

God's Justice League

Oscar Romero – The Advocate Phil. 1:12-21 Luke 6:27-36

Intro

In the world of DC and Marvel, Bruce Wayne in Batman, Diana Prince in Wonder Woman, or Peter Parker in Spiderman – all left **their comfortable lives, and in the face of a great tragedy or terror, and their lives are turned upside down** – filled with courage and ever-faced with danger.



This is not how people in our society usually think of priests!



Yet, **there is one who stands out** as an anti-hero. His life too had a turning point in life that led him into grave **danger and** required of him great **courage**.

A quote from our hero in focus today gives a good preview of his perspective on life and faith: he said...

“There are many things that can only be seen through tears.”

(Slide – potted history)

Oscar Romero was considered **conservative** theologically, and a **traditionalist** on church matters. Born in 1917 in a rural region of El Salvador, Oscar Arnulfo Romero y Goldamez was an apprentice carpenter at age 13, but soon drawn to the ordained ministry.

Potted History

- Born 1917 in El Salvador
- Humble apprentice carpenter
- Felt drawn to the ordained ministry
- Studied theology in Rome
- Became a priest at 25 years old
- A self-confessed bookworm
- Became a parish priest, regional bishop, and diocesan secretary in El Salvador
- Known as frail, conservative, conflict-averse



Having studied in Rome and entered Holy Orders of the Church at age 25, he was known as a pastor and scholar. When the Second Vatican Council came around under Pope John XXIII in 1962, Romero had no regard for its innovations and reforms. He was even **more sceptical** of so-called “**Liberation Theology**”¹ and the view of some priests and theologians that God had a **bias toward the poor**.²

Those who known him found it **unthinkable** to associate him with such a movement. It was even more **unimaginable** to describe Romero with titles like “Hero” and “Advocate”. That Romero could ever pose a threat to institution of the Church was **inconceivable**.

Yet, when the radical archbishop Luis Chavez y Gonzalez retired in El Salvador, Oscar Romero was **chosen as successor**. No doubt this was precisely because it was presumed by Rome that Romero **would support the status quo and never rock the boat**.

How extraordinary then, that the **final three years of Romero’s ministry** have left a **lasting and radical impact** on theology and politics world-wide.

Turning Point

What then, led to a **change of heart and mind** and **character** in Romero?

Romero had seen with his own eyes the **struggles of the land-less poor** of El Salvador in his rural homeland. El Salvador’s civil war³ was largely the result of *so* few owning *so* much of the nation’s land and assets, leaving *so*



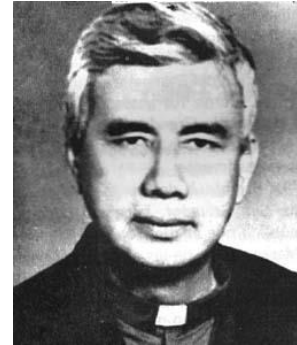
¹ In the 1950s and 1960s, liberation theology was the political praxis of Latin American theologians such as Gustavo Gutiérrez of Peru, Leonardo Boff of Brazil, Juan Luis Segundo of Uruguay, and Jon Sobrino of Spain, who popularized the phrase “Preferential option for the poor”. The Latin American context also produced Evangelical advocates of liberation theology, such as C. René Padilla of Ecuador, Samuel Escobar of Peru, and Orlando E. Costas of Puerto Rico, who, in the 1970s, called for integral mission, emphasizing evangelism and social responsibility

² There were radical pronouncements at the Council of Medellin in Colombia in 1968 where bishops had penned a document titled “Poverty of the Church”. They broke away from the long-standing support of the wealthy in society in South America, and instead committed themselves to listen to what they called the “deafening cry” for liberation that came from “the throats of millions”.

³ A coup on October 15, 1979, led to the killings of anti-coup protesters by the government as well as anti-disorder protesters by the guerrillas, and is widely seen as the tipping point toward civil war.

many destitute. Yet, like many clergy of the time, Romero at first believed the Church should be **neutral toward politics**.

