

Monsignor Romero: Pastor, Prophet, and Martyr

--Jose "Chencho" Alas

Introductory note to this chapter

This chapter is special for me because it deals with my last days in El Salvador and because I want for it to constitute my personal testimony on Monsignor Oscar Romero. I believe that he is a martyr, that he is a saint, and above all, that he is the greatest symbol of our people's desire for justice and peace. He symbolizes our greatest ideals and our hopes. I wrote this chapter during my years of exile in Nicaragua, a country for which I wish the best of luck.

The scope of this chapter

It is not easy for me to write about Mons. Romero. Too many deeds and words rush to my mind: all are tied to his life and the lives of the Salvadoran people. Without any pretension, I want to tell the reader about a few of these deeds and words which, I believe, changed him and gave a new historical sense to the Church and to our country, El Salvador, which he served. I do not seek to make a theological analysis or present a systematization of his eminently prophetic ministry. That is the work of scripturalists, theologians, and those who study ministry.

The beginning of a conversion

March 12, 1977, was not an easy day for the new archbishop of San Salvador. That day saw the beginning of a wave that grew during the week until it crested on the 19th and crashed on the 20th. Many things happened that week which forced Romero to question his own values and to respond to the demands of his people and his coworkers: the priests, religious orders, community leaders, and catechists. On the 12th he fell from the horse, like Saint Paul; on the 19th he theologially questioned the values of "authority and obedience;" and on the 20th came his consecration and he gave himself over, during the celebration of the Eucharist, to be the people's prophet. After March 20th, his life continued for three more years until he celebrated the Eucharist at 5:30pm, March 24th, 1980, when he was given over, definitively, to the Father of Life.

I met and became friends with Mons. Romero in 1962, when he attended a Christianity Workshop (I founded and served as national director of this movement in El Salvador). We often gave the Workshops together. I spent the last four months of my pastoral work in the San José de la Montaña Seminary working for him: from February to May 1977. My friendship and my work allowed me to be very close to him.

At 5:30pm, on March 12th, Father Rutilio Grande had fallen victim to the bullets of the Death Squadron's assassins - who served the landowners and industrialists of Aguilares and Suchitoto. An old man and a boy, both *campesinos* accompanied him. He was going to El Paisnal, his birthplace, to celebrate the Eucharist and read the Pastoral Letter from the Bishops'

Conference which denounced the human rights violations by the country's authorities. Rutilio, like many of the clergy, had proclaimed the need for that prophetic letter from the Church.

On February 28, the army had massacred dozens of the government's opponents in the middle of the city, inside and outside of the Church of the Rosary, in front of Libertad Park. The night before, Father Alfonso Navarro had celebrated the Eucharist for the 10,000 people in that park who had protested the presidential election fraud of February 20th. The cold-blooded massacre formed part of a government policy to crush the people's demands. The people had, since 1967, sought different ways to organize themselves in order to struggle for their dignity.

The Kennedy-epoch Alliance for Progress economic model had run down, and the people were hungrier than ever. Hundreds of catechists, labor leaders, *campesinos*, women, and children who had demanded their rights had been assassinated.

On that 28th of February, six days after Monsignor Romero had become Archbishop of San Salvador, we began a week-long workshop on the penetration of fundamentalist Protestant churches in Latin America. Before beginning the sessions, some members of the clergy had met and we had given Rutilio the job of speaking and demanding that the bishops face the country's problems with prophetic leadership. The new archbishop, Mons. Oscar Romero, Mons. Luis Chávez y González, and the auxiliary Bishop, Mons. Arturo Rivera Damas were there. As a result of our petition, the bishops wrote a pastoral letter. Then we returned to our parishes, as it was time to be with the people. Rutilio was on his way to read this letter on the day he was martyred. The letter denounced the violence against the *campesinos*, the destruction of their crops, the intimidation campaigns, the expulsion of some priests from the country, the public campaigns by organizations like the Association of Private Enterprise (ANEP) and the Eastern Region Agricultural Front (FARO) against the Church, the assassination of leaders -- or the equivalent, their "disappearance," and other outrages against the people.

