

Dear Friends of Oscar Romero

Gustavo Gutierrez, the great Latin American theologian, once said that if Jesus Christ, the Word Made Flesh, was the homily of God the Father; then Archbishop Romero could be described as the homily of Jesus, his Son, whom he followed so faithfully and so courageously.

I would add that the late Mgr Ricardo Urioste, and Dr Maria Julia Hernandez, both of happy memory, alongside don Gregorio, our Cardinal Rosa Chavez, here with us today, and together with Romero's devoted Postulator, Mgr Rafael Urrutia, and my very good friend, the Jesuit Jon Sobrino, should, each one, be described in a similar fashion, as the homily and echo of this great contemporary Saint, Oscar Romero. They have doggedly communicated Romero's ministry and martyrdom, his words and his legacy, to the Church and to the world over 38 long and difficult years. Romero-phobia had the upper hand for a very long time. It is appropriate therefore that at Romero's sanctification here in Rome, we pay tribute to them. We owe them a colossal debt of gratitude.

From 1977 onwards, Romero as archbishop became known as the voice of the voiceless poor. He wanted the Church to articulate the suffering and the desperation, the hunger for bread and the thirst for justice of so many of his people who had no voice. Therefore, week in week out, after prayerful contemplation, with phenomenal discernment, with pastoral wisdom, and above all with apostolic courage, this self-effacing bishop, this instrument of God, spoke the unvarnished truth in a land of cover-up and lies.

There was no 'spin', no exaggeration, no populism, no hidden agenda. His words of truth were authentic Christian social communication. And in speaking that truth with integrity from the pulpit, from his cathedra, via his radio station and his newspaper, he gave hope to his people. It earned him enormous credibility as a witness for the whole world, through the international media, a witness to the oppression and violence being experienced by his people and being documented by the diocese.

With massacres and disappearances, with six priests and dozens of lay catechists assassinated, churches occupied as military barracks, and tabernacles smashed he was led to describe his Catholic country, El Salvador, named after Christ the Saviour, as 'resembling the dominion of hell'.

That is why they killed him: because he spoke the unblemished truth, disregarding threats to his life from both the right and the left. It is important to remember that paradoxically Oscar Romero was killed 'in odium fidei' - out of hatred of the faith - by self-declared Catholics. He is a martyr to the option for the poor, a martyr to the whole Magisterium of the Church; but in a very special way he is a martyr to authentic social communications in the Church; and a worthy and keenly appropriate Patron Saint for SIGNIS.

Throughout his priestly life Romero embraced a frugal and simple life-style; he was close to the people; he was a prayerful and a cultured man with a wonderful capacity to write and to use the microphone - and with a spectacular talent as a preacher.

He was not technically-speaking a journalist. But he was a great communicator which was evident even from his colourful letters home in the 1930s from the Pio Latino seminary in Rome. He became Director of three separate Church newspapers. First in San Miguel where from 1945 to 1967 he was in charge of 'El Chaparrastique', the

diocesan paper; then in San Salvador he was made Editor of 'Orientacion' the archdiocesan weekly, and in Santiago de Maria, as Bishop he founded 'El Apostol' as the diocesan paper. He was a true believer in the church media as the 'Voice of the Church' communicating and elucidating the doctrine and practices of the Church, conveying news from the Church, and fostering popular religiosity. And indeed, he removed those columnists who wanted to tackle the great social issues of the countryside!

But as he became archbishop, his approach to the church media was transformed, matching his new understanding of evangelisation, gleaned from Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, and reflecting his changed personal approach to spirituality. Romero's spirituality gradually evolved away from one which saw holiness equated with perfection and rigid observance of spiritual and ascetic practices - to a dynamic, faithful and prayerful searching for what God was really asking of him; and he gradually began to identify the God of Jesus who lived in the suffering people of El Salvador. With the circumstances he found in the archdiocese in 1977, and his decision to look at things as Jesus of Nazareth would, he put his great capacity to use the means of communication at the service of his pastoral mission.

