

Nonviolence: The Witness of Oscar Romero and the Nonviolence Initiative of the Catholic Church

It was March 2005. During a week-long commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero, I visited the memorial wall in El Salvador with thousands of names of the murdered and disappeared during the long years of oppression and violence, and the civil war. I struggled to find the name of Archbishop Oscar Romero – but eventually I did. It was because his name is the same size as the name of everyone else on the wall – Oscar Arnulfo Romero – a moving testimony for me that every one of those people was equal and special. On another day I also sat quietly in a little church. Around me were some of the faithful people who come to pray every day at this special, peaceful place. In front of me were 3 simple sets of tiles in the floor: the graves of the little boy, the old man, and the close friend of Oscar Romero, Father Rutilio Grande, who had served the people in that parish...all three brutally shot to death by the Salvadoran military.

I could not help thinking of what was going on in the mind and heart of Oscar Romero when he was called out and saw the bloodied bodies of those 3 people. What does such violence do within one's spirit especially when it is very personal, as it was for Oscar Romero? And what does it continue to do to so many innocent people in our world where atrocities, wars and mindless violence have become an almost everyday experience?

Violence can indeed be something very personal for many millions of people. I have had several such experiences in South Africa, e.g. last September when I was attacked by two men, landed in hospital for 6 days and was very ill for over 2 months. On March 21, 1991, just seven weeks after my ordination as bishop I led a peaceful protest march with a few pastors at the request of all the people's organisations. The people wanted to protest at the deportation of the revered Queen Mother of the Bafokeng tribe by a power hungry leader of one of the so-called homelands created by the apartheid regime. Behind me were some 6000 ordinary people, and I will never forget a young woman with the message on a piece of cardboard: "Police don't shoot; we are unarmed".

But, they did shoot. As I came up to the armoured personnel carriers near the Queen Mother's home, and heavily armed soldiers, the command rang out: "Shoot the priests". They jumped down and at first shot directly at me with high-speed steel gas grenades which, if they had hit my head, I would surely have been killed (I picked one up afterwards as a memento). I ducked and weaved because I could see the gas grenades speeding towards me, fell to the ground, but then heard the staccato sounds...and I remember saying to myself: "O my God, that is live ammunition". A young student was killed, another took a bullet in the shoulder, the soldiers went berserk shooting into the homes of people, beating up women – it was mayhem. I was dressed in my white cassock, brand new after my ordination – and that was the end of that cassock.

The church on the mission where I live was severely damaged by a powerful bomb in November, 1992, when I refused the demand of the same homeland leader to cancel a meeting of the people

and their organisations. They were banned from meeting anywhere in that homeland, but the people could come to the mission every weekend under our protection as Church to discuss their issues and the ongoing crises. It went on and on for 4 years even as we prepared for the historic 1994 elections by giving the people voter education in our own churches, always under the threat of being attacked, or having tear gas lobbed into the churches by the soldiers.

Which is why Oscar Romero was and still is my mentor, an inspiration and a witness who has been central to my life and ministry especially for the past 26 years as bishop, and in my work for peace in various countries as a member of Pax Christi International. Romero's situation was infinitely more dangerous than mine.....and was powerfully captured in these words of Julian Filochowski in one of his talks.....

“Let's think back to remember some of the colossal problems that Archbishop Romero had to confront over those three years (as archbishop). Besides the extreme and pervasive poverty he responded to paramilitary killings of community leaders, peasant massacres and the indiscriminate shooting of urban demonstrators by the security forces, the torture and disappearance of political prisoners, the decapitation and mutilation of death squad victims, the assassination of six of his priests and dozens of catechists, the desecration of churches and their tabernacles, the death squad threat to exterminate all the Jesuits in the country, the bombings of the diocesan radio station and printing press, the disapproval of the nuncio and four fellow bishops, a military-civilian junta installed by military coup, the kidnapping and execution by armed leftist groups of foreign businessmen, the occupations of churches by radical popular movements, continuous campaigns of slander and defamation in the press, and death threats from both the right and the left.

He preached and he spoke out trying to find the words to convey the horror of what was happening in a deeply Catholic country which he said had come to resemble the dominion of hell. Each week he spoke the unvarnished truth in the setting of the homily of the Mass. And they killed him for it.”

So, encountering in a much, much smaller way what Oscar Romero increasingly experienced in truly horrifying dimensions, the question has constantly confronted me: how does one respond to wars and violence? For example, the infamous Jihadi John, as he was called, with the video footage of him decapitating hostages - what did their families feel seeing such brutality meted out on their loved ones, and then.... what did people around the world think or say when Jihadi John was allegedly taken out by a drone strike? Or that painful video footage of the traumatized little boy, Omran Daqneesh, covered in blood, put in the back of an ambulance after a bomb strike in Syria; the bloodshed in Yemen, the appalling chemical gas attack on the town of Khan Sheikhoun in Syria, with the awful images of dead children and people....and the response of President Trump sending in cruise missiles....the attacks in churches in Tanta and Alexandria in Egypt..... It seems that almost every week we are confronted by new atrocities. I have had to deal with my own feelings of outrage and anger and sometimes helplessness at the suffering caused to the “little people” of the world....But...do those in power make responses based on a title of a book in Italian that I saw: “The geo-politics of emotion” instead of making clear moral and ethical choices about what affects people, indeed the world? The question we face is this: Is lethal force the only viable solution to wars, atrocities and violence.....or is there another way?

This question is surely relevant to the array of issues in the global arena, from the wars in Iraq and Syria, to the threats posed by terrorist groups, the intractable situation in Palestine, the nuclear threat, the Trident issue here in the UK, and so on and so on. And so, do we continue to uphold as Church the so-called “just war theory” so as to justify the use of violence and going to war under certain conditions, or should we rather be promoting another narrative, another vision, another conversation as Church in the real world of today? This is not a simple and straightforward conversation; it is complex but I believe it is necessary – and some of us in the Church have begun that journey (as Pat Gaffney of Pax Christi UK has shared with you). Indeed, I think the issue of nonviolence as a strategy is becoming increasingly pertinent to the future of our world and all its peoples, and indeed the planet. And Oscar Romero made his contribution to this conversation in his time.

The witness and word of Romero was the fruit of his own faith-filled reflection on the word of God as he discerned the call of God in the actual, living circumstances of his suffering and dying people. His theological and spiritual reflection was informed also by the teachings especially of Pope Paul VI, and the prophetic contributions of the assemblies at Puebla and particularly Medellin.

His analysis of violence was succinct and telling: “The Church does not approve or justify bloody revolution and cries of hatred. But neither can it condemn them while it sees no attempt to remove the causes that produce that ailment in our society....”¹.... “I will not tire of declaring that if we really want an effective end to violence we must remove the violence that lies at the root of all violence: structural violence, social injustice, exclusion of citizens from the management of the country, repression. All this is what constitutes the primal cause, from which the rest flows naturally”.²

In his Third Pastoral Letter in particular Romero analysed different types of violence, and commented on them. So, he identified firstly:

Institutionalized violence: “Those responsible for the institutionalisation of violence, and for the international structures that cause it, are those who monopolise economic power instead of sharing it, those *who defend themselves through violence* and all *those who remain passive for fear of the sacrifice and personal risk implied by any courageous and effective action* (Medellin Documents, *Peace*, #17, 18).

The repressive violence of the State: “Alongside institutionalised violence there frequently arises repressive violence --- that is to say, the use of violence by the state security forces to contain the aspirations of the majority, violently crushing any signs of protest against the injustices we have mentioned. This is a real form of violence.....”

¹ Romero, *Homilias*, 12 February, 1978, “Romero, The Violence of Love”, pg. 36-37. The Plough Publishing House, Farmington PA.

² Romero, *Homilias*, 23 September, 1979, “Romero, The Violence of Love”, pg. 166. The Plough Publishing House, Farmington PA.

Seditious or terrorist violence: “We are talking of the violence that Paul VI referred to as *the explosive revolutions of despair* (Bogota, August 23, 1968, quoted in Medellin Documents, *Peace*, #17). This form of violence is usually organised and pursued in the form of guerrilla warfare or terrorism and is wrongly thought of as the final and only effective way to change a social situation. It is a violence that produces and provokes useless and unjustifiable bloodshed, abandons society to explosive tensions beyond the control of reason, and disparages in principle any form of dialogue as a possible means of solving social conflicts.”

Spontaneous violence: “In being spontaneous and not deliberately sought, this form of violence is marked by desperation and improvisation, and so cannot be an effective way of securing rights or bringing just solutions to conflicts.”

Violence in Legitimate Self-Defense: “Violence can also be used in legitimate self-defense, when a group or an individual repels by force the unjust aggression to which they have been subjected. This violence seeks to neutralise or at least to bring under effective control --- not necessarily to destroy --- an imminent, serious, and unjust threat.”.....But, then Romero immediately follows this analysis with:

The Power of Nonviolence: “The gospel's advice to turn the other cheek to an unjust aggressor, is far from being passivity and cowardice....*The Christian can fight, but prefers peace to war*, was what Medellin said about this moral force of nonviolence...” (Medellin Documents, *Peace*, #15).”

Romero then deals with the theme: **The Church’s Moral Judgement on Violence...**

He wrote: We shall now recall some moral principles that should bind the conscience of any honourable person:

- 1) The Church has always condemned violence pursued for its own sake, or wrongly used against any human right, or used as the first and only method to defend and advance a human right. Evil may not be done to promote good.
- 2) The Church allows violence in legitimate defense, but under the following conditions: (a) that the defense does not exceed the degree of unjust aggression (for example, if one can adequately defend oneself with one's hands, then it is wrong to shoot at an aggressor); (b) that the recourse to proportionate violence takes place only after all peaceful means have been exhausted; and (c) that a violent defense should not bring about a greater evil than that of the aggression --- namely, a greater violence, a greater injustice.
- 3) Because it is the root of greater evils, the Church has condemned institutionalised violence, repressive violence by governments, terrorist violence, and any form of violence that is likely to provoke further violence in legitimate self-defense.
- 4) The Medellin document on peace, quoting a text from Paul VI's encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, mentions the legitimacy of *insurrection* in the very exceptional circumstances of an *evident and prolonged tyranny that seriously works against fundamental human rights and*

seriously damages the common good of the country, whether it proceeds from one person or from clearly unjust structures.

It immediately goes on, however, to warn of the danger of occasioning, through insurrection, *new injustices ... new imbalances ... new disasters --- all of which would justify a condemnation of insurrection* (Medellin Documents, *Peace*, #19).

5) For this reason too the Church has taught --- and the present situation gives tragic relevance to this teaching --- that a government ought to use all its moral and coercive power to guarantee a truly democratic state, one based on a just economic order, in which justice, peace, and the exercise of every citizen's fundamental rights are defended.

6) The Church prefers the constructive dynamism of nonviolence: *The Christian is peaceful and not ashamed of it . . . not simply a pacifist, for he/she can fight, but prefers peace to war. [The Christian] knows that violent changes in structures would be fallacious, ineffectual in themselves, and not conforming to human dignity* (Medellin Documents, *Peace*, #15).

We can recognise in what Romero wrote his own struggle with the complexities of violence and the response to it, and his clear option for nonviolence. He articulated the principles which have been used in discussions around the just war theory, and by those who think the just war theory continues to have relevance today, given the appalling atrocities of groups such as ISIS and others which, they would contend, can only be countered or contained by lethal force.

As part of the ongoing reflection and grappling with very complex issues in the modern context of wars, the possibility of nuclear annihilation, extreme terrorist violence, environmental destruction and so on, a landmark conference was held last year in Rome from 11 -13 April. It was hosted by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and Pax Christi International.

