

# OSCAR ROMERO, RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

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*An article marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of Oscar Romero's  
martyrdom, 24 March 1980.*

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO ARCHBISHOP OSCAR ROMERO was shot dead. He was celebrating Mass in the chapel of the Divine Providence Hospital, in the grounds of which he had his residence. It was no surprise that he died in this way. Throughout the three years of his tenure as Archbishop of San Salvador he had spoken out consistently on behalf of the poor majority of Salvadorans as they were being subjected to an escalating and brutal campaign of repression and terror—a campaign mounted by the security forces and right-wing death squads. He had looked critically at the turbulent social and political conditions of his country as it lurched towards civil war, and had pinpointed the common factor causing the unrest among the people at large, the insurrectionary violence from the left, and the savage retaliatory response from the right. The root of all three, he insisted, lay in the systemic injustice that left the vast majority of Salvadorans without jobs, without access to the barest essentials of life, and without hope that they or their children could ever enjoy a better life. Faced with this situation, he believed that the chief task required of him by his episcopal vocation was to shed the light of Christ on ‘even the most hideous caverns of the human person: torture, jail, plunder, want, chronic illness’.<sup>1</sup> For that reason he named names: the security forces; the presidential and judicial branches of the government; and the wealthy ‘fourteen families’ who had run the

<sup>1</sup> Oscar Romero, *The Violence of Love: The Pastoral Wisdom of Archbishop Oscar Romero*, edited by James Brockman (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 198. The source is a homily preached on 23 October 1979.

country with impunity for so long. It was because of all this that he was murdered.<sup>2</sup>

If, by March 1980, no one was surprised by how Romero died, many had nevertheless been astonished by how he had lived in those last three years. Up until 1977 he had been a rather timid, conservative prelate. He had identified himself with the structures and interests of an institutional Church in El Salvador, and therefore also with the wealthy oligarchy and with the military that enforced the oligarchy's rule. In his last three years he was different. He was a fiery prophet. Deeply in love with his people, he confronted the ruling elite even at grave risk to the very institution over which he presided. The Church's facilities were bombed; more seriously, its priests and lay leaders were deported, tortured or murdered. What changed?

Many have asked this question, and it is not uncommon to read of a 'conversion', often connected with the murder of Romero's friend, the Jesuit priest and pastor Rutilio Grande, on 12 March 1977, barely three weeks into Romero's tenure as Archbishop.<sup>3</sup> Romero, however, did not like calling what had happened to him a 'conversion', preferring instead to speak of 'an evolution of the same desire that I have always had to be faithful to what God asks of me':

... and if earlier I gave the impression of being more 'spiritual', it was because I sincerely believed that in that way I responded to the gospel, because the circumstances of my ministry were not as demanding as those when I became Archbishop.<sup>4</sup>

What is beyond question is Romero's commitment to the Church as an institution, which he served—often overworking himself to the point of exhaustion—as priest, as Auxiliary Bishop of San Salvador, as Bishop of the neighbouring diocese of Santiago de María, and as Archbishop of San Salvador. Romero's commitment to the institutional Church found particular focus in a dedication to the

<sup>2</sup> The UN Truth Commission has established that Colonel Roberto D'Aubisson, a member of one of the 'families' and founder of the Arena party, was responsible for Romero's death.

<sup>3</sup> Romero's auxiliary and successor as Archbishop, Arturo Rivera y Damas, who went with Romero to view Grande's body in Aguilares, is one of those who endorsed calling this change a 'conversion'. See his preface to Jesús Delgado, *Oscar A. Romero: Biografía* (Madrid: Ediciones Paulinas, 1986), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Letter to Cardinal Sebastiano Baggio, quoted in Douglas Marcouiller, 'Archbishop with an Attitude: Oscar Romero's *Sentir con la Iglesia*', *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 35/3 (May 2003), 23.

papacy and its magisterium. This dedication has led his archiepiscopal vicar, Ricardo Urioste, to name him a 'martyr for the magisterium'. Romero's death, Urioste contends, was a result of his fidelity to papal social teachings.

Yet this cannot be the whole story. Romero was certainly aware of the Church's social teachings long before his 'conversion' in 1977, and of how the Latin American Catholic Bishops had appropriated them for Latin America at Medellín in 1968. But Romero's acceptance of these teachings had been abstract and theoretical. He had often shown himself suspicious, not to say hostile, when it came to their implementation in concrete circumstances, even when this implementation was supported by his predecessor and ecclesial superior, Archbishop Luis Chávez y González.<sup>5</sup> While warm and compassionate in one-to-one encounters, he had seemed to many aloof and stubborn in his exercise of ecclesial office. Though fiercely loyal to the Church universal, he had been unable to appreciate the local Church, and had appeared quite deaf to observations and criticisms from others. One observer spoke of him as having 'his head in the clouds, away from reality, up in the trees like avocados'.<sup>6</sup> But as Archbishop, Romero listened carefully to others,



