

March 19th “I Dream of a Church: Christ’s Representatives”

(Peaceworks Speaker):

Archbishop Oscar Romero

Óscar Romero (1917-1980) was a prominent Roman Catholic priest in El Salvador during the 1960s and 1970s, becoming Archbishop of San Salvador in 1977. After witnessing numerous violations of human rights he began to speak out on behalf of the poor and the victims of repression. Increasing government violence against socially committed priests and laypersons undermined his trust in the authorities. The assassination, of his long-time friend and activist Father Rutilio Grande brought a stinging denