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Romero's resurrection

John Dear | Mar. 16, 2010 On the Road to Peace

"I have often been threatened with death," Archbishop Oscar Romero told a Guatemalan reporter two weeks before his assassination, 30 years ago on March 24, 1980. "If they kill me, I shall arise in the Salvadoran people. If the threats come to be fulfilled, from this moment I offer my blood to God for the redemption and resurrection of El Salvador. Let my blood be a seed of freedom and the sign that hope will soon be reality."

Oscar Romero gave his life in the hope that peace and justice would one day become a reality. He lives on now in all those who carry on the nonviolent struggle for justice and peace. A beautiful new photo book and biography, *Oscar Romero and the Communion of Saints*, by Scott Wright, shows us what a holy life he lived, and just how much he gave.

Romero spent his years up until 1977 as a typical quiet, pious, conservative cleric. Indeed, as bishop, he sided with the greedy landlords, important power brokers, and violent death squads. When he became archbishop, the Jesuits at the Univeristy of Central America in San Salvador were crushed. They immediately wrote him off -- all but one, Rutilio Grande, who reached out to Romero in the weeks after his installation and urged him to learn from the poor and speak on their behalf.

Grande himself was a giant for social justice. He organized the rural poor in Aguilares, and paid for it with his life on March 12, 1977. Standing over Grande's dead body that night, Romero was transformed into one of the world's great champions for the poor and oppressed. From then on, he stood with the poor, and denounced every act of violence, injustice and war. He became a fiery prophet of justice and peace, "the voice of the voiceless," and in Jon Sobrino's words, "a new Jeremiah." For me, Romero was a stunning sign of God's active presence in the world, a living symbol of the struggle for justice and what the church could be.

The day after Grande's death, Romero preached a sermon that stunned El Salvador. With the force of Martin Luther King, Jr., Romero defended Grande, demanded social and economic justice for the poor, and called everyone to take up Grande's prophetic work. To protest the government's participation in the murders, Romero closed the parish school for three days and cancelled all Masses in the country the following week, except for one special Mass in the cathedral.

That act alone would have put Romero in the annals of history. Imagine if every Mass in the United States but one had been canceled in protest after the death of Dr. King! Over a hundred thousand people attended the cathedral Mass that Sunday and heard Romero's bold call for justice, disarmament and peace. Grande's life and

death bore good fruit in the heart and soul of Romero. Suddenly, the nation had a towering figure in its midst.

Within months, priests, catechists and church workers were regularly targeted and assassinated, so Romero spoke out even more forcefully. He even criticized the president, which no Salvadoran bishop had ever done before, and few in the hemisphere ever did. As the U.S.-backed government death squads attacked villages and churches and massacred campesinos, Romero's truth-telling became a veritable subversive campaign of nonviolent civil disobedience.

Soon Romero was greeted with applause everywhere he went. Thousands wrote to him regularly, telling their stories, thanking him for his prophetic voice and sharing their new found courage. His Sunday homilies were broadcast nationwide on live radio. The country came to a standstill as he spoke. Everyone listened, even the death squads.

As Romero's stature grew and his leadership for justice and peace deepened, his simple faith and pious devotion remained steady, and gave him a foundation from which he could take on the forces of death. To protest the government's silence in the face of recent massacres, he refused to attend the inauguration of the new Salvadoran president. The church, he announced, is "not to be measured by the government's support but rather by its own authenticity, its evangelical spirit of prayer, trust, sincerity and justice, its opposition to abuses." While he embodied the prophetic role of the church, he also modeled that spirit of prayer, trust and sincerity in his everyday life.

As the arrests, torture, disappearances and murders continued, Romero made two radical decisions that were unprecedented. First, on Easter Monday 1978, he opened the seminary in downtown San Salvador to welcome any and all displaced victims of violence. Hundreds of homeless, hungry and brutalized people moved into the seminary, transforming the quiet religious retreat into a crowded, noisy shelter, make-shift hospital, and playground. (I remember helping out there for a few days in 1985, and trying to imagine what a similar Gospel action would look like in the United States. We have never experienced such an action by our church leaders.)

Next, he halted construction on the new cathedral in San Salvador. When the war is over, the hungry are fed, and the children are educated, then we can resume building our cathedral, he said. Both historic moves stunned the other bishops, cast judgment on the Salvadoran government, and lifted the peoples' spirits.

Meanwhile, Romero's preaching reached biblical heights. "Like a voice crying in the desert," he said, "we must continually say No to violence and Yes to peace." His August 1978 pastoral letter outlined the evils of "institutional violence" and repression, and advocated "the power of nonviolence that today has conspicuous students and followers." He wrote: "The counsel of the Gospel to turn the other cheek to an unjust aggressor, far from being passive or cowardly, shows great moral force that leaves the aggressor morally overcome and humiliated. The Christian always prefers peace to war."

Romero lived in a sparse, three-room hermitage on the grounds of a hospital run by a community of nuns. During his busy days, he traveled the country, met with hundreds of poor Salvadorans, presided at Mass, and met with local community leaders. He assisted everyone he could. Later, he said that one of his primary duties as archbishop had become not just challenging the U.S.-backed government and its death squads, but claiming the dead bodies of their victims, including priests, nuns and catechists.

On one of my visits, a Salvadoran told me how Romero would drive out to city garbage dumps to look among the trash for the discarded, tortured victims of the death squads on behalf of grieving relatives. "These days I walk the roads gathering up dead friends, listening to widows and orphans, and trying to spread hope," he said.

In particular, Romero took time every day to speak with dozens of people threatened by government death squads. People lined up at his office to ask for help and protection, to complain about harassment and death

threats, and to find some support and guidance in their time of grief and struggle. Romero received and listened to everyone. His compassionate ear fueled his prophetic voice.