<sup>5</sup> For example, in 1973 Romero wrote a stinging rebuke of the Jesuits' reconfiguration of their secondary school, the Externado San José, in line with the principles of Medellín. Romero was instrumental in the Salvadoran Bishops' Conference's removal of the Jesuits from supervision of the national seminary in 1972, again because of their implementation of reforms based on Vatican II and Medellín. He also attacked certain 'radical Christologies', intending primarily the work of the Jesuit liberation theologian, Jon Sobrino. See James Brockman, *Romero: A Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989), 41-42, 48-49, 51-52, 60.

<sup>6</sup> María López Vigil, *Memories in Mosaic*, translated by Kathy Ogle (London: CAFOD, 2000), 54.

particularly to the poor. He was persuaded that the Spirit was to be found and respected everywhere in the Church, especially among simple believers, with their wisdom and with their knowledge of their own reality. He was so different after 1977. What changed?

It is perhaps inevitable that we cannot answer this question fully. It is not given to us to see into the deepest recesses of the human heart; we must stop short at the boundaries of that inner sanctuary where, as Ignatius reminds us, God deals directly with the human soul (Exx 15). Yet perhaps the fact that we cannot easily pinpoint the change tells us something important about the kind of change it was. Romero's

**The change  
in Romero  
emerged from  
his constant  
desire to be  
faithful**

conversion was not one that could be described in juridical terms, a conversion from unbelief to belief, or from manifest and serious sin to repentance and amendment. Rather he went through the kind of ongoing conversion that the masters of the spiritual life tell us is a constitutive part of the Christian life *in statu viae*. This is the judgment of the Archbishop of Tegucigalpa, Oscar Cardinal Rodríguez. Rodríguez glosses Romero's own statement that his 'conversion' was really just 'an evolution of the same desire that I have always had to be faithful to what God asks of me', with the observation that this 'is the natural "evolution" of those who live in a permanent state of conversion, in total openness to God and neighbour'.<sup>7</sup> However deep and ineradicable Romero's commitment to the Church was, this state of openness was more profound. As Jon Sobrino, a Jesuit who knew and worked with Romero, puts it:

The *ultimate ultimacy* (it is worth being redundant here) of God relativises and locates all the rest, including the Church .... Monsignor Romero was a creature before God, naked and unconditionally before God; and he let God be God, however God wanted to make Godself present to him, and wherever God would take him.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Oscar Cardinal Rodríguez, 'Monsignor Romero: A Bishop for the Third Millennium', in *Monsignor Romero: A Bishop for the Third Millennium*, edited by Robert Pelton (Notre Dame: U. of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 19.

<sup>8</sup> See Jon Sobrino's 'Prólogo', in Douglas Marcouiller, *El Sentir con la Iglesia de Monseñor Romero* (Santander: Sal Terrae, 2004), 27, 28. Translation mine.

Romero was a churchman, first and last; his ecclesial motto was *Sentir con la Iglesia*, 'to be of one mind with the Church'.<sup>9</sup> Yet this commitment to the Church was not inflexible or rigid, because he had a relationship to God that was more fundamental still.

Among sociologists of religion in the United States, as well as in popular parlance, it is common to make this kind of distinction in terms of 'spirituality' and 'religion'. 'Spirituality' refers to a person's most intimate and personal relationship to God (or to some other version of 'the sacred'); 'religion' refers to the shared cultural frameworks, with their associated institutional structures, that publicly claim to express and manage this relationship. The distinction is unstable at best and, given the protean character of its terms, often rife with ambiguity. Yet the phenomenon to which it refers is undeniable, as astute observers such as Robert Wuthnow and Wade Clark Roof have established.<sup>10</sup> There are a substantial number of people who claim to be spiritual without being committed to a religion, and others who seem to go through the motions of religious commitment without being nourished by a genuinely spiritual experience. Spirituality and religion are often seen as mutually exclusive, or at best as uneasy associates.

In what follows, I want to suggest that this kind of distinction between spirituality and religion sheds light on Romero's 'conversion'. If we take Romero's allegiance to the Church as religion, and the 'ultimate ultimacy' of his relationship to God to be spirituality, then the change in the former (more precisely, the way that he lived out this allegiance as churchman) was shaped by the latter. At the same time, however, Romero models powerfully the connections that will always be present when religion and spirituality are both healthy. Romero's case undermines the strong distinction between spirituality and religion that is often assumed theoretically and lived out practically in the United States. It would have been unthinkable to Romero to live a 'churchless spirituality'. His spirituality was creatively expressed through his religion. Far from competing with his spirituality, far from

<sup>9</sup> For an extended analysis of this element of Romero's spirituality, also of Ignatian provenance, see Marcouiller, 'Archbishop with an Attitude'.

