
Ricardo Ramirez, CSB

The Unfinished Eucharist

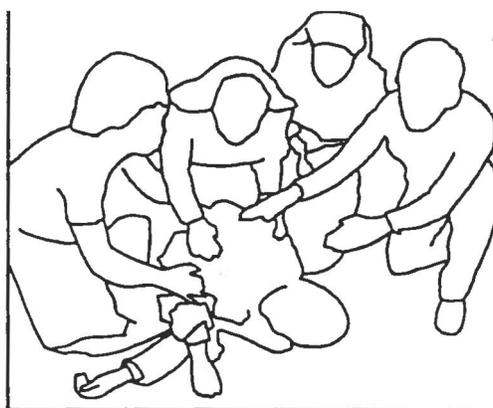
The Spiritual Legacy of Archbishop Romero

Oscar Arnulfo Romero is referred to by the poor of El Salvador as “San Romero,” or simply as “Monseñor.” He is regarded as a holy man whose life, ministry, and martyrdom have created a dramatic scenario that is both tragic and inspiring. The dreadful forces of repression and death that Romero confronted called for God’s vindication, and continue to do so. The atrocities of bloodshed, rape, destruction, and mutilation belong to the categories of My Lai, the Khmer Rouge, and the Holocaust. On the other hand, all but the most hardened of heart will be lifted in spirit as we re-read the violent life of the saint and martyr named Romero. His name will live on for centuries to come, and will be remembered as a modern-day Thomas Becket, another martyr/archbishop, who was assassinated while celebrating the Eucharist.

As I journey through the Romero story, I have become more than ever convinced that he embodies the new spirituality of Latin America, a spirituality that is intimately connected with the poor and oppressed peoples who coura-

geously struggle for their freedom. Further, I have become convinced that the future of the spirituality of North America to a great extent depends on how we connect with the “spiritual space” created by our neighbours to the south. One of the lessons of Romero is that when we say we are making a “preferential option for the poor,” we are in fact stating that our own salvation depends on how we treat the

The word remains. This is the great comfort of one who preaches. My voice will disappear, but my word, which is Christ, will remain in the



hearts of those who have willed to receive it.

*Oscar Romero
17 December 1978*

poor, for our salvation depends ultimately on how we relate to our God and to godly things, and the Gospel tells us that the poor are sacred to God and are of eminent importance to the Son of God.

What is that legacy that is ours as a result of Romero having lived in our generation? After all, we are the privileged ones to have lived when he lived, and we must reap what we can from the harvest of his dying to his own life and his rising in the hearts of the Salvadoran people, as he said he would. And risen he has. In processions and other public gatherings you hear repeated again and again, "*Monseñor Romero vive en el corazón del pueblo.*"

The Church of Latin America has given Archbishop Romero to the Universal Church and to the world as a model of holiness: a holiness that has to do with wholeness and integrity in Christ. For Romero, all things had to do with God, and God had to do with all things. He took seriously that which is deep in our Judeo-Christian tradition: God intervenes in history, God cares for and loves his people. Romero believed deeply and strongly that "God so loved the world, that he gave his only son" (Jn 3.16). God incarnates and reveals himself in the dwelling place of his children wherever they are; God is there, in his children's joys and sorrows. The first mark of Romero's legacy to us, then, is his appreciation of divine revelation.

God's Voice in the Voiceless

It appears that Romero had the strong intuition that in the midst of strife, in the madness and the violence of human suffering, God spoke as he had in the time of the Egyptian bondage of Israel, in the desert, in the Babylonian exile, and at other painful moments of Israel's history. God spoke through his prophets who discerned his voice in the events of their lives. Romero was a prophet; whether he saw himself in that role or not does not matter. Others, myself included, have no doubts that he was.

But consider his methodology:

While visiting the rural communities, he loved to mingle with the people and listen to their sufferings. In conflictive situations,

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he knew how to hold off making a decision until he heard different points of view. But he also listened to the Gospel and had the ability to collect himself in prayer. That gave him a serenity when he had to make controversial decisions.