After the burial of Father Grande and his companions in El Paisnal, the Monsignor agreed to call the clergy, religious orders, and some lay people together to analyze the situation more calmly in order to evaluate the Church's prophetic mission at that time.

Romero had the spiritual disposition to work with the heritage that Mons. Chávez had left him: an involved Church, enlarged by its acceptance and application of the Second Vatican Council, and, particularly, by the praxis of the Second Latin American Episcopal Conference in Medellín's teachings. On February 21st, the day before assuming possession of the archdiocese of San Salvador, Romero wrote to the clergy: "I want to speak to you about the spirit of cooperation that I offer you. I need you. Together, we can participate in the honor that Christ gives us to help build his Church, each according to his calling."

On the afternoon of March 17th, Romero had to turn this spirit of cooperation into reality. From the 13th to the 16th we had met with him twice. He had sought dialogue on the following four points: basic elements on which we should stand united so that the Church could present a common position; actions with which we were all in agreement; what sort of public opinion had the Church been able to create through the bishops' radio messages, bulletins, and other means; and other suggestions and discussion.

The celebration of a unique Eucharist

In the plenary meeting on March 17th, the participants were allowed to vote on the different proposals that had been presented. However, according to the archbishop, for reasons of his theological training, the vote only had the weight of advice. Among the proposals, one had especially caused a lot of discussion: the celebration of holding only one mass in the country on Sunday, March 20th, to be presided by the Archbishop and accompanied by all of the archdiocesan priests and the people. There would be no celebrations in the parishes.

Two fundamental problems troubled the Archbishop about this mass, one legal and the other theological. Legally, the country was under siege and one could not have open-air public activities without the government's permission. Theologically, we had learned that each Eucharist, each host, contributed to building the glory of God: a mathematical conception of the sacrament of unity and love.

In San Salvador, we were used to novel proposals from Mons. Chávez. His pastoral theme had been: if something serves the good of the people, go ahead, let's do it. However, for Mons. Romero, in the circumstances that the country found itself, it seemed unacceptable to hold only one mass and contrary to his doctrinal way of thinking.

After seeking private advice, and being hounded by diocesan clergy trained under Mons. Chávez, all of whom had committed themselves to work with and on behalf of the poor, the Archbishop accepted to hold the One Mass. Nonetheless, among many dissenters stood one important person who was particularly opposed: the Nuncio Gerarda, the representative of His Holiness the Roman Pontiff in El Salvador. Ivan Illich said it well: it is difficult for a diplomat to be a Christian, whether the diplomat represents the Vatican or the United States. Certainly, he cannot be a prophet, an essential element of baptism.¹

On Saturday, at 2:00pm, the Nuncio arrived at San José de la Montaña Seminary, where the Archbishop has his provisional offices. Some seminarians and I were preparing signs for each parish. We had planned that the faithful would organize according to their parishes in the plaza in front of the cathedral. The Nuncio seemed very worried to me. He asked me for the Archbishop, and I told him that he was not at the Seminary. He looked annoyed, and told me "He should be here. Tomorrow is a terrible day for the Church and it is his duty to be here, available." He gave me a letter for the Archbishop and left.

At the time, Romero was praying with some members of Opus Dei. He was a man of prayer. The conservative positions of Opus Dei, a sect within the Catholic Church, attracted him. Opus cultivates piety, does not question the status quo, works for the salvation of society's leaders, and for the rich. With a Hellenic mentality, they are able to separate the historical reality

¹ Theologically, when a person receives baptism she or he is called upon to be a prophet: to decry injustices in society and help to bring about the reign of God here on Earth. (See 1 Peter 2:9, and the earlier chapter "Priests, Kings, and Prophets.")

from ideas and dedicate themselves to proclaiming the later. Thus, they elude any sort of commitment.

The Monsignor returned to the Seminary at 5:30pm. I immediately gave him the Nuncio's letter. He went to his room for five minutes, then returned to the corridor and asked me to read the Nuncio's missive. As a representative of the Holy See, he warned Romero to stop the mass scheduled for the next day, and asked him to call on the radio to all of the clergy to stay in their parishes.