<sup>10</sup> See Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1998), and Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999).

being a ‘necessary evil’ to be tolerated, Romero’s religion was the necessary framework within which his spirituality flourished.

### ***Spirituality and Religion***

In a recent article, Sandra Schneiders has analyzed the differences between ‘spirituality’ and ‘religion’ as they appear on the North American scene, as well as the different ways in which they interact, which range from mutual indifference, via competition, to at least the possibility of partnership.<sup>11</sup> Her exploration of the distinction provides a valuable framework for understanding how Oscar Romero was both ‘spiritual’ and ‘religious’. In Schneiders’ view, spirituality is a constitutive dimension of human being:

... the capacity of persons to transcend themselves through knowledge and love, to reach beyond themselves in relationship to others.

Usually, however, ‘spirituality’ denotes a mature expression of this capacity:

... a relatively developed relationship to self, others, world, and the Transcendent, whether the last is called God or designated by some other term.<sup>12</sup>

A mature spirituality is defined by four features:

- it is focused on *personal experience*, having both a passive dimension (experience as something given to me) and an active one (experience as what I construct out of the linguistic, symbolic and ritual resources available to me);
- it requires *conscious involvement in a project*—it is not episodic or sporadic, but rather entails consistent and extended commitment to a certain set of practices;
- it is *life-integrative*, defining in large measure how one relates to oneself, to other persons, and to the world in general;

<sup>11</sup> Sandra Schneiders, ‘Religion vs. Spirituality: A Contemporary Conundrum’, *Spiritus*, 3/2 (Fall 2003), 163-185.

<sup>12</sup> Schneiders, ‘Religion vs. Spirituality’, 165.

- it is orientated towards a transcendent *source of ultimate meaning and value* (variously construed), which one takes to be foundational to all that is.<sup>13</sup>

A religion, too, is concerned with relationships and with ultimate reality, whether or not this is to be conceptualised as God. But there is more to religion than individual commitment. Religions are 'cultural systems'. They are 'organized in particular patterns of creed, code and cult'.<sup>14</sup> A given religion has its historical origin in a particular revelatory experience. An experience of this kind is, as we have seen, also at the heart of a given spirituality. To the degree that it fully incarnates itself in the historical and cultural milieu in which it occurs, such an experience can form or reshape a religious tradition. This gives the spirituality greater stability and broader availability. However, if the religious tradition and the spirituality it makes available are to outlast the originating generation, that tradition must, at least to some extent, become an institutionalised religion, with a defined cult, creed and code. Moreover, it must develop structures of authority for interpreting and enforcing its beliefs and practices, and for passing them on to subsequent generations.

***There is more to religion than individual commitment***

For Schneiders, the ideal relationship between spirituality and religion is a creative partnership:

... *institutionalisation* as an organized religion is what makes *spirituality* as a daily experience of participation in a *religious tradition* possible for the majority of people.<sup>15</sup>

She contends that mutual indifference or hostility between religion and spirituality is ultimately destructive to both.

On these terms, if spirituality fails to find a place in an organized religion, it dissipates into an amorphous cultural ethos and is absorbed into other cultural formations. Lacking the checks and balances offered by institutional structures, 'uninstitutionalised spiritualities' also run the risk of extremism and instability, or of being ghettoized

<sup>13</sup> Schneiders, 'Religion vs. Spirituality', 167.

<sup>14</sup> Schneiders, 'Religion vs. Spirituality', 169.

<sup>15</sup> Schneiders, 'Religion vs. Spirituality', 171.

into 'lifestyle enclaves of the like-minded', with little leverage or impact on the broader culture (an all too common feature of spirituality in North America). I would add that, without *religious* institutionalisation, spirituality inevitably falls victim to the alternative institutionalisation offered by the culture industry in the United States. It is shaped by the forces of the marketplace. As the flood of books, cassettes, workshops, films and lectures on 'spirituality' proves, it is, in these terms, tremendously successful. But we would do well to heed Wuthnow's caution: 'Spirituality has become big business, and big business finds many of its best markets by putting things in small, easy-to-consume packages'.<sup>16</sup>

If, however, an institutionalised religion loses connection with the spirituality arising from the revelatory experience at its origins, it will either die out altogether, or survive only in a fossilised form that makes an absolute of the institution. It will end up making normative claims based more and more on coercion, and less and less on the transformative power of the revelatory experience that is made available by its traditions and appropriated by individuals through their



<sup>16</sup> Wuthnow, *After Heaven*, 132. For further reflections on this theme, see Vince Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

spiritualities. The result is too often an alienation of believers and non-believers alike, not only from the particular religion in question, but from religions (as institutions with normative creeds, etc.) in general. If it is enough to be 'spiritual', then why bother with religion? At the same time, the institution suffers an erosion, not just of membership (although often 'spiritual' people continue to assert nominal membership in a religion), but also of the social capital that might enable it to influence (or, to use theological language, evangelize) its social-cultural milieu.<sup>17</sup> This latter is the scenario being tragically played out in the US Roman Catholic Church today.