Paul Newpower, MM
"Romero's Legacy"

Thus, he listened to God's voice in the voiceless. This was a true prophetic method, a method Romero must certainly have learned from the *Comunidades de Base* experience. In those base communities, Scripture and real life come together: the Scriptures give meaning and direction to life; life provides the earth into which the seeds of the Word fall; and those who prove to be "good earth" make the Scriptures spring to life. The Holy Bible is only holy, it is only the inspired Word, when it quickens and enlivens people to acts of charity, mercy, peace, and justice.

In *Archbishop Romero: Memories and Reflections*, John Sobrino, SJ, describes Romero's ability to make faith concrete in his preferential option for the poor. Romero's preaching was powerful and bold; he spoke in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets. His was the manner of Jesus, and in that style he addressed the evils of corruption in government, the violence of the army and the death squads, and the oppression of the poor.

It was precisely because he first listened to God and to his own people that Romero can be described as a true prophet. The Church needs to speak and act prophetically. Our preaching, the style of our liturgies—including our Church music and physical environment—speak all too often of a peace that pacifies rather than the peace that challenges and carries with it the burden of working for justice, the essential ingredient of a peaceful world.

Both the American and the Canadian bishops have spoken in a prophetic style about peace and economic justice, but many articulate and Catholic-educated people have challenged even the appropriateness of our daring to relate matters of faith and morality with matters of the world. We have failed in our teaching and evangelizing, especially in convincing our parishioners that faith and holiness have an

enormous bearing on the social and political environment. We have conveniently accommodated to world views and political systems whose values are dramatically opposed to the message of the reign of God. We have allowed our people to accept the false yet popular interpretation of the text, "render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's," as meaning that we must keep the spiritual separate from the things of the world.

We, the preachers, are afraid to discern the voice of God in the voiceless of the world, probably because we are afraid to change ourselves and to challenge others to change. We fail to read the signs of the times for our people. We need to point out the clear opposition between the cultural wisdom of our contemporary society and the Christian wisdom of the Gospel. When we address the real issues of the dehumanization of our society in the light of the Gospel, when we bring hope to a world that has to a great extent given up hope of a civilization of love, when we bring faith to an unbelieving world, then we are correctly and effectively acting as prophets. Romero has charted the way.

The God of Life Versus the Death Squads

We are filled with horror as we see the scale and grimness of the killing in El Salvador. I personally cannot look at the pictures of the religious women killed in 1980, nor at the photos of Archbishop Romero as he lay dying on the floor of the chapel where he was shot, nor at the unbelievable scene of the murdered Jesuits, without becoming deeply angry and feeling utterly powerless to do anything. Could my own emotion be likened to that of Romero's when he would first hear of the death of a priest (it happened five times when he was Archbishop), or of the raping and killing and torture of the innocent poor?

Romero condemned violence in all forms and from whatever its source. I am sure he saw the different kinds of violence. He saw that violence can be institutional. The institutions that are in place allow people to become victims of deprivation, such as the more than 20,000 children who died of malnutrition or

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related diseases last year in El Salvador. There is also repressive violence from the forces that are brought to bear against those who dare to speak out for justice. In addition, there is the violence of the armed struggle of peoples who counteract the violation of their human rights with real violence of their own. The repression of their efforts is also an example of this violence.

And so, in a situation where the violation of human life became rampant, Romero became the champion of life. He appealed to all sources of violence: to the guerrillas, to independent sources, and to the Salvadoran government. He even appealed to the President of the United States that military aid to El Salvador be stopped because it would only lead to further killing.

The spirituality and faith behind Romero's struggle for life flows from his belief in the God of the living who enters into human history to destroy the forces of death and allow the forces of life to heal, reconcile, and lift up those who walk in the valley of death. Poverty and death go together. In Latin America, this has become very clear. Poverty means death and death comes in different ways: it can be physical, psychological, or spiritual. It can come to individuals and to a people, to their cultures and traditions. The forces of death in Latin America can exhaust the hopes and dreams of the people and their will to continue to struggle for a life with dignity. Their salvation is their faith in a God who wants to liberate them from those forces of death, and who offers a life-giving approach to a new civilization, and the dignity that comes from respect for the totality of their lives.

Antonio Lujan, the director of the Office of Social Ministry of the diocese of Las Cruces, New Mexico, returned recently from the "Pastors for Peace" caravan that took medicine and other assistance to El Salvador. He was most impressed by the repatriated Salvadoran communities of people returning from refugee camps. The people developed new structures that enabled them to survive. They became literate, for example; one camp went from a ninety percent illiteracy rate to an eighty-five percent literacy rate. Practically out of nothing they were able to support one another. They learned that love of neighbour is salvation, and that only as a

community will they be able to survive. "You can see the presence of God in their hearts," Antonio says, "and they believe he is with them."

