wrote in his diary:

I left, pleased by the meeting but worried to see how much the negative reports of my pastoral work had influenced him, although deep down I remembered that he had recommended “courage and boldness, but, at the same time, tempered with the necessary prudence and balance.” Although I did not feel completely satisfied with the meeting, I think that the audience and our conversation were very useful because he was very frank. I have learned that one cannot expect to get complete approval and that it is more useful to hear criticism that can be used to improve my work.¹⁶

This meeting with the Pope took place at a time when there was much discussion about naming an Apostolic Administrator, that is, Romero would continue as the Archbishop but all authority would be given to another person named to administer the Archdiocese. While he was in Rome he met with Cardinal Baggio who felt that it was not a very practical solution because he did not see that any one of the present bishops who could be the apostolic administrator would be able to work well with Romero. To bring in someone from outside the country also seemed an absurd idea, given the situation of El Salvador. The cardinal mentioned that this action would still be studied and there are many people who wonder if Archbishop Romero had

not been assassinated would Rome have intervened and given the decision making authority to someone else.

I previously mentioned the fact that José Eduardo Alvarez was one of the bishops in El Salvador. I should say a little more about him since he was a Vincentian, a member of the Central American Province of the Congregation of the Mission. He was often referred to as “the colonel from San Miguel” because he held that rank in the Salvadorian army and was also the military chaplain. He attracted international attention in 1981 for his blessing of new war planes that had just arrived at Ilopango Air Force Base outside of San Salvador. He was a vehement opponent of Archbishop Romero and with the other bishops sent letters to Rome denouncing the Archbishop as a communist and a Marxist. Though I am not proud of this fact nor the position that he took during the time of his episcopacy in San Miguel, I felt that it was also important to be frank and include this fact here.

Romero as an Evangelizer of All the People of El Salvador

As Romero visited the communities of the Archdiocese he took time to meet with the various groups that worked and ministered in the parishes. His visits to these communities were not photo opportunities but a time to encourage and strengthen the work of evangelization. His evangelization of the whole of El Salvador meant that he tried to proclaim the Good News to everyone, regardless of their political or social situation. Romero was very well aware of the fact that the population was divided into distinct groups. So he undertook his mission in a different way. In ministering to the masses he took into account the need to purify and reinforce popular religion. In dealing with politically committed Christians he encouraged them in their work on behalf of justice and human rights and in his work with Christians in positions of economic or political power he encouraged these people to change their way.

It was this approach to ministry that led to his martyrdom on March 24th, 1980. The previous day, after he recounted at length the violence of the past week he concluded his homily — a homily that lasted for more than two hours — with the following words:

I would like to appeal in a special way to the army's enlisted men, and in particular to the ranks of the Guardia Nacional and the police --- those in the barracks. Brothers: you are a part of our own people. You kill your own campesino brothers and sisters. Before an order to kill that a man may give, God's law must prevail: Thou shalt not kill! No soldier is obliged to obey an order against the law of God. No one has to fulfill an immoral law. It is time to take back your consciences and to obey your consciences rather than the orders of sin. The Church, defender of the rights of God, of the law of God, of human dignity, of the person, cannot remain silent before such abominations. We want the government to understand seriously that reforms are worth nothing if they are stained with so much blood. In the name of God, and in the name of this suffering people, whose laments rise to heaven each day more tumultuous, I beg you, I beseech you, I order you in the name of God: Stop the repression!¹⁷

Many have said that these words were like placing the final nail in his coffin. The following evening he celebrated Mass on the anniversary of the death of a mother of a friend. As he concluded the homily, a single shot rang out and the Archbishop died a few minutes later in the emergency room of the hospital. In death Romero is one with the oppressed and persecuted, and that oneness is recognized by the continual visits to his tomb by the people of El Salvador. After the assassination of Father Rafael Palacios he said:

It would be sad, if in a country where murder is being committed so horribly, we were not to find priests also among the victims. They are the testimony of a Church that is incarnated in the problems of its people.¹⁸

How fitting that in death the blood of the Archbishop should be mingled and shared with the countless people who had been assassinated and murdered and "disappeared" before him. Indeed, in death Romero is one with the oppressed and the persecuted and that oneness is recognized by the continual visits to his tomb in the Cathedral. Yet as he himself said: *a bishop will die, but the Church of God --- the people --- they will never die!*¹⁹

Notes

1. Brockman, *Romero*, (Orbis Books:Maryknoll, New York, 1989), p. ix
 2. Interview, March 1980
 3. Homily, March 14, 1977.
 4. Homily, March 14, 1977
 5. Homily, March 20, 1977
 6. Homily, May 12, 1977
 7. Homily, September 9, 1979
 8. Newspaper column written by Romero, May 26, 1978
 9. Homily, December 16. 1979
 10. Homily, August 6, 1978
 11. Luke 4:18-19
 12. Approved by Board of Trustees, March 15, 1999
 13. *Christus Dominus*, #37
 14. Romero, *A Shepherd's Diary*, entry for April 3, 1978, p. 24
 15. Homily, July 2, 1978
 16. Romero, *A Shepherd's Diary*, entry for May 7, 1979, p. 215
 17. Homily, March 23, 1980
 18. Homily, June 21, 1979
 19. Interview, March, 1980
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