Somehow, then, spirituality and religion need to be integrated and brought together in fruitful partnership. What might Romero's spirituality offer in this regard?

### **Romero's Spirituality**

We must first define Romero's spirituality, before using Schneiders' framework to see how it meshed with his commitment to the institutional Church ('religion'). A full description and analysis of his spirituality would exceed the scope of this essay. What we can say is that it was part of the long tradition, going back at least to Augustine, of the *vita mixta*—spiritualities that bring together contemplation and action. We can become a little more specific by noting elements in Romero's biography that point to two important members of this general family of spiritualities. First of all, while he was a member of the diocesan clergy, Romero was trained by Jesuits for much of his priestly formation, and he was profoundly influenced by the Spiritual Exercises. He made the Exercises in their full thirty-day form in the mid-fifties, and continued to make them in the abbreviated form up to the year of his death.<sup>18</sup> Second, Romero's spirituality (and his theology

<sup>17</sup> Wade Clark Roof is optimistic about this development. He points sanguinely to Churches that have 'caught on' to the popularity of spirituality in this culture as examples of how religion can continue to survive in the postmodern cultural milieu. John Coleman sounds (correctly, in my view) a more sombre note about these experiments. See his review of Roof's book in *Spiritus*, 1/1 (Spring 2001), 109-112, especially 111-112.

<sup>18</sup> He made an eight-day retreat a month before he was killed. His notes from that retreat are available, in 'El último retiro espiritual de Monseñor Romero', *Revista latinoamericana de teología*, 13 (January-April 1988). His thirty-day retreat was directed by Miguel Elizondo, one of that remarkable generation of Jesuits who forcefully advocated (and applied) the practice of Ignatian spirituality based on the original documents and practices of the first generation, including directed rather than



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for that matter) is most clearly and forcefully expressed in his preaching. This suggests that we can also draw on the Dominican tradition, with its focus on preaching and its ideal of *contemplata aliis tradere*, to understand important elements in Romero's spirituality. Thus, in what follows I present Romero's spirituality as a form of 'contemplation in action', understood first in Dominican and then in Jesuit terms, before returning to the theme of spirituality and religion.

#### *Preaching and Contemplation*

It is easy to see in Romero's preaching as Archbishop how he was exemplifying the Dominican ideal, 'handing on to others what one has found in contemplation'. Romero's spirituality of the preached Word included, demanded, a concrete incarnation in his life and ecclesial practice. Romero made the point clear in a homily he preached in 1978, describing a recent visit to Rome during which he had defended his actions and policies as Archbishop:

I told them: it's easy to preach his teachings theoretically. To follow faithfully the pope's magisterium in theory is very easy. But when you try to live, try to incarnate, try to make reality in the history of

preached retreats. On Elizondo, see Teresa Whitfield, *Paying the Price: Ignacio Ellacuría and the Murdered Jesuits of El Salvador* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 21-24.

a suffering people like ours those saving teachings, that is when conflicts arise. Not that I have been unfaithful—never! I think that today I am more faithful than ever, because I experience the trial, the suffering—and the intimate joy—of proclaiming with more than words and lip-service a teaching that I have always believed and loved. I am trying to give it life in this community, which the Lord has entrusted to me ....<sup>19</sup>

And, a year earlier:

We cannot segregate God's word from the historical reality in which it is proclaimed. It would not then be God's word. It would be history, it would be a pious book, a Bible that is just a book in our library. It becomes God's word because it vivifies, enlightens, contrasts, repudiates, praises what is going on today in this society.<sup>20</sup>

These quotations shed light on Romero's 'conversion'. He was always faithful 'in theory' to the teachings of the magisterium. But he set off on the path to being a 'martyr for the magisterium' when he began incarnating those teachings in Sunday homilies, taking them up in order to vivify, enlighten, contrast, repudiate and praise what was going on in his country. And he did this precisely because of a deeper engagement with the suffering of the people in his Church. This is clear from an answer he gave when asked in Rome by César Jérez, at the time the Jesuit Provincial of Central America, about the change that had happened to him. It is worth quoting at length:

It's just that we all have our roots, you know .... I was born into a poor family. I've suffered hunger. I know what it's like to work from the time you're a little kid .... When I went to seminary and started my studies, and then they sent me to finish studying here in Rome, I spent years and years absorbed in my books, and I started to forget about where I came from. I started creating another world. When I went back to El Salvador, they made me the Bishop's secretary in San Miguel. I was a parish priest for 23 years there, but I was still buried under paperwork .... Then they sent me to Santiago de María, and I ran into extreme poverty again. Those children that were dying just because of the water they were drinking, those

<sup>19</sup> *The Violence of Love*, 70.