Phil Dahl-Bredine, who yearly organizes the *Instituto de Paz en Las Americas* and who has dedicated a good portion of his life to peace in El Salvador, says that the faith has penetrated the people deeply, and this is because of what the Church has become: a Church that identifies itself with those who struggle for life and freedom. The identity of Church and the people is of course embodied in the person of Archbishop Romero.

The people who have been driven from their homes and villages liken themselves to Jesus, Mary, and Joseph in Egypt, or to Rachel who wept for her children. They see themselves as the Exodus people in Scripture, and they are sure that God intends for them to return.

In this Church we find the pearl of great price for which we must sell everything. . . . It contains the possibility of building a Church faithful to the Gospel of Jesus and the demands of the present moment. The weakness of the prophetic Church in Central America is like that of the tiny seed: though it is small, it holds great promise. The social and political programmes of the poor and the Church programmes that support them are barely a small seed. But without this seed the scene would be much bleaker than it is. For in this region life with suffering and poverty, there is also a struggle going on to find new models of living together founded on dignity and equality. These models can provide a small light in a world that threatens life and the quality of life on many fronts. And in the same way, this new model of Church that has already been born and is now developing in these countries can inspire the whole Church.

Archbishop Oscar Romero
Voice of the Voiceless

The challenge this poses to us in North America is basically the same: the absolute imperative—stemming from the Gospel—that because life is sacred, it must be cherished and de-

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fended. The forces of death are with our poor also, and with the Indians, the homeless, the jobless, women, and the abused children of our age. Our society is horribly cruel toward its children; we are shocked at how often they are sexually and physically abused, neglected, unwanted, and aborted. Some adults have simply decided not to have children. Ecology is finally becoming a concern, but we know how little is actually being done for Mother Earth and for the sake of this generation's children.

Another example is how little regard we have for the common good, and how lacking we can be in sacrificing for the sake of that good. Our refusal to consider increased taxes to pay for schools and government debt is indicative of this unfortunate attitude.

Human life in our sophisticated society is threatened by our susceptibility to addiction. The evil of addictiveness stems from a vision of life cultivated by the consumeristic world that says we are supposed to have things—many things—feel good, look pretty, never feel pain, and live forever. When the harsh realities of life hit us, we say, "But this isn't supposed to happen!" It is that basic insecurity that ultimately leads people to the escapes that are momentary trips into a false and empty happiness. And then we blame Colombia and the narcotics traffickers. The drug problem is there because we are susceptible, not because drugs are available. Drugs are available precisely because we are susceptible.

Compare the problems of our affluent culture with the problems of the peoples of Central America: our problems are there on account of our over-abundance, theirs exist on account of their lack of the basic necessities of life. Romero stands with the Lord on the judgement seat, as it were, and if we feel guilt it is because there is reason for it. But we must go a step further; we must search together for strategies to overcome our flirtations with death-giving world-views and lift our sights to the vision of Jesus, to an environment of respect for the dignity of life, and this begins with an appreciation of the self as created in God's image and redeemed by the most precious blood of the God-Man hanging on the tree of life.

The Conversion from Remote to Radical Love

The dramatic conversion of Romero after he became archbishop is another gift that we should consider today as part of his legacy to our own spirituality. People such as Jon Sobrino, SJ, who was close to Romero, attest to the radical change that took place in him on the occasion of Father Rutilio del Grande's murder. The conversion of Archbishop Romero has to be the key moment in the recent history of the Church in El Salvador. It can be seen as the faith response—not only of Romero, but of the people he represented—to the divine call to love in this particular time and place. Romero offers us an example of what real conversion means: it is becoming incarnate in a particular situation. Being a Christian involves constant conversion, and, even though conversion does not always take place in the radical way in which it took place in Romero, it must happen if we are to continue as Christians. Conversion for us is a gradual transformation of our lives in their totality, in our consciousness, in our worldview, in our ability to make value judgements, in our sensitivity to the hurting situations in which we find ourselves. Just as Jesus incarnated himself with a particular people and responded to their immediate needs, so do Christians have to respond in the here and now. Conversion is never an abstract process, but involves a change of heart that carries with it a change in ways of relating to our God and to other people.