Cardinal Peter Turkson opened the conference with a message from Pope Francis. (Participants included 9 members of the Pontifical Council, and an international component of 80 theologians, analysts, member organisations of Pax Christi International like Pax Christi UK, and peace activists who have been working in situations of war and extreme violence around the world.)

The theme of the Rome Conference was: "Nonviolence and Just Peace: Contributing to the Catholic Understanding of and Commitment to Nonviolence". What emerged during our discussions was a questioning of the just war theory as an accepted teaching in the Catholic Church and a move to a more inclusive challenge and call to proactive peacemaking, i.e. seeking a just peace especially through giving space to the consideration of multiple non-violent methods of peacemaking, as opposed to a continued commitment to engage in wars and to respond to violence with violence as the way to achieve political objectives.

Clearly, the massive, indiscriminate violence and destruction of modern wars at least calls into question whether modern wars can be justified at all. As analysts have noted, some key criteria of the theory, namely, proportionality and protection of noncombatants, are never met by modern wars, and still less in the event of nuclear weapons being used in conflicts. Civilian deaths in World War I made up roughly 10 percent of all the deaths. In modern wars, such as the internal conflict in Syria or the U.S. invasion of Iraq, civilian deaths now range from 80 percent to 90

percent of all war casualties. By the very criteria of the just war theory, it is difficult to see how there can be such thing as a justified war in our times, and the Conference in Rome made its declaration: "There is no just war" today, it stated, while participants recognised that we face difficult challenges in the face of what to do and how to respond when war and massive violence breaks out and how to stop it, and how to protect innocent civilians – and then begin the process of peacemaking and restorative justice to heal affected communities. Complex issues, especially given what some world powers are doing or not doing, e.g. the use of vetoes at the United Nations Security Council.

The Rome Conference last April opted to introduce a different type of thinking in the discussion around wars and violence, and to carry this through into advocacy for active nonviolence and just peacemaking at all levels, including through the empowerment of affected people and communities.

Cardinal Turkson said during an interview last year after the Rome Conference that while just war teachings were first developed to make wars difficult or impossible to justify, they are now used more as conditions that allow violence to be used. "My understanding is that it was initially meant to make it difficult to wage war because you needed to justify it," said the cardinal. "This now has been interpreted these days as a war is just when it is exercised in self-defense ... or to put off an aggressor or to protect innocent people."

Turkson continued: "In that case, Pope Francis would say: 'You don't stop an aggression by being an aggressor. You don't stop a conflict by inciting another conflict. You don't stop a war by starting another war.'"

Instead, Turkson commented that the participants at the Rome conference decided to promote "another thinking" around this issue, namely, Gospel nonviolence, or "nonviolence as Jesus was nonviolent."

Because the agenda for peacemakers is clearly so complex and challenging, a vision – and indeed *an inner strength of spirit and spirituality* is needed to inspire and match the scope of that agenda. For Christians, that vision and spirituality can be discovered in in the New Testament, particularly through what Jesus proclaimed in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5: "Blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for what is right; blessed are the gentle, the merciful; blessed are those persecuted in the cause of right".

For us this is the basis, the foundation, the spiritual vision for active nonviolence and just peacemaking. This is all about a different worldview, a life choice, an option for a way to live and relate to all people without distinction, and to the whole of creation.

In essence, this is all about a choice, a decision every person, group, organisation and government can make. The challenge, therefore, is how to introduce the power of nonviolent responses to nations and communities, groups and individuals both to, if possible, prevent wars and violence breaking out, or to limit the effects of war and violence when they occur, and to bring healing, hope and new beginnings after wars and violence have ended.

Nonviolent action

What supports the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount is the record or stories of nonviolent action campaigns, and not enough of this story I believe has been brought into conversations around modern wars, and possible alternatives both to such wars and all other forms of violence, and indeed the violence being meted out on our planet.