<sup>20</sup> *The Violence of Love*, 14.

*campesinos*<sup>21</sup> killing themselves in the harvest .... You know Father, when a piece of charcoal has already been lit once, you don't have to blow on it much to get it to flame up again. And everything that happened to us when I got to the archdiocese, and what happened to Father Grande and all ... it was a lot. You know how much I admired him. When I saw Rutilio dead, I thought, 'if they killed him for what he was doing, it's my job to go down that same road' .... So yes, I changed. But I also came back home again.<sup>22</sup>

It was direct engagement with people, a coming home again to the concerns of the poor majority of El Salvador, that caused Romero's spirituality to 'flame up again'. Romero always insisted that it was the people of the Church of El Salvador who were the source of his strength and his vision. 'With this people it is not hard to be a good shepherd', he said.<sup>23</sup> If Romero's spirituality was about 'handing on to others' the gifts of contemplation, a crucial way in which he received these gifts was through the people of the Church, God's people:

With admiration I give thanks to God that so many gifts of the Spirit are present in you, God's people, religious communities, grass-roots church communities, ordinary people, peasants. If I were envious, like the persons in the gospel or in today's first reading, I would say, 'Stop them! Don't let them say anything! Only I, the Bishop, can speak.' No, I have to listen to what the Spirit says through His people. Only then do I receive it from the people and analyze it and, along with the people, turn it into construction of the Church. So it is we must build our Church, respecting the charism of the Bishop, who discerns and who unifies, who brings into one the variety of different charisms. And the hierarchy and priests must respect the grand deposit of faith that the Spirit entrusts to God's people .... When I visit the communities I respect them and I try to give direction to the great spiritual wealth

<sup>21</sup> 'Country people'.

<sup>22</sup> López Vigil, *Memories in Mosaic*, 158-159. Jerez was accompanying Romero and Urioste on Romero's first trip to Rome as Archbishop, when he was defending himself in the face of the controversy stirred up by his forceful dealings with the government after Rutilio Grande's assassination. See Brockman, *Romero*, 19-21. The judgment that he had begun to change already in the diocese of Santiago de María, where he served as Bishop for two years, is confirmed by the testimony of two Passionist priests who worked under him there: Zacarías Díez, Juan Macho, "En Santiago de María me topé con la miseria": *dos años de la vida de Mons. Romero (1975-1976)* (private Salvadoran publication, no details given).

<sup>23</sup> *The Violence of Love*, 207.

that I find even in the humblest and simplest of people. This building in harmony is what the Lord asks of us.<sup>24</sup>

Schneiders, as we have seen, suggests that the first element of a mature spirituality is personal experience. For Romero as Archbishop, this was the experience of finding in his people the voice of the Spirit, in their joys, hopes, grief and anguish.<sup>25</sup> The point was, however, to give these fruits back: *aliis tradere*. That entailed a further vitally important element, the interweaving of what he learned from the people with what he learned from Scripture. Pulling together the threads of Scripture with those of 'the events of the week' was an essential goal of Romero's prayer, often achieved in long hours of solitary prayer during the night prior to his Sunday morning homilies.<sup>26</sup> It was not that Romero gave, in a spirit of *noblesse oblige*, a 'spiritual commodity' over which he had exclusive control to those who did not have it. What he gave them, rather, was an invitation and a challenge to experience and to immerse themselves in the presence of God in their midst. He issued this invitation by pressing upon them the intimate connection, indeed the identity, between the God disclosed in Scripture and the God at work among them. The Scripture, he urged on them Sunday after Sunday, served to illuminate God's presence among them, enabling them more surely to find the God whose gratuitous self-gift was the centre of Romero's own spiritual life.



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<sup>24</sup> *The Violence of Love*, 201. The Scripture passages from the Sunday lectionary to which he refers are Numbers 11: 25-29 and Mark 9: 37-42, 46-47.

<sup>25</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 1.

<sup>26</sup> According to one witness, Rafael Urrutia, Romero would meet with advisers to discuss the events of the previous week, which he would always weave into his homily. He would then retire to solitary prayer, sometimes praying from 10 pm until 4 am in preparation for the homily at the 8am Mass in the Cathedral (López Vigil, *Memories in Mosaic*, 225).