The hour of the conversion

For me, this was Romero's zero hour, the hour of his conversion. Perhaps it had begun in Tres Calles, when he saw the blood of the *campesinos* assassinated by the National Guard. Beginning some years before, the blood of our people had begun spilling around him, crying for his conversion.

On June 21, 1975, the National Guard surrounded the village of Tres Calles. It is located in the Santiago de María diocese, where Romero was bishop at the time. Five *campesinos* accused of holding arms for the guerillas were pulled from their huts and massacred by the National Guard. The next day, the Monsignor visited the place to console the families and celebrate the Eucharist.

For the first time, he had to look at the *campesino's* blood; it entered him, and questioned him. His response was that of a good man, a good bishop. He wrote a letter to President Molina and a memorandum to his colleagues, the bishops. In a way, he felt committed for having gone to Tres Calles, where various priests from San Vicente Diocese had gone. In the memorandum he explained why he did not make a public protest: it seemed better to him to intervene directly with the authorities, as he had done, protesting personally to the military commander and writing to the president. He added that the Church was not involved directly in the matter and that he was not certain about the true motives for the massacre or the conduct of the victims.

According to some nuncios and bishops, this procedure is called diplomatic silence. This deed and other deaths in the country seriously affected Romero's conscience. The spilled blood was that of the poor, just like his blood.

No one knows if Tres Calles reminded him of his *campesino* upbringing. Oscar Arnulfo Romero Galdámez was born in Ciudad Barrios, in San Miguel province, on August 15, 1917. He was the son of a telegraph operator and postal worker called Santos Romero and of Guadalupe de Jesús Galdámez, housewife. Oscar learned the trade of carpenter before entering the seminary. Back then, Ciudad Barrios, just 20 kilometers from the Honduran border was only a big village with streets that were dusty during the dry season and muddy during the rainy season. Romero knew country life first-hand.

The Nuncio's missive was full of clerical authoritarianism. For a moment, I feared that all was lost. At stake was the concept of authority and obedience that Romero had learned in the Gregorian University's classroom during World War II, in the epoch of the noble Pius XII.

Personally, I believe that Romero had everything necessary to commit himself to the people, like many of us who worked back then in about 40 parishes. Simple people, inspired, sacrificing, followers of the Gospel, of Vatican II and Medellín, priests who knew their people. The majority of these priests belonged to the Archdiocese of San Salvador. But the problem that Monsignor Romero faced was theological, it had to do with his conception of authority, his sense of obedience. On the one hand, the Church's doctrine was clear; on the other were those who believed that they are the final authority of the doctrine in daily practice. How could he say no to the Nuncio? That was impossible.

I read the Nuncio's letter and Romero, worried and nervous, asked me what he should do. It was late, we were both leaning on the handrail in the hall of the Seminary -- a simple and beautiful building. Romero was suffering. I reminded him of theology, I spoke to him of his mission as pastor, as bishop. This did not move him. I reminded him of something that he himself had affirmed when we gave Christianity Workshops, "If we have a problem and we don't know what to do, what decision to make, the best thing to do is go to Jesus and speak with Him." I suggested that he go to the Seminary's chapel to speak with Jesus. Romero walked slowly and calmly to the chapel. He crossed the building from the south to the north, through the wide central corridor adorned with flowers and thorns, a symbol of life. Then he entered the chapel. The silence of a sacred place like that invites us to make the best decisions of our life.

About an hour later, in the same corridor, Romero approached me. His face had a look of serenity and peace; he had a smile on his lips. He told me, "tomorrow we will all be in the cathedral, and we will all celebrate the Eucharist together."

This was the breaking with the past. His decision forced him to define his own identity, to accept his destiny as pastor, as the person directly responsible for the heritage of rebellion in the Salvadoran Church.