Increasingly, research is validating the superiority of nonviolence over violence in terms of its *effectiveness* in achieving political solutions. Erica Chenoweth, a professor at the University of Denver, together with Dr. Maria J. Stephan wrote a book in 2011: *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* in which they examined 323 violent and nonviolent campaigns from 1900 – 2006. They demonstrated that nonviolent resistance campaigns succeeded, in terms of stated political objectives about 54% of the time, compared to 27% for violent campaigns. In addition, the research showed that nonviolent campaigns are associated with both democratic and peaceful societies. Why? Because of the inclusion and participation of communities and people. Therefore, besides national and international advocacy at all levels, peace has also to be *built* from *within* the affected communities everywhere, and peacemaking strategies must, therefore, be varied and adapted to each situation.

The author Gene Sharp has identified 198 methods of nonviolent action, including what Gandhi referred to as the “Constructive Program” of social uplift for the poor and marginalized. (cf. G Sharp: *The Politics of Nonviolent Action: Part 2 – The Methods of Nonviolent Action*, Boston: Extending Horizons Books, 1973).

And symbols, gestures are important to keep hope alive in the search for a just peace, like the invitation of Pope Francis to Presidents Abbas and Peres to come to Rome to meet each other as fellow human beings, to pray together for peace, a symbol of which was the planting of an olive tree. A small step....but the search must go on.....

I think it was in October last year that a small group of Israeli women began a march to Jerusalem from northern Israel to demand that the Israeli government restart a peace process with the Palestinians. After they reached the Palestinian city of Jericho on the West Bank, the core group of 20 women was joined by more than 3000 others, including around 1000 Palestinian women. And, even though the Palestinian women could not proceed beyond the barrier that separates the West Bank from Israel, the Israeli women headed for the Prime Minister’s residence where they held an emotional rally. The Liberian peace activist Leymah Gbowee, a 2011 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, addressed the group: “I say to my sisters in Israel, that this is your time to stand up and say no to war and yes to peace. When you stand firm for what you believe, the men with guns are afraid of you.”

We have witnessed the achievements, against all odds, of nonviolent campaigns across the globe, One example of a broad-based campaign of non-violent civil resistance was the "People Power" movement that ended the reign of Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos in 1986.

A rural, largely male insurgency fought against Marcos for years and did not topple him. Then, a mass movement made up of workers, some in the business community, students, the urban poor, women's groups, and the Catholic Church came together in opposition to Marcos. This resulted

in the mobilisation of over 2 million Filipinos into a movement to oppose the dictator. They used a variety of nonviolent tactics and programmes, for which the people were trained all over the country, and it was this nonviolent resistance campaign that diminished the support of the army and the powerful business leaders for Marcos and he left the country. A key to that was the role of the Catholic Church in ensuring that the protests remained non-violent.

Pope Francis has also praised the particular role of women in peace-making efforts, noting, for example, the thousands of Liberian women who "organized pray-ins and nonviolent protests that resulted in high-level peace talks to end the second civil war in Liberia."

The stories are being shared of the witness of people from all over the world who are promoting the power of coordinated nonviolent action in multiple small settings to achieve what are significant results.

For example, civilians trained in nonviolent tactics can and do effectively protect others in conflict zones around the globe. To date, 12 international nongovernmental organisations provide unarmed civilian protection in 17 countries, even though this is by no means easy. (An organisation called Mercy Corps Europe is engaged in prevention strategies in communities affected by conflict, even as it mobilises humanitarian assistance on a huge scale.)

Two major United Nations reviews and a report from countries that supply UN troops for Peacekeeping Operations have cited and recommended unarmed civilian protection (UCP) as practiced by an NGO called Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP).

