

Archbishop Romero: Bishop, Martyr and Patron of Justice and Peace

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I would like to focus on three great anniversaries or jubilees that fall this year.

On July 16, 40 years ago, 12,000 pilgrims from all over Europe led by Cardinal Heenan and Archbishop Cowderoy, streamed to Aylesford for the rededication of the Shrine and the consecration of the altars. Perhaps we could say the renaissance of Aylesford. This anniversary year sees a new Prior and team at Aylesford - no doubt discerning the way ahead, renewing the vision for this treasure house of spirituality and reaffirming its place in the modern world.

Where better to go in that discernment than *Gaudium et Spes*, the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral (and Doctrinal!) Constitution on the Church in the Modern World - promulgated also 40 years ago on December 7th. A second ruby jubilee! Arguably *Gaudium et Spes*, along with *Lumen Gentium*, were the most important bequest to us from Vatican II.

Gaudium et Spes offers a vision of Church which is not just institution and hierarchy. It speaks of the Church as the People of God, the community of the baptised. The Church is all of us. Furthermore we could say that *Gaudium et Spes* provides for the justice and peace movement its Magna Carta from its very opening, and oft-quoted words:

"The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ."

It spoke then of the terrible divide in our world between rich and poor. Never so much wealth and still colossal scandalous numbers going hungry. It highlighted the urgency of greater solidarity; it urged dialogue and engagement with the world to transform the world, promoting human dignity, freedom, and human rights. Its message is that peace is the fruit of justice. We are invited to know not so much an all-powerful God as an all-loving God.

So we the Church are a pilgrim people, united in sacrament and solidarity, striving to follow the Lord in a broken and divided world. Sacrament AND solidarity. Prayer AND action. Love of God AND love of neighbour. We can't have God without neighbour or sacrament without solidarity. Here in *Gaudium et Spes* are planted the seeds of the preferential option for the poor - the poor at the centre and heart of the mission of the Church - subsequently crystallised in the social teaching of John Paul II.

The pilgrim people needs food for the journey which comes in the Eucharist - but we still grow weary and occasionally our commitment flags. To energise us we look to our heroes, our saints, to those who have carried the torch of faith and justice before us. This brings us to our third anniversary.

2005 is the 25th anniversary of the martyrdom of Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador, a *Gaudium et Spes* bishop to his core and patron-saint-in-waiting of our justice and peace movement. At this moment we are waiting confidently and expectantly for Benedict XVI to announce that Romero's heroic sanctity and martyrdom will be recognised in his beatification.

For me personally the greatest grace and privilege of my life is to have known and worked with Archbishop Romero and to have enjoyed his friendship. Let me tell you his story.

It was a Tuesday morning 25 years ago. I was woken up by the telephone ringing. It was a call from El Salvador with the news that Oscar Romero had been assassinated. He had been shot dead with a single marksman's bullet just as he began to offer the bread and wine at a Mass he was celebrating in the little chapel at the cancer hospital where he lived with the Carmelite sisters. Like millions of others I was shattered; I felt sick. The news ricocheted round the world. It was not simply a killing. It was a great crime against humanity. The magnicide ended three dramatic years of Romero's ministry as Archbishop of San Salvador.

It all happened on 24 March 1980 - twelve hours before Robert Runcie was installed in the Chair of St Augustine not far from here in Canterbury Cathedral. In fact on the spot where another turbulent priest, St Thomas Beckett, was killed in 1170 on the orders of King Henry II for his defence of the rights and liberty of the Church.

And it all happened in El Salvador, the tiny Catholic country in Central America, named after Christ the Saviour. The size of Wales, with a population of about 4 million, El Salvador was ruled at the time by a military-led junta. The order to kill Romero was given by Major Roberto D'Aubuisson with the knowledge and assent of the military high command. It was planned and executed by their death squads with a hired professional marksman. It happened with the complicity of the National Police (who were nowhere to be seen for two hours after the killing). And, it has to be said, it happened to the joy of the Catholic wealthy class who opened champagne and let off fireworks as news of the assassination spread on that evening of 24 March.

It happened when El Salvador was poised on the brink of civil war - a country with grotesque economic exploitation, social deprivation and malnutrition in the countryside, on the coffee estates and cotton and sugar plantations. The whole unjust system - the institutionalised injustice - was kept in place through electoral fraud and wholesale repression. Killings, torture, disappearances, political imprisonment and forced exile were the routines of the military regime. Six priests and dozens of catechists were killed before Romero. Kidnappings and high profile murders were the response of the guerrilla left.