*Scripture and Discernment*

At this point, Romero's spirituality demonstrates some Ignatian features. His use of Scripture follows Ignatius' proposals for the Second Week of the *Spiritual Exercises*. One enters imaginatively into Scripture in order to come to a deeper knowledge of Christ and follow him more deeply. The goal is a correlation of the gospel history with one's own history, in order to facilitate the discernment of the direction one's history ought to take in the future, as changed or ratified by some life-determining choice or 'election'.

Consider in this light the following excerpt from a homily preached on Christmas Eve, 1978:

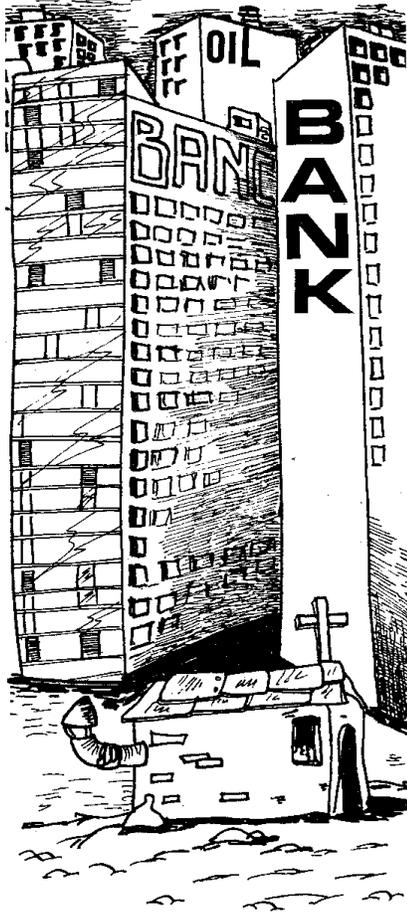
God keeps on saving in history. And so, in turning once again to the episode of Christ's birth at Bethlehem, we come not to recall Christ's birth twenty centuries ago, but to live that birth here in the twentieth century, this year, in our own Christmas here in El Salvador. By the light of these Bible readings we must continue all the history that God knows eternally, has in his eternal mind, even to the concrete events of our abductions, of our tortures, of our own sad history. That is where we are to find our God.<sup>27</sup>

Romero had received the grace of the First Week of the *Spiritual Exercises*: a deep sense of sin as real, devastating and death-dealing, and at the same time a grateful recognition that God's salvific response is nevertheless more powerful, more comprehensive. Having had that insight, received that grace, the task is to understand how *we* as a Church are called to participate in the continuation of that salvific response today. Which is also to ask how one finds God in all things, how to be *contemplativus in actione*.

*Spirituality, Maturity and Church*

In Romero we can see all the features of a spirituality as articulated by Schneiders, integrated into a robust way of participating in one's religion—which for Romero meant exercising ecclesial leadership. Romero's spirituality led him to the conscious involvement in a life-project that Schneiders mentions. But this project was also shaped ecclesially, by Romero's prayerful reading, interpretation and preaching

<sup>27</sup> *The Violence of Love*, 133.



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of Scripture, as well as by his understanding of what the magisterium required of him and his Church. He understood this work to be the project of evangelization, and inextricably connected with integral liberation, as laid out in what was probably Romero's favourite papal writing, Paul VI's *Evangelii nuntiandi*. It was a project to which he thought that the *Spiritual Exercises* made an indispensable contribution.<sup>28</sup>

The touchstone, what Schneiders calls the 'transcendent source of ultimate meaning and value' orientating everything else, was God, of course, as Jon Sobrino also insists. But for Romero this was a God whose glory is present and fully alive in the human being. Or, paraphrasing Irenaeus more freely, Romero came to see that it was the glory of God shining through in the poor person fully alive:

*Gloria Dei, vivens pauper.*<sup>29</sup> Here too he drew on Ignatian resources:

St Ignatius, so practical in his considerations about God, about eternity, about Christ, would ask us, as an evident sign, to serve people, defending their rights and defending respect for God's

<sup>28</sup> See the interview he gave, 'Some Reflections on the Spiritual Exercises', reproduced in *The Way Supplement*, 55 (May 1986), 100-106, especially 104.

<sup>29</sup> See the address he gave on the occasion of the conferral of a doctorate *honoris causa* by the University of Leuven, 2 February 1980: Oscar Romero, 'The Political Dimension of the Faith from the Perspective of the Option for the Poor', in *Voice of the Voiceless: Four Pastoral Letters and Other Statements* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985), 187.

image. We would see, through the Exercises, that human persons are truly God's glory on earth.<sup>30</sup>

Needless to say, he also found confirmation of these convictions in the Church's social teachings. Conversely, those teachings shaped, focused and nurtured his spirituality. His entire pastoral work as Archbishop revolved round these principles.