Archbishop Romero provoked ferocious opposition from the traditional media owned by, and at the service of, the privileged economic sectors. It was, on the one side, a pastor determined to anchor the Word of God in the reality that his people were living, up against, on the other side, a social group who had abandoned their faith in Jesus Christ and their duty to give true news - and instead defended unjust privilege. The perverse irony was that the one who rejected violence - either to maintain or to overturn structures of injustice - was labelled as the source of conflict.

The episode of the single Mass (the Misa Unica), in March 1977, in response to Rutilio Grande's killing, provoked the anger of the wealthy classes and they turned completely against the one they had imagined was their 'little subservient bishop'. But this prophetic action of Romero, like his subsequent boycott of the presidential inauguration, was highly effective social communication. The statement he was making was that the national communion had been ruptured in the death squad killing of a priest - and, to restore communion, impunity to the crime must be lifted.

Romero became the moral compass of the nation - and for the international press the 'arbitrator' of national life. He had won their trust. I prepared Archbishop Romero for his press conference with the international media at Puebla, Mexico, in 1979. He was very nervous beforehand, but he acquitted himself brilliantly and was given an ovation by the packed media hall - who in that way reinforced his commitment.

At home, the oligarchic press cut Romero's news, his declarations and his actions out of their columns; and almost all reference to the Church was tendentious reporting, filled with slander. They insulted Romero mercilessly and vilified him with hateful articles, labelling him a communist, a guerrilla fighter, a puppet and an agent of Satan. The traditional media became an ethics-free zone, a no-go area for morality. You may think 'fake news' is a phenomenon of the Trump era. But it was there, already alive and well, in the 1970s Salvadoran media. 'Ghost' organisations, fictional Catholic groups, placed adverts attacking Romero's orthodoxy and his ministry. The dialogue between the archbishop and the press was constant and intense. Romero used harsh words, which you can read in his homilies, - in this 'servile and misleading press', he said, there were 'tongues fed with lies' and 'pens for sale'. The most shocking and disgusting of all the

manifestations of hatred appeared on the pre-Twitter social media - in the form of car bumper stickers (calcomanias) - with the message 'Be a Patriot: Kill a Priest'.

It is possible to argue that the traditional Salvadoran media were an accessory to Romero's assassination by creating the conditions, in the frenzied atmosphere leading to civil war, where such a magnicide became conceivable and do-able - and in the end we know that it was celebrated with fireworks and champagne in the wealthy barrios of the capital city.

The Christian communities in Latin America immediately canonised Romero in their hearts, as San Romero de America. But, as don Gregorio has reminded us, he is now to become San Romero del Mundo. He is to be canonised here on Sunday as a Saint of the universal Church, a model of a Christian and a bishop, the option for the poor incarnate. His words and his deeds, his homilies and his social communications, crowned by his martyrdom, are already inspiring the Church across the globe.

His sometimes-disturbing words are a real challenge to bishops, priests and layfolk alike. It is a challenge to strive for holiness and, in so doing, to ask God, through the intercession of Oscar Romero, to be granted the necessary apostolic courage, to listen intently to the poor, to seek justice for the excluded in our midst, and to speak the truth of their plight faithfully - even when we are criticised and insulted as naïve and ignorant do-gooders. Romero said: "We would be false to our mission as shepherds, if we were to reduce evangelisation to mere practices of piety and disincarnate sacramentalism". I believe Pope Francis is saying much the same.

The challenge to the Christian media now is to avoid the temptation to present to the Church a decaffeinated Romero, a milk and water saint, a charismatic prayerful guy who got hit by a bullet from a crazy gunman whilst celebrating Mass!

No, Archbishop Romero was killed in a deliberate planned attempt to silence the voice of truth in a society fed on a diet of distortions and lies. The voice of the voiceless was assassinated at the altar. He was in the end executed like Jesus of Nazareth. So please tell the story like it really was.

The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. San Oscar Romero – Presente!

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