Unarmed civilian protection (UCP) is an emerging methodology for the direct protection of civilians, for localised violence reduction and for supporting local peace infrastructures. UCP provides unarmed, specially trained civilians, recruited from many countries and cultures to live and work with local civil society in areas of violent conflict. It has grown in practice and recognition in the last few decades, with over 50 civil society organisations applying UCP methods in 35 conflict areas since 1991, but only after developing close collaboration with local civil societies and after a comprehensive analysis, based on the practicing of the principle of "Do No Harm".

UCP can be applied at all stages of a conflict, but it can be particularly effective at an early stage, to prevent or mitigate violent conflict, and also after violent conflict has subsided, to support the transition to a more healthy and viable civil society.

An example. In mid-2014, women living in the Bentiu Protection of Civilians area in South Sudan alerted the Nonviolent Peaceforce team living there, that women were being raped and sometimes gang-raped by soldiers when they went out to gather firewood and water. The women reported that sometimes the soldiers would describe the assaults as part of their job. Often older women took on these chores to protect the younger ones, and decrease the likelihood of attack. Women had to choose between their personal safety and providing for their families' basic needs.

NP began accompanying the women when they left the camp, sending 2 or more trained civilian protectors along with them. In the year after this accompaniment had been offered no woman was attacked when accompanied. Instead, the soldiers looked the other way. In that year NP provided over 1,000 accompaniments for vulnerable people, primarily women and children, throughout South Sudan. Just one example among many to illustrate that another mindset, another way of thinking about war and violence, holds promise and is worth pursuing.

All these experiences, and the input of specialists, formed the backbone of the reflection and discussion at the Rome Conference in April last year. The message of the Conference was sent to Pope Francis, and the Catholic Non-Violence Initiative took on the responsibility to carry forward the process of the Rome conference. About 15 of us in the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative returned to Rome on 19 and 20 December last year to carry forward our reflections, and to meet with Archbishop Gallagher from the Vatican Secretariat of State and with Archbishop Tomasi of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace – fruitful encounters with the leadership at the Vatican, which will be continued whenever possible. And shortly afterwards we received the prophetic and courageous message of Pope Francis for World Peace Day in 2017 which was given the title: “Non-Violence: A Style of Politics for Peace.”

Last month, in response to Pope Francis' January 1 peace message, advocates for peace-making met together at a United Nations forum on 2 March (cf. article in the National Catholic Reporter). The event was co-sponsored by Maryknoll, the Permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See to the U.N., Pax Christi International and the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative. Its focus was Pope Francis' call for non-violent alternatives to resolving conflicts and his strong call that violence "is not the cure for our broken world." The Pope reflected thus:

"Countering violence with violence leads at best to forced migrations and enormous suffering, because vast amounts of resources are diverted to military ends and away from the everyday needs of young people, families experiencing hardship, the elderly, the infirm and the great majority of people in our world," he said. "At worst, it can lead to the death, physical and spiritual, of many people, if not of all." (cf. January 1, 2017 Peace Message)

The Pope visualises such peace-building efforts a "natural and necessary complement to the church's continuing efforts to limit the use of force by the application of moral norms" and challenged both those within and outside the church to "apply the Beatitudes in the exercise of their respective responsibilities."

"It is a challenge to build up society, communities and businesses by acting as peacemakers. It is to show mercy by refusing to discard people, harm the environment or seek to win at any cost," he said. (cf. Message of Pope Francis for the World Day of Peace, 1 January, 2017)

During the UN Forum on 2 March this year, Gerry Lee of the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns affirmed that..... “in the last 50 years, nonviolent campaigns are becoming increasingly successful and common.....” Lee also cited the research which found that: “Once the campaigns reached an active and sustained participation of 3.5% of the population, the campaigns did not fail, and every campaign that garnered 3.5 percent or more of popular support was nonviolent;”

Marie Dennis is a wonderful prophetic woman with whom I am privileged to serve as co-president of Pax Christi International. At the same UN Forum, Marie expanded the reflection on Francis' call for peace to include the United Nations and its peace operations. She noted that a high-level independent panel that studied U.N. peace-keeping operations recently saw "a widening gap between what is being asked of U.N. peace operations today and what they are able to deliver."