By late 1979 and early 1980, his Sunday sermons issued his strongest calls yet for conversion to justice and an end to the massacres. "To those who bear in their hands or in their conscience, the burden of bloodshed, of outrages, of the victimized, innocent or guilty, but still victimized in their human dignity, I say: Be converted. You cannot find God on the path of torture. God is found on the way of justice, conversion and truth."

When President Jimmy Carter announced in February 1980 that he was going to increase U.S. military aid to El Salvador by millions of dollars a day, Romero was shocked. He wrote a long public letter to Carter, asking the United States to cancel all military aid. Carter ignored Romero's plea, and sent the aid. (Between 1980 and 1992, the U.S. spent $6 billion to kill 75,000 poor Salvadorans.)

In the weeks afterwards, the killings increased. So did the death threats against Romero. He made a private retreat, prepared for his death, discovered an even deeper peace, and mounted the pulpit. During his March 23, 1980, Sunday sermon, Romero let loose and issued one of the greatest appeals for peace and disarmament in church history:

> "I would like to make an appeal in a special way to the men of the army, to the police, to those in the barracks. 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 that says: Thou shalt not kill! No soldier is obliged to obey an order against the law of God. No one has to fulfill an immoral law. It is time to recover your consciences and to obey your consciences rather than the orders of sin. The church, defender of the rights of God, of the law of God, of human dignity, the dignity of the person, cannot remain silent before such abomination. We want the government to take seriously that reforms are worth nothing when they come about stained with so much blood. In the name of God, and in the name of this suffering people whose laments rise to heaven each day more tumultuously, I beg you, I ask you, I order you in the name of God: Stop the repression!"

The next day, March 24, 1980, Romero presided over a small evening Mass in the chapel of the hospital compound where he lived, in honor of a beloved woman who had died a year before. He read from John's Gospel: "Unless the grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains only a grain. But if it dies, it bears much fruit "(12:23-26). Then he preached about the need to give our lives for others as Christ did. Just as he concluded, he was shot in the heart by a man standing in the back of the church. He fell behind the altar and collapsed at the foot of a huge crucifix depicting a bloody and bruised Christ. Romero's vestments, and the floor around him, were covered in blood. He gasped for breath and died in minutes.

I remember exactly where I was when I heard the news -- in my fraternity room at Duke University. I had just turned on the TV to watch the evening news. Only the month before, I had decided to apply to the Jesuits, to try to spend my life following Jesus. The shocking report of the death of this brave archbishop stunned me, inspired me and encouraged me to go through with my decision. Later that night, a peace vigil and prayer service was held on campus. My friend Paul Farmer, living next door to me, marks his conversion from that event. (Farmer would become a doctor and teacher at Harvard University and founder of Partners In Health, an international health and social justice organization.) Both of us were touched and changed by Romero's gift.

Romero's funeral became the largest demonstration in Salvadoran history, some say in the history of Latin America. The government was so afraid of the grieving people that they threw bombs into the crowd and opened fire, killing some 30 people and injuring hundreds more. The Mass of Resurrection was never completed and Romero was hastily buried.

Just recently, I learned from one of his biographies that Pope John Paul II had decided to remove Romero as Archbishop of San Salvador. In fact, he signed the removal order on the morning of March 24. In some ways, I'm grateful that Romero never lived to hear that dreadful news. His martyrdom became a spiritual explosion that continues to transform the church and the world.

Today, we remember Oscar Romero as a saint and a martyr, as a champion of the poor and prophet of justice. He calls us to live in solidarity with the poor and oppressed, to think with them, feel with them, walk with them, listen to them, serve them, stand with them, become one with them, and even die with them. In that preferential solidarity, he summons us to carry on his prophetic pursuit of justice and disarmament.

Thirty years later, as the wars and poverty continue, Romero's conversion, death and resurrection push us to a deeper conversion on behalf of the world's poor, especially to side with the latest victims of U.S. warmaking. His prophetic example challenges us to speak out as never before, and so to denounce Obama's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; our assassination training camps and execution chambers; our prisons and torture centers, such as Guantanamo; our corporate greed and unjust system; and our lack of funding for food, clothing, education, jobs, housing and true universal healthcare. Romero named war and poverty as sinful, idolatrous, and demonic; we need to do the same with the same faith, force and determination.

During one of the first anniversaries of Romero's death, Salvadorans distributed posters with a black and white photo of Romero and a caption that read, "We Want More Bishops Like Romero!" I sure wish we had more bishops and priests like Romero today. We certainly have one -- our own hero, Bishop Thomas Gumbleton. But I think Romero sets a new standard, which should be heralded and taught around the world. Not only should he be canonized and widely honored, he should be studied and taught as the model priest and bishop, the model Catholic and Christian.

I know we cannot wait for that day to come, for the conversion of others. We need to be converted ourselves and carry on Romero's prophetic work. That's the best way to remember St. Oscar Romero -- to do what we can, serve those in need, advocate for justice, speak up for peace, and follow the nonviolent Jesus. In that way, Romero rises in us, Christ rises in us, God's reign is welcomed and our resurrection is assured.

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John's booklet, "Oscar Romero and the Nonviolent Struggle for Justice" is available from www.paxchristiusa.org. To contribute to Catholic Relief Services' "Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund," go to: http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn. John will lead a retreat, "The Gospel According to John," April 30-May 2, near Stroudsburg, PA, see www.kirkridge.org; and"Gandhi, King, Day and Merton," at Ghost Ranch Center, Abiquiu, NM, see www.ghostranch.org. John's latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), along with other recent books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down Your Sword*, as well as Patricia Normile's *John Dear On Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com. For further information, or to schedule a lecture, go to www.johndear.org.

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