The **turning point** came, as it so often does in history, when a **personal tragedy brought the reality of injustice and corruption** in the Church and the government close to home. Romero's dearest friend and fellow priest, Rutilio Grande, **was murdered** by a government-backed, land-owner death-squad.



Grande and Romero had been classmates and remained friends **yet went to different mission fields** - Grande to the poor, Romero to the upper class. **The murdered priest** was a strong **proponent for the dispossessed**. And for this he became known as a **threat to landowners, an embarrassment to the Church officials, and a concern to the Government**- he considered to be an **agitator**.

Grande once said:

“I am fully aware that very soon the Bible and the Gospels will not be allowed to cross the border. All that will reach us will be the covers, since all the pages are subversive, it is said. If Jesus crosses the border at Chalatenango (in the north of El Salvador), they will not allow him to enter. They would accuse (Jesus)... of being an agitator.”

These words were perhaps Grande's **death sentence** in 1977. He was killed by machine gun fire, along with two parishioners.

The murder of a priest was **unheard of** in El Salvador. The nation was stunned. This for Romero was the turning point; **and the rest, as they say, is history**.

A **giant awoke** within the frail, compliant, conservative pastor Oscar Romero. He sprang into action almost immediately.

- He demanded a **public expose** of Grande's murder
- He **published a bulletin** telling of Grande's great work to give dignity to the poor

- He **changed his views** on church reforms
- After Grande's murder, he **cancelled all masses** to hold **just one** in the cathedral in San Salvador to **call all people to the end of violence**
- He **confronted the military face-to-face** after Grande's parish church building was seized and made into make-shift army barracks
- He began **regular radio broadcasts** calling the nation to end violence and bring justice, and became known as a **"voice for the voiceless"**
- He called soldiers to **disobey laws** that contradicted God's law – "...thou shalt not kill"

Biblical Reflections on Romero's example

When we hold up a Bible next to the story of Grande and Romero's, we're reminded of the **Old Testament prophets, Elijah and Elisha**.



2 Kings in the Old Testament tells of how the older prophet, Elijah, was soon to depart to heaven, and would leave the mantle of his prophetic ministry to the younger Elisha. In chapter 2, Elisha begs his mentor and hero, Elijah, saying, "leave me a **double share** of your spirit".⁴

Fr. Rutilio Grande must have granted Oscar Romero his own spirit **in double portion**. The notoriously frail, conservative Archbishop Oscar Romero became a **notable advocate** and a prophetic voice for the poor of El Salvador.

When we hold up the Bible alongside the story of Oscar Romero, it's also easy to see alignment with the testimonies of the Apostle Paul and his **theology of suffering**.



Romero once told his people: "You should know that you have not suffered alone, for you are the Church. You are the people of God. You are Jesus in

⁴ 2 Kings 2:9

the hear and now. He is crucified in you just as surely as he was crucified 2000 years ago... you pain and suffering... will contribute to El Salvador's redemption."

Like Paul, the **love of Christ** and the **cross of Christ** inspired Romero in his **suffering service** for the sake of others.⁵

The examples of Grande and Romero **seriously challenges** a "Christianity" that only focusses on **personal piety**. Their lives shine a spotlight on faith that lives only **inside academic halls and church buildings**.

C.K. Roberston comments,

"Romero went deeper theologically, seeing Jesus' own crucifixion replayed in the suffering of the people... he transformed them from victims of an unjust regime into co-redeemers with Christ for the entire country."⁶

He goes on to write, "For Oscar Romero, liberation **had to mean more than simply escaping oppression**."

We live in an age where people have no choice but to flee their nation due to political oppression, with more people on the move across borders than at any other time in history. **What sort of advocacy is needed today?** The Church must not remain divorced from politics and distant from the oppressed and poor.