"Repeatedly since 1945 the U.N. has been confronted with an enormous challenge, facing complex and dangerous situations with relatively underfunded or underdeveloped nonviolent strategies," Dennis said. "At the moment of crisis — in Aleppo or Mosul, Rwanda or the Balkans, the Philippines, Haiti or South Sudan — we have time and again opened a toolbox that is flush with military might, but woefully under-invested in the tools of active nonviolence."

Pax Christi International, Maryknoll and other partners in the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative, Marie said, "believe that much more creative energy as well as intellectual and financial investment in the development of effective nonviolent approaches to peacekeeping and peace-building can help fill that gap."

She continued: "Countless movements around the world have shown that action which is both nonviolent and determined is often essential to overcoming the roadblocks to a just and peaceful solution in situations of oppression and violent conflict. Nonviolent action can dramatise the issue at hand and foster the creative tension that encourages all parties and the larger community to find a path to justice and peace."

Data shows that there are fewer than 10 major wars in the world now, and more than half of war-related deaths are from Syria and two-thirds are from Syria and Iraq. But Rima Salah, a former deputy director of UNICEF and another speaker at the UN event, said that while the data shows fewer conflicts between states, the reality of wars in 2017 is that they tend to be *internal* conflicts that take an increasing toll on civilians. "That suffering is increasing," she said, and has "created tremendous hardships. The suffering is not like before.".....That is the challenge for us today – how to respond creatively at all levels, including at the community level, to limit and hopefully end the suffering of the millions of vulnerable people who feel they have nowhere to turn.

My concluding reflections.....Pope Francis, at the closing ceremony of an interreligious peace gathering in Assisi on 20 September last year, said: "We never tire of repeating that the name of God cannot be used to justify violence. Peace alone, and not war, is holy! I am thinking of the families, whose lives have been shattered; of the children who have known only violence in their lives; of the elderly, forced to leave their homeland. All of them have a great thirst for peace," he said. "We do not want these tragedies to be forgotten."

And inspired by the witness of people like Oscar Romero, Pope Francis and others..... all of us involved in the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative, and our many wonderful supporters and co-workers with whom we journey need to keep that hope alive; that indeed the tragedies will never be forgotten, but rather be a continual invitation to walk the extra mile in the cause of just peacemaking through active nonviolence, and that the Church indeed has something important to contribute in this journey. We believe this conversation must continue, in spite of the challenges,

so that more and more people, communities, organisations and governments may recognise and take up the invitation.....that the multiple forms of nonviolent engagement and action, whose starting point is **respectful encounter** and **dialogue** with “the other”, should become increasingly centre stage in the quest for a peaceful and just world.....

On November 27, 1977, Romero said in one of his homilies: “We have never preached violence, except the violence of love, which left Christ nailed to a cross, the violence that we must each do to ourselves to overcome our selfishness and such cruel inequalities among us. The violence we preach is not the violence of the sword, the violence of hatred. It is the violence of love.....the violence that wills to beat weapons into sickles for work”.³

And then, the powerful homily on Sunday, 23 March 1980, at the end of which he addressed the military: “Brothers, you are part of our own people... You kill your own campesino brothers and sisters. And before an order to kill that a man may give, the law of God must prevail: Thou shalt not kill!! No soldier is obliged to obey an order against the law of God.....In the name of God, and in the same of this suffering people whose laments rise to heaven each day more tumultuous, I beg you, I ask you, I order you in the name of God....stop the repression”....And for this, next day they killed him....

Who can ever forget Dom Pedro Casadaliga’s words: “Saint Romero of the Americas, our shepherd and our martyr. No one can ever silence your last homily.”

Thank you.

Bishop Kevin Dowling C.Ss.R.
Leeds, 25 April, 2017

³ Romero, *Homilias*, 27 November, 1977, “Romero, The Violence of Love”, pg. 12. The Plough Publishing House, Farmington PA.