Late in the night of March 19th, Romero wanted to revise the introduction that I had made for the celebration of the liturgy. He invited me to go to Father Jesús Delgado's house, who he held in high esteem for his theological knowledge. Jesús was a professor at the UCA, the Jesuit University. We had foreseen that the following day parishioners would be arriving a few at a time from all of the parishes of the archdiocese and other dioceses before the mass would begin. Therefore, we wanted to take advantage of this opportunity before the mass to educate the people in issues that affected the country, to denounce oppression, and demand respect. Through loudspeakers, we would prepare the faithful - spiritually and politically - as they filled Barrios plaza in front of the Cathedral for the event.

In the introduction I had prepared, it was easy to prophetically denounce the assassination of Rutilio and his two companions, and to point out the intellectual authors. It was enough to quote from the Bible, the Vatican, the Medellín documents, letters from the bishops, and pronouncements made by the extreme right in the newspapers. Romero began proofreading the

text slowly. At that moment he seemed like a tailor: cutting here and there. The forty-minute introduction was reduced to twenty. He feared hurting someone, causing problems, and above all, he wanted to guarantee that the celebration remained under his control.

We slept very little that night before the celebration. Romero went to bed exhausted. The next day, March 20th, we all went to the cathedral. It was Sunday. We found a sea of people in front of us; the plaza had filled up little by little. People came from everywhere; they did not care about the state of emergency that the government had declared a few days before.

We began with the introduction to the mass, but Monsignor Romero quickly interrupted. He put on the celebratory vestments and, without giving the seminarians or me time to finish, he began with the invocation: "In the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Many things have been done in the Church and my country beginning with the invocation of the Trinity, but very few have had such a repercussion or affirmed love between us. In fact, the invocation has been used many times to bless tools of death, guns, which have murdered 80,000 people in my country. In the name of God, one can even be anti-communist.

When Monsignor Romero began the celebration he was sweaty, pale, and nervous. Once the readings had ended, he took his staff and began his sermon. He was an elegant preacher, known among the clergy for his talent. He had a good command of the language. His sermon began slowly, heavily. It sought the rhythm of the words. He looked tired and without the desire to face the challenge of the crowd standing in front of him.

It was not easy to make the jump from a generous man to prophet. The prophet is like the people's soul: he or she knows their pain and anguish, and carries to everyone the hope of Jesus' death and resurrection. The people asked that of him.

Little by little, he let the people's spirit carry him. He began denouncing sin, the structures of sin, crime, and then, moved by the Spirit of God, announcing the Kingdom. It was the moment of his confirmation. Invaded by that Spirit he became a prophet forever. He accepted something more than martyrdom. In that moment, he began living the pain and hope of El Salvador. The widow's lament, the bread the orphan begs, the liberty the young seek, and the nation's struggle became his. He gave the transcendence that comes through the Kingdom. I believe that Monsignor Romero converted during that sermon in front of what is most sacred in a nation, its people.

Pastor, prophet, and people

With the celebration of the Eucharist with the community, Romero became the pastor-prophet. Children, teenagers, women, widows, workers, students, teachers, professionals, oligarchs, clergy, and priests sought him out. He was the man of the Word, of silence for listening, of giving consolation. He was a man who would help find a solution to a conflict, who could inspire.

Simultaneously, a campaign began against him. Those who had pressured the authorities for Romero's nomination as Archbishop felt betrayed -- including more than one bishop. They tried flattering him, manipulating to isolate him from the people, and making him assume the lifestyle of the rich and powerful in order to remove him from the Seminary and his simple room there.

For example, early in the morning in April of 1977 a middle-upper-class woman wanted to speak with the Archbishop. But he was busy and had to go to his office to meet with some *campesinos* who had come to tell him about their situation in northern Chalatenango. He preferred to be with the poor. So, Romero came up to me and told me: "Speak with this woman. I should see to this group of *campesinos* that are waiting for me; they've come from far away and need me." I listened to the woman, who was the mother of an old friend of mine. She was sorry that she could not speak with him, and told me that she had an important message for him. She told me that a group of friends had met and decided to find him a home dignified of his position: a mansion. Don Rafael Meza Ayau, the owner of the beer monopoly, was offering a furnished residence in the Escalón neighborhood dignified enough for him. At lunch I told Romero about the offer and he replied, "They want to separate me from the people." He paused and added, "After all, what is a bishop's dignity? What does it consist of?"

I would say that his first reaction after the mass on March 20th was to immerse himself in the people, feel their presence in a new and deeper way, bathe himself in their lives, to drink their words and deeds. It is as if he went through a new baptism.

During the week he listened to the concerns that the people brought him. On Sundays and even some weekdays, he communicated his fellowship with them through mass, particularly the homily which was transmitted by radio so the whole nation could hear it. People in the city and countryside listened to him. His words even echoed in the oligarchs' homes, who listened to him either with rage or happiness, depending on their ideological position.

I believe that the radio transmitter brought about the first cultural revolution in third world countries. Certainly, that is what happened in El Salvador. I have seen families that live in flimsy homes, consisting of nothing but a roof, who have a radio hanging from a post that they play at full blast for hours. I have seen *campesinos* riding their poor little horses with a transistor radio hanging from the saddle. They have no money for food, but they do for batteries. Their world thirsts for music, words, and news.

Monsignor Romero, who often visited their villages, knew about this part of their world, and knew how to put it to good use. At night, during the week, he dedicated fifteen minutes of his time to giving a small message via radio. For many, he was their only contact with the outside world; their way of knowing what happened in the country.

I remember the first nights of his ministry as Archbishop that he would discuss his message with Father Gregorio Rosa Chávez (now auxiliary bishop of San Salvador) or me. He had so much to say! He knew that, in order to respect the people, his message would have to be presented pedagogically. Thus, little by little, the masses' consciousness would grow.

Their consciousness did grow during his three years as archbishop. It became more critical every day they faced the reality of their lives and the structures of power. This consciousness sought to organize itself in a thousand ways, often through Christian Base Communities. With Romero, the Christian Base Communities grew horizontally and vertically.

A deep and close relationship developed between Archbishop Romero and his people. One can see this in the letters that he received -- letters from the people to their pastor. In the Church, we are accustomed to and interested in reading the letters from the Pope to the faithful and from the bishops to their flock. We discovered that there is a theology fed by the Spirit, of a very ministerial character, in the letters from the people to their bishop. Monsignor Romero read them. It was the communion of the pastor with his sheep, the communion of the saints. They were letters written by hands accustomed to the machete or washing by the side of the river. They came from women and men of the fields, workers living in the slums, from the middle class. The letters spoke of their struggles, their hopes; their faith in Romero inspired him to continue and sustained his faith. They were valuable in that respect, because you also have to support bishops' faith and hope. A bishop without hope is not a bishop; he is just an employee of the church with a hierarchical title, nothing else.

Someone wrote to him, "I always listen to radio station YSAX and my faith grows daily because I had never felt before that the Church was so close to us, the poor people." A group added, "Bishop, we want to let you know that your sermons and homilies move us to keep going stronger and with more enthusiasm in the struggle to build justice, beginning with ourselves." Some letters noted the unity of the pastor and his church: "We, the Christian community, committed to Jesus Christ, are one with you and are very happy to have a pastor and prophet in our times."

From these people, Romero learned the language which gave life to his words. At times, seeking a better way to explain the corrupt administration of justice in the country, he could find no more elegant way than a phrase he had learned from a *campesino*: "The law is like a serpent, it only bites the barefoot."

Messenger of life for the youth

For many post-Vatican II bishops and pastors, the lack of new people entering the priesthood and religious life in general has been a big headache. Many seminaries have had to close. Youths have neglected to follow a life that only offers privation, submerged in senseless bureaucracy, of challenges that produce very little. The identity of the priest, as a priest and as pastor, has not always been clear. Monsignor Romero gave it new life for many youths. Reality and his prophetic vision attracted them. They went to him to talk and found in him a source of inspiration, someone who they could follow. The seminary, which had been empty when he became archbishop filled so much that they had to turn many youths away because they would not fit. Romero was a messenger of life, and this filled them.