Archbishop Romero, just simply 'Monsenor' as he was affectionately known by all his people, preached a gospel message of social justice, non-violent change, peace and reconciliation. In word and deed he acted out *Gaudium et Spes* and all the rich heritage of Catholic Social Teaching. He made incarnate the preferential option for the poor - the poor really did come first on his agenda. The joys and sorrows of his suffering people were indeed the joys and sorrows of his Church. The social teaching was not just words, words, words. He lived them out day by

day. And in the end he gave his life for his people, a 20th century martyr for the poor.

Three incredible years of ministry at the head of the archdiocese. Put alongside the three years of the public ministry of Christ the inevitable comparisons are there to be made. The preaching, the teaching. The compassion. The audacious challenges to the authorities. The doubts. The temptations. The agonies. The insults. The plotting. The hostility of the elders of the Church (in Romero's case the nuncio and his fellow bishops). The death threats; and the public execution. Romero was an authentic follower of Jesus Christ. According to Gustavo Gutierrez, if Jesus Christ, the word made flesh, is the homily of God, then Oscar Romero was the homily of Jesus Christ. He was an ordinary man who did extraordinary things.

Born on the Feast of the Assumption 1917, he went to seminary at 13. he studied in Rome and was ordained in 1942. He was trained in the most traditional fashion, a product of the Gregorian University and the Jesuits. He became a great admirer of Pius XI and Pius XII. He loved the rosary from childhood to his death - but he had many devotions. He developed a deep prayer life in which (and through which) he could retreat to be with God and pray through his difficult challenges. He prized and recommended to others the intimate divine space of our conscience where we encounter ourselves and then go out and encounter God. It was a rich spirituality with clear mendicant and indeed Carmelite traits.

In a homily on the Feast of Carmel in 1977 he said:

The scapular is a sign of salvation.... If the Blessed Virgin were to give the scapular to Simon Stock today she would tell him "This is the sign of protection, a sign of God's teaching, a sign of humanity's integral vocation, for the salvation of the whole person, now in this life. All who wear the scapular must be persons who live now in salvation on this earth and they must feel content to develop their human powers for the good of others".When the Church demands a more just society, wealth better shared, and more respect for human rights, the Church is not meddling in politics. The church is telling people what the scapular says: only those will be saved who can use the things of earth with the heart of God.

For 25 years from his ordination Romero was what we would describe as a zealous pastor, an indefatigable and popular preacher and catechist, parish priest, editor of the diocesan newspaper, vicar general and administrator of the cathedral. He promoted the local SVP, the Cursillo movement, and Alcoholics Anonymous. He lived a life of simplicity and, according to his housekeepers, of austerity and fasting. He was guardian of the national shrine of Our Lady Queen of Peace in San Miguel. Indeed he oversaw its refurbishment and rededication - a decade before the Aylesford ceremonies!

Cut adrift from his diocese as an ecclesiastical bureaucrat in 1967, he had a difficult 'blue' period, seven years of pastoral famine. By all accounts he became sullen, awkward, pedantic and aggressively suspicious of new pastoral practice. Ordained an auxiliary bishop in 1970, he became close to the military government and flirted with Opus Dei.

In 1977, against all the odds and all the predictions, to the dismay of the diocesan clergy and many religious, to the horror of the grassroots Christian communities, Romero was appointed archbishop of San Salvador.

But two weeks after his installation the scales were dramatically shaken from his eyes by the murder, at the hands of a death squad, of his friend the Jesuit priest Rutilio Grande who worked to organise exploited rural workers into unions. The government lied to him. He paused and he prayed. It was his Gethsemane. He made an option - to put himself on the side of this poor peasantry which, he wrote at the time to a friend, "seems to have put me on the road to Calvary". To demonstrate the Church's abhorrence at the crime and to express the sorrow and mourning Romero cancelled all Masses throughout the diocese the following Sunday except for a single Mass in front of the metropolitan cathedral. This infuriated the government, the wealthy classes, the nuncio and some of his episcopal colleagues.