This brings us back to the first element of a mature spirituality: an originating experience. For Romero, as for any Christian, this was and had to be the experience of the God who took flesh in Jesus of Nazareth two thousand years ago—the God of Jesus Christ who is definitively disclosed for us in Scripture, and who is present for us in the hopes, anxieties and grief of human beings today, especially those of the poor. Finding his way back to this experience reignited the smouldering core of Romero's spirituality. That core probably burst anew into flame when Romero gazed upon the body of Rutilio Grande and his two parishioners, since Grande was a pastor faithful to the Church, and, as pastor, represented a Church faithful to the cries of the poor.<sup>31</sup>



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*The Funeral of Rutilio Grande—Oscar Romero is in the centre*

<sup>30</sup> Romero, 'Some Reflections', 103.

<sup>31</sup> There are other affinities. Grande had, like Romero, grown up in poverty. He had been painfully shy and often unsure of himself until he returned to his own roots as pastor of a parish that included his

But again, this spirituality, once inflamed, animated and purified Romero's participation in the Church (his 'religion'). By, as Sobrino puts it, 'locating and relativising everything', it led him away from an absolutisation of a Church too closely linked with a sinful social and political order. He could endure, even welcome, the bombing of church buildings and the expropriation of church property, the murders of priests and lay church leaders, as long as this persecution was a result of the Church being a Church of 'Christian liberators', made up of Christians of sincere heart who were seeking God, seeking to make Salvadoran history resemble more a history of salvation and less a history of sin and death.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, Romero's participation in the institutional Church gave a creative outlet and impetus to his spirituality, and great joy. He was never happier, he said, than he was as Archbishop during those tense, exhausting years—this despite often cruel and humiliating treatment by his fellow Bishops, by the papal nuncio, and by Vatican officials.<sup>33</sup> He was never more sure of God's enlivening presence, never more sure of the 'rightness' of his ecclesial vocation.<sup>34</sup> To be a spiritual person was precisely, for him, to be religious, ecclesial; and he could neither be nor remain religious without being spiritual. In him spirituality and religion interpenetrated, to their mutual enrichment.

### ***A New Gift from God's Spirit***

It might be objected at this point that Romero integrated spirituality and religion only because for his time and place their separation was never really an option, as it is so manifestly is in late-modern or postmodern societies like that of the United States, with its high levels of social mobility and religious pluralism. But that claim is not entirely

home town of El Paisnal, working to help the poor there experience their dignity as God's children. For more on the relationship between Romero and Grande, see Dean Brackley, 'Rutilio and Romero: Martyrs for Our Time', in *Monsignor Romero*, 79-100.

<sup>32</sup> *The Violence of Love*, 25, 29, 43, 207.

<sup>33</sup> For the story of Romero's painful experience with other members of the hierarchy, see Marcouiller, 'Archbishop with an Attitude', 38-50.

<sup>34</sup> Just a few days before he died he told a friend: 'I don't want to die. At least not now. I've never had so much love for life. And honestly, I don't think I was meant to be a martyr. I don't feel that calling. Of course, if that's what God asks of me, then there's nothing I can do. I only ask that the circumstances of my death not leave any doubt as to what my true vocation is: to serve God and to serve the people. But I don't want to die now. I want a little more time.' (López Vigil, *Memories in Mosaic*, 397)

**We struggle with  
the separation of  
spirituality and  
religion**

true. Romero may not have spoken in terms of a divide between spirituality and religion, but he was certainly worried about a privatised spirituality, divorced from the Church as it had defined itself in the documents of Vatican II, Medellín and Puebla: that is, as a community of faith for which the promotion of justice in history was an integral part of that faith.<sup>35</sup> Yet, for all the differences between contemporary North America and the El Salvador of Romero's time, and for all that each people must (as Romero himself would be the first to admit) discern how God is calling them to bring the reality of salvation into their own particular history,<sup>36</sup>

Romero's inspiring example has much to say to us as we struggle with the perilous separation of spirituality and religion in North America. There are some formal features of Romero's integration of spirituality and religion which, I contend, are valid for any situation.

*Rooted Spirituality*

Firstly, the Church cannot afford to promote a spirituality that does not face, as Romero's did, both the positive *and* the negative aspects of its historical reality. Romero's example recommends to us what Johann Baptist Metz has called a 'mysticism of open eyes', open to suffering both here and abroad, particularly of the poor and marginalised.

Secondly, and related to this, we must promote spiritualities that emphasize the unity of contemplation and action in history: whether it be a model of *contemplata aliis tradere, contemplativus in actione*, or some other model from another tradition.<sup>37</sup> We must insist, with Augustine,<sup>38</sup> that a full relationship to Christ must include *both* being fed by Jesus in the Holy Spirit and ministering to the needs of Jesus, particularly as he

<sup>35</sup> Romero did not disparage the importance of personal transformation, of feeling interiorly the grace of forgiveness and being a child of God. However, he looked for a 'social radiation' from this internal transformation. Speaking of the many retreats in El Salvador he worried that they 'remain on the level of individualistic piety, since I have not seen many effects of a social nature. I would measure the effectiveness or the ineffectiveness of retreats by the degree to which the people who come out of these profound reflections are really the sort that Latin America needs: new persons able to organize new structures according to their capacities.' (Romero, 'Some Reflections', 102)

<sup>36</sup> *The Violence of Love*, 230-231.