There were other reasons for Romero's conversion besides Father del Grande's death. There were the conflicting responses—first from the right, which claimed that del Grande deserved what he got, and then from the many priests and nuns who reacted to the archbishop's new vision with extraordinary commitment. Yet another reason was the response of the poor, "his people," and their agonizing pleas for assistance. This conversion of heart and life led to Romero's determination to clarify the nature of the Church as the defender against the forces of death and oppression, and to his prophetic stances against injustice, and in his defence of the poor. We are told that when he studied at the Gregorianum in Rome, he was a

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logical thinker, very studious, and orderly. He was a lover of order and clerical discipline, and a friend of liturgical rules. He seemed to have believed that the most important elements of Christianity were prayer and personal conversion, but conversion taken in a very limited sense. Perhaps the roots of his conversion—his love for the Church, his regard for truth—were there before that radical change. Father Rutilio del Grande himself urged his fellow priests to accept Romero when he first became archbishop because of his honesty and goodness.

Safe, pious, non-political, he seemed to promise no trouble for El Salvador's ruling class. They probably thought they could continue to suppress by force any attempt to awaken El Salvador's poor people. The revolutionary left mistrusted Romero because of his refusal to condone political violence. He had little backing among the country's other bishops—to them, the people's unrest was communist-inspired. A fellow bishop accused Romero of giving "encouragement to communist elements bent on manipulating the Church and overthrowing the constitutional government."

Dorothy Folliard, OP
Eulogy, 24 March 1990

The reaction to his prophetic words and actions filled his enemies with rage. Even at the level of the Vatican there were those who wanted to remove him as archbishop. His conversion challenges the materialistic worldview so prevalent in modern society. Romero further challenges the prevailing view of the Church and its mission. Many people today think that the Church exists as a kind of élitist organization, and that if one follows its rules and believes all that it teaches, this life is a prelude to eternal life in heaven. Romero said:

Christ founded his Church in order to keep on being present himself in the history of human beings, precisely through that group of Christians who formed his Church. The Church is thus the flesh in which Christ incarnates throughout the ages his own life and the mission of his person.

These words are from the second pastoral letter of Archbishop Romero, dated 6 August 1977, entitled, "The Church the Body of Christ in History." In this letter, Romero describes what in his mind is the Church and its mission in the world. He writes that as long as the Church preaches an eternal salvation without involving itself in the real problems of our world, it is respected and praised, even given privileges. But if it is faithful to its mission of pointing out the sin that puts many in misery, and if it proclaims the hope of a more just and human world, then it is persecuted and slandered, and called subversive and communist. The Church must be faithful to its mission, and it must enter the world of sin with the intention to save and liberate.

What happened in the mind and heart of Oscar Arnulfo Romero, the Church must also undergo. It must be converted to a more radical preaching of the Gospel, applied to situations as particular as that which the people of El Salvador faced. Throughout the latter part of his ministry, Romero preached the conversion of all to a more just and peaceful existence. His call to conversion was often aimed at the élite groups in El Salvador, including the military. He went on to challenge even the poor and oppressed, that they might take on a reconciling spirit and avoid all forms of violence to fight violence.

I believe that Romero's words can most *appropriately* be applied to the Church of comfort throughout the developed world. For one thing, we must change our attitude toward Latin America. I do not know why the North American attitude toward social and political change in Latin America is so different from our attitude toward the same things in other parts of the world. On the one hand, we are supportive of the peoples of Eastern Europe in their struggle for freedom and economic justice. On the other hand, we do not seem overly concerned about the same things in Latin America. In some instances we even support the stifling of people's struggles for freedom. It may have something to do with racial bias.

What we need is to be freed from our own ignorance of what is going on. The truth *will* make us free. As the Western hemisphere becomes smaller, what happens in the north or

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in the south cannot help but affect the whole. No one country in the Americas can continue to try to go it alone. For the survival of all of us, it is imperative that we begin to deal with one another honestly and out of a sincere desire to live in peace and fairness.