Romero's example is powerful and challenging: he refused to take up arms against the government as the Marxists encouraged, telling the people such reciprocity may make them as evil as those who oppressed them. Instead, he encouraged what he called, the "**violence of love**... violence that wills to beat the weapons into sickles for work". He also spoke of the "**force of peace**".

⁵ For example, while in prison, the Apostle Paul wrote in Philippians 1: "...what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel", "...dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear", "...proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defense of the gospel", "Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain." (excerpts from Philippians 1:12-16)

⁶ Robertson, C.K., *A Dangerous Dozen*, Skylight Paths Publishing, USA 2011, p 495

When we hold up the Bible alongside the story of Oscar Romero, the radical teaching of Jesus in Matthew 6 also comes to mind. Jesus controversially called people to “love your enemies”.⁷ Consider Romero’s example:

- He **made enemies** with **the wealthy** and the government because he loved and stood alongside the poor
- He **made enemies** with some of **the poor** because he would not take up arms and called them not do so
- He **made enemies** in the **Church** because he called out the clergy who refused to show the courage to translate the Gospel into action.⁸
- He impacted all parties because, following the way of Jesus of Nazareth, **he loved all those who became his enemies**
- Most importantly, like Jesus of Nazareth, his last three years of life **showed a bias to the poor, even at the risk of his life.**

Romero’s lasting influence

While the Roman Catholic Church took decades to recognise Romero as a saint and martyr, the **Anglican Church embraced him as a role model almost immediately.**



- March 24 (the date of Romero’s assassination in 1980) is devoted to him in the Anglican liturgical calendar, along with other 20th Century martyrs
- If you visit Westminster Abbey in London today you’ll see a statue of Romero on the west door
- More significantly, his theology and example **radically change the way the Church** viewed the needs of the poor and oppressed

Only minutes before his assassination in 1980 in a small chapel while lifting the chalice in the act of Holy Communion, Romero had urged his people on in a sermon, calling them to:

⁷ Luke 6:27

⁸ “the fortitude that the Gospel asks in serving the people we must lead.”

“...every effort to better society, especially when injustice and sin are so ingrained, is an effort that God blesses, that God wants, that God demands of us.”⁹

Give thanks for...

- Romero’s **lasting legacy** that has changed theology and practice in many parts of the Church today
- the many **unrecorded heroes** who carried on being a “voice for the voiceless” in places of oppression, having been inspired by Romero’s example
- for the **freedoms** we might take for granted in our own nation at this time that allow us to be heard and to advocate for others.

Be Challenged...

- What if a **new “Romero” rose up** in your midst and advocated for the voiceless in your community, or nation – would you want to:
 - A. silence him/her?
 - B. urge him/her to enter politics?
 - C. urge him/her to break the laws of the land?
 - D. join him/her in calling out injustice, no matter the cost?
- Perhaps **we are** the “land-owners”, “Government”, or “The Church”, in this story – not the Romero figure. This is personally challenging. How can we be open to God, and aware of our own bias and detrimental impact on others? How can we be truly penitent, even reparative?
- **What would you need** to become courageous enough to be an advocate for the downtrodden and oppressed?

Conclusion

On the day before Oscar Romero was assassinated/martyred, he said: “I have no ambition for power, and so with complete freedom I tell the powerful what is good and what is bad.”¹⁰

The first six words of this quote are truly rare in human history.

⁹ Robertson, C.K., *A Dangerous Dozen*, Skylight Paths Publishing, USA 2011 p. 516

¹⁰ Spoken on March 23, 1980, the day before he was killed

To Do

- Consider asking your study group to watch together the feature film *Romero*, directed by John Duigan and starring Raul Julia, 2009 (available on DVD or via Youtube).
- Mark March 24 in your diary as a date to recall the example and teaching of Oscar Romero and to guide your prayers that day.
- Join a Christian advocacy group or movement that is a “voice for the voiceless” today – e.g. <https://www.commongrace.org.au/>