<sup>37</sup> For a further elaboration of this point, see J. Matthew Ashley, 'Contemplation in Prophetic Action: Oscar Romero's Challenge to Spirituality in North America', *Christian Spirituality Bulletin*, 8/2 (Spring/Summer 2000), 6-13.

<sup>38</sup> See his two sermons on Luke 10: 38-42 in Augustine of Hippo, *Sermons 103, 104*, from *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1990- ), volume III, part 5: 76-87.

is present to us in the most needy—both Mary’s part and Martha’s part.

Thirdly, Romero’s example urges on us a spirituality informed by Scripture, and unafraid to draw on the doctrinal riches of the Church, especially its social teachings. Indeed, if one takes spiritual transformation ultimately to include one’s society and the redemption of its history, then one cannot afford *not* to bring to that task the resources that only a long tradition can offer. Bricolage might suffice in the short term for dealing with challenges to one’s individual identity, but it is



quite inadequate to the more difficult task of responding creatively to the pressing social challenges we face today.

#### *Church and Inclusiveness*

Romero also has important things to say about what religion, what Church, should be. The Church must, as Romero did, invite *everyone* to join in the work of evangelizing, of transforming its local culture and history.<sup>39</sup> It must take all its members seriously, recognising the potential for prophecy anywhere in its ranks, even when this prophecy may be directed at the failings of the Church itself. It must be prepared in principle to follow authentic leads from any of its members. Otherwise it cannot expect people to draw on its structures for spiritual impetus, sustenance and direction.

To live by such a vision is difficult and risky; it demands that people indeed ‘let God be God’, and allow themselves to be taken wherever God will. It requires developed skills in dialogue, and a

<sup>39</sup> See *The Violence of Love*, 104, 200.

courageous willingness to follow Ignatius in ‘putting the best interpretation’ on what others say and do (Exx 22). Romero abundantly demonstrated such gifts in those final three years. His willingness to conduct dialogue and to collaborate with others did not dilute his leadership—rather it strengthened it. The proofs of this are the many occasions on which his clergy and religious came to his defence when he was attacked in either ecclesial or secular circles. Ultimately, these attitudes of Romero’s derived from a deeply held conviction about the Church that was nourished at once by the Second Vatican Council, and (at least in Romero’s mind) by his appropriation of Ignatian spirituality. Together they defined his understanding of his episcopal motto, as he made clear from this comment on the ecclesial character of the Spiritual Exercises:

**Authority  
rooted in  
dialogue**

There is also an ecclesiological substance ... [to the Exercises]: ‘to be of one mind with the Church (*sentir con la Iglesia*)’. St Ignatius would present it today as a Church that the Holy Spirit is stirring up in our people, in our communities, a Church that means not only the teaching of the magisterium, and fidelity to the pope, but also service to this people and the discernment of the signs of the times in the light of the gospel.<sup>40</sup>

Romero offers no easy answer to the question of how we move forward through a history that often seems to be a dark night. He professed only a conviction that ‘all histories must move toward the resurrection’, and a perception of the light of Christ dawning on the horizon of history.<sup>41</sup>

In one sense, there is nothing radical or new in the way that Romero brought together spirituality and religion. His spirituality was nourished by Scripture and tradition, and tested by long practice through success and failure, joy and disappointment, desolation and consolation. His understanding of the Church was defined by the Second Vatican Council’s vision, as applied to the reality of Latin America by the documents of Medellín and Puebla. Romero’s creativity was deeply traditional.

<sup>40</sup> Romero, ‘Some Reflections’, 103.

<sup>41</sup> *The Violence of Love*, 87, 199, 231.

But in another sense, Romero's 'ecclesial spirituality' *was* radical and new, because of the absolute consistency with which he lived it, no matter what the cost, in all aspects of his life, including as a Church leader and as a Salvadoran. Perhaps Karl Rahner, speaking of the spiritual masters and saints of the past, best describes what Romero offers us today: 'a creative and generative way of appropriating God's revelation in Christ'. Romero made this perennial divine gift his own in such a way as to release a power within it that was previously only latent: 'a way that sets a pattern ... that serves as a generative model'.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> From 'The Logic of Concrete Existential Knowledge in Ignatius Loyola' (1956)—translation here based on the version in Rahner's *Spiritual Writings*, edited and translated by Philip Endean (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), 140.