



PAX



CHRISTI

International Catholic Movement for Peace

Peace People Series

OSCAR ROMERO

El Salvador, in Central America, had experienced many years of injustice, a great disparity between the rich and the poor and military repression and violence against the ordinary people. During the 1980s in particular, many thousands of people were tortured, disappeared, or were murdered by the military dictatorship which ruled the country.

Against this background the Catholic Church in El Salvador made a special commitment to the poor, believing in God as the God of life and justice, a God of the poor. The Church became an advocate of the poor and of all those who experienced the violence of poverty and repression.

A major supporter of this commitment to the poor was Archbishop Oscar Romero. He was known as the companion of the poor and oppressed of El Salvador. His ministry came to an end when he was gunned down while saying Mass on 24th March 1980. How did he become a target of such violence?

Archbishop Romero had not always been known for his outspokenness on behalf of the poor. He was a quiet and timid man, rather traditional in his approach to religion and not very sympathetic to the movement for Basic Christian Communities which had been steadily growing within El Salvador. He was appointed Archbishop of San Salvador in 1977 and soon after his appointment an event involving the death of a Jesuit priest challenged the way he saw his own ministry.



Change of heart and mind

Father Rutillio Grande had worked with landless peasants in El Salvador for some years. He believed that he was called to live and work with the poor, that this was what the Gospel message challenged him to do. As well as witnessing to this through action he also challenged the government about its understanding of democracy and the treatment of the poor. This work had brought him into conflict with the government and the security forces within El Salvador. He was violently murdered in March 1977.

His death was both a shock and a challenge to Archbishop Romero. Against the wishes of more conservative bishops, he proclaimed three days of mourning for Father Grande. He also called for a funeral Mass to be celebrated in San Salvador's Cathedral which was watched over by military tanks and helicopters. From this time on, Archbishop Romero became the "voice of the voiceless" speaking out on behalf of the poor and oppressed of El Salvador.

Church organisations, schools, convents, bookshops, radio stations were also involved in exposing the truth about what was happening to the people of El Salvador. They experienced verbal attacks in the press and physical attacks such as bombings and shootings.

... it is right to include the power of nonviolence, which clearly today has its own eager students and followers. The Gospel's advice to turn the other cheek to an unjust aggressor, far from being passivity and cowardice, is evidence of great moral strength which leaves the aggressor morally defeated and humiliated. The Christian is able to fight but prefers peace to war.

Each Sunday Archbishop Romero read out in public the cases of human rights abuse which had occurred.

Dialogue for change

Many of the Archbishop's sermons and talks were broadcast on the church-backed YSAX radio station. The radio station was bombed on February 19th 1980 as a result of criticism of the government. Similarly, the Catholic newspaper was attacked and the Jesuit-run Central American University was also bombed.

Archbishop Romero attempted to create dialogue between the government, the military and the people. He asked for conditions that would give people at all social levels the chance to take part in democratic decision making. He spoke out about the unequal distribution of wealth within the country and supported land reform so that peasant families could support themselves. He called for an end to violence and repression. This extract, from a sermon given the day before he was murdered, gives some indication of his understanding of nonviolence.

" I would like to appeal in a special way to the men of the army, and in particular the troops of the National Guard, the police and the garrison. Brothers, you belong to your own people. You kill your own brother peasants, and in the face of an order to kill that is given by a man, the law of God should prevail that says do not kill! No soldier is obliged to obey an order counter to the law of God. No one has to comply with an immoral law. It is time now

that you recover your conscience and obey its dictates rather than the command of sin. The Church, defender of the rights of God, and in the name of this long-suffering people, cannot remain silent before so much abomination."

A challenge to us all

This was too much for the government of El Salvador and so Archbishop Romero became one of its many victims. For many, inside and outside El Salvador, he is a martyr and a saint. His challenge, that Christians should be defenders of the poor and oppressed, is addressed to all Christians. He invites us all to have courage and take our faith commitment into the world:

"When we leave Mass, we ought to go out the way Moses descended Mount Sinai: with his face shining, with his heart brave and strong to face the world's difficulties".

For more information:
www.silk.net/RelEd/romero.html

<http://salt.claretianspubs.org.romero/rindex.html>

Read:
Oscar Romero and the Nonviolent Struggle by John Dear sj.
Pax Christi USA Price £2.50
Available from Pax Christi UK - London Office

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