The immigration problem between the United States and Mexico, for example, should be dealt with bilaterally, not unilaterally. Wisdom does not stop just north of the Mexican border. The American government seems to be lacking in trust, so when turmoil arises in South America, often as a result of gross injustice and scandalous poverty, Americans are too quick to send troops or otherwise interfere in the sovereignty of those nations. The government acts all too often as the protector of the interests of a few. The solutions to the social, economic, and political troubles of Latin America lie to a great extent within the borders of the United States.

If the Church does not change, people will not change. It is truly remarkable what has happened in Latin America since Medellín took place in 1968. In Brazil in the early 1970s, for example, it is said that seventy-five percent of Catholic students considered themselves atheists. In 1978, seventy-five percent believed in the Church and in God. The reason for this change was because of the change in the hierarchy and in the style of the Church in Brazil. It became the Church of the poor; and the people, particularly the young, took notice and themselves became believers on account of that witness. I believe that this is what our young people are waiting to see in the leadership and ministry of our own Church. If we begin to take the Gospel more seriously, especially in our attitude to the real problems of our world, then our young people will also take notice, and join us in our efforts to eradicate that which takes away from our humanity.

It is interesting that conversion in Latin America has taken place in people other than members of the episcopacy, clergy, and religious. Lay people, too, have become powerful witnesses of the Gospel. One is truly impressed by the witness of the Colombian judges and those who run for office, knowing that the positions they take against drug traffickers might mean their assassination. There seem to

be many more Romeros out there.

We in a free society need to be freed from the traps of individualism. Perhaps the call to conversion is coming from the Base Communities in Latin America. North Americans are not prone to work together for the common good. A distortion of freedom seems to have developed in our countries. We hear that since this is a free society we are free to pursue any pleasure, no matter what happens to others, to the environment, or to future generations. This extreme individualism has led to a relaxed collective conscience, and a spiritual void that must be filled with material things, entertainment, and other satisfactions of the ego. There is certainly great room for conversion, and this conversion can only begin in the hearts of individuals who are called to live in the freedom of the sons and daughters of God.

*"I will rise
in the struggles of my people"*

What happened among the poor in El Salvador under Archbishop Romero, and what has happened since his death, gives us hope and inspiration. El Salvador has been, in a sense, a test case for Christianity. Once more the Gospel has proven itself *the way, the truth, and the life*. The Church of Christ is given profound credibility because of the witness of Oscar Arnulfo Romero. We are proud to belong to the same Church; we rejoice that he lived, and are grateful to him for having died for the causes of God on earth.

But we must take on once more the same causes of the God of life that were Romero's. He promised he would rise again in the hearts of his people. He meant the people of El Salvador, but he can also rise in those who want to help his people and those who suffer oppression. The spirit of Romero can rise in all of us. We need to rekindle the fires of the ideals of God's reign in our Church. Our youth are generally unimpressed with us, the adult world. It seems that all we can do is emulate a comfortable way of being Christian. The way of real Christian love is painful, and we do not seem to have time for the pain. Look at the agendas in our diocesan or parish pastoral

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councils. We spend an undue amount of time and energy on the unessential. As for myself—and I think I am typical of other bishops—I spend more time and energy running the diocese than leading it in the direction of true and authentic conversion. We do too much pacifying and not enough disturbing, as the Gospel does.

How do we go about changing the agenda? How do we become more creative and effective in our efforts to create a better world? The answers to these crucial questions are not easy to arrive at. Questions of the practical order never are. I suspect that many people are already doing some excellent things along these lines. Share your wisdom and experience with one another. That is one reason we are here. "And let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart" (Gal 6.9).

Oscar Arnulfo Romero was assassinated at the end of his homily on 24 March 1980. He did not finish the celebration of the Eucharist. Neither was the Eucharist of his funeral Mass finished. Gunfire and death were again present, and people had to rush into the cathedral for cover. Many see the "unfinished Eucharist" of Romero as symbolic of what yet needs to be done in El Salvador, in Central and South America, and in every place that people suffer in their struggle for liberation.

Who will finish the Eucharist? The Eucharist is the re-enactment of the drama of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. What Romero was doing when he was killed was reliving the Paschal Mystery. He was doing in ritual what he had done throughout his life: offering himself with Christ as a peace offering, so that the earth might be reconciled with its creator, and sins be forgiven. The life and death of Romero will be as fruitful as you and I make it.

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