The popular organizations and violence

From the beginning of his ministry in San Salvador, Romero worried about the conflict between the people's right to organize and violence. He dedicated his third pastoral letter to this theme. It was the fruit of a dialogue with priests, political leaders, workers, *campesinos*, teachers, and other groups in Salvadoran society. Monsignor Arturo Rivera Damas, Bishop of Santiago de María (and later Archbishop of San Salvador), wrote the letter jointly with him. They wrote: "The situation in our country and the continual interrogation of our Christians, especially the *campesinos*, drives us to urgently draw attention to these two problems as much as we can: those of the so-called "popular organizations" which could receive better descriptions more in accord with their nature and objectives; and the problem of the violence which every day requires the distinctions and classifications of a prudent Christian moral." The bishops found that "popular organizations" proliferated. No doubt, the presence of the prophetic word in El Salvador had created the need for the people to organize themselves to create just solutions to society's problems.

The right to organize had been denied. While "the economically powerful minorities could organize in defense of their minority interests, workers, *campesinos*, and teachers find only difficulty and even repression. Even worse, they get them to fight against one another, especially among the *campesinos*." The bishops noted how in El Salvador "that which has forced them to organize is not simply the civic right to participate in economic and political development of the country, but rather the simple vital necessity to survive, to exercise their rights, so that their life conditions can be at least tolerable." The common people want to avoid remaining at the margin of life. Romero and Rivera defended life itself, above all the life of the weak. For the same reasons, they denounced violence. Their denouncement of violence and affirmation of life is that which definitively carried Monsignor Romero to his death. Remember his famous talk given in the cathedral on March 23rd, 1980, one day before his death.

I would like to make a special call to the men of the army, particularly those in the National Guard, the police, and in the barracks. Brothers! You are of our people. You kill your *campesino* brothers. When faced with an order to kill from a man, God's law should prevail which says: do not kill! No soldier is obliged to obey an order against God's law. No one has to fulfill an immoral law. The time has come for you to regain your consciences and for you to obey your consciences before a sinful order. The Church, the defender of God's rights, God's Law, and human dignity, cannot remain quiet before such an abomination. We want the government to truly understand that the reforms are worthless if they are stained with so much blood.

In the name of God, then, and in the name of this suffering people, whose cries reach more loudly to heaven every day, I appeal to you, I beg you, I order you, in God's name, to cease the repression, to not obey if they order you to kill!

Monsignor Romero understood the value of a human life, which he himself lost. The first days of 1980 I had a short conversation with him in the Hospital of the Divine Providence. He told me about the threats that he received every day, that he could possibly fall, that he could give his life for the people. As he spoke, his face showed his anguish and sadness. It is not easy to face the consequences of being a prophet. Jesus himself felt fear on the Mount of Olives.

He gave his life for his people on March 24th. Some of the last words of his sermon that day were the following: "The Kingdom is now mysteriously present in our land; when the Lord comes, his perfection will be consummated." After finishing his sermon, he raised the bread and chalice to make the offering. In that moment a bullet struck his heart. His body and his blood, the bread and wine, converted themselves in that instant into one single offering to the Father. It was an offering of passion and of death which will know full life when the people of El Salvador and Central America find themselves free from injustice and live in peace. At that time Monsignor Romero will be resurrected. His resurrection is anticipated in time and in space, it is an eschatological resurrection because it bears the stamp: the alliance that the Archbishop made with the people and with our God.

This offering will have to pass alongside many offerings of lives, by the blood of our brave diocesan priests, the blood of the Jesuits massacred on November 16, 1989, the blood of more than 80,000 Salvadorans murdered for their faith in love. After all of these offerings there will be justice, there will be peace. Men and women, boys and girls of good will on Earth should work together so that this peace matures through hope, in faith, so that it produces the sweet fruit of love.

From one Eucharist to another, from March 20, 1977 to March 24, 1980, the Monsignor became an act of grace that symbolizes for our people the living flame that justifies the struggle of Christians and non-Christians for a better world. In that way, Romero lived in constant liturgical action, illuminated by his word as a prophet through his attitude of generosity. It that way he became the manifestation of the Glory of God among us to live, in death, in the memory of the people and in the Glory of our Father.

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