The persecution of the Church actually intensified as Romero's legendary preaching week by week confronted the human rights violations, the political violence, the corrupt system of justice, the iniquitous land tenure system and the suffering of El Salvador's poor. He endeavoured to make the Word of God come alive in the concrete situation of El Salvador, in the lives of the poor. His homilies were broadcast each week on the diocesan radio station and brought him a massive audience beyond the packed cathedral. He teased out all the meaning from the Gospel and then applied it directly to contemporary El Salvador. The Mass was never a political rally but rather a giant catechetical workshop in the heart of the Eucharistic celebration where he told the truth about the situation in the country. His message was utterly consistent. No to the killings of the right. No to the violence of the left. Yes to political organisation. Yes to the option for the poor. Social Justice for the poor. Human rights for all. Yes to dialogue. He invited the wealthy groups to a change of heart - sometimes gently; sometimes more sharply. They believed he was deranged or duped. There began to be seen bumper stickers 'Be a Patriot. Kill a priest'. Six priests were killed before Romero. At the funeral of one of them he said, "My job seems to be going around collecting dead bodies".

He brought hope to his people in a situation of escalating violence, suffering and tragedy. He generated international solidarity. He gave hope to many of us here in Europe and North America. Cardinal Hume offered him important support; CAFOD funded the reconstruction of his radio station twice after it was bombed and taken out of action. As violence intensified in February 1980 he appealed to President Jimmy Carter to stop military aid to Salvador's armed forces as it was being used to repress the people. The army and the government were livid. But the repression simply got worse. On 23rd March he made a direct appeal to the enlisted men in the army not to kill their fellow Salvadorans - the law of God 'Thou shalt not kill', he reminded them, was more important than an unjust order to shoot. He said, "I beg you, I implore you, I order you, in the name of God and in the name of this suffering people, stop the repression". The plan, long prepared, for his elimination was put into action. The next day he died at the altar after preaching a beautiful homily on the gospel text 'Unless a grain of wheat dies and falls into the ground...' (John 12:24)

For three years Romero had staved off civil war - the only person who could be heard by both left and right in an ever-polarising context. Following his

assassination the war was unstoppable and over the next 12 years it claimed more than 70,000 lives. Romero was a martyr for the option for the poor - which he lived and promoted; a martyr to the magisterium of the Church - to *Gaudium et Spes* and the whole body of Catholic social doctrine; but a martyr to political incomprehension too!

Archbishop Romero's relevance to the Church and the justice and peace movement in 2005 is manifold. First and foremost he is a credible witness to the resurrection in this post-modernist age. A model Christian, his spirit gives us energy. His identification with the poor demonstrates that the 'option for the poor' is not just meaningless rhetoric from the late 20th century. The gospel is addressed to all but its privileged recipients are the poor. It is good news for the poor. It can be good news for us the rich - provided that WE in our lives are good news to the poor. He spoke the truth fearlessly, prophetically. He was an evangeliser par excellence. There was just no 'spin'. He unmasked the idolatry of the time and named it. The idolatry of wealth. The idolatry of national security. And the idolatry of the party organisation - on the left.

Today we look not at tiny El Salvador but at our tiny globalised planet. The poor in Africa are our crucified peoples. The scandal of 1.2 billion people living on less than \$1 a day; 40 million people living today with HIV - most without medication, social support or pastoral care - and no vaccine. The misuse and misallocation of our global resources - plenty for war and precious little for the global poor. The global divide widens. Global tension and conflict increase far beyond the Middle East. But we resolutely believe that 'another world is possible' - in John Paul's phrase 'a civilisation of love', a world of solidarity and justice. We really can 'Make Poverty History'. But global security must not be a new idolatry tied up simply with global anti-terrorist measures - we must rather struggle for human security for everyone and that must include our global war on abject poverty and destitution. Oscar Romero would be with us at the very front of the march.

Ignacio Ellacuria, martyred himself in 1989, said that with Archbishop Romero God passed through El Salvador. I believe we could say that with Archbishop Romero God passed through the universal Church. He is the patron to whom we should pray 'Monsenor, guide and illuminate us in our work for justice and peace. Take our concerns to Jesus himself'.

In this jubilee year of the martyrdom I was proud to be able to cooperate with the British province of the Carmelites in enabling the little house where Romero lived at the cancer hospital to be repaired and protected. It has long been a place of pilgrimage, 'a Holy Place'. The Anglicans have already in their own manner canonised Oscar Romero with his statue placed over the West Door of Westminster Abbey alongside Martin Luther King, seven years ago. We pray that his Cause will this year go forward in Rome too. It will bring joy and hope - *gaudium et spes* - to the bread-breaking justice-seeking pilgrim people of God throughout the world.

My hope is that it may be possible to link all three anniversaries and that Oscar Romero and his spirituality of justice might become a special thread in the life of Aylesford, to strengthen and give joy and hope to the justice and peace movement here in England and to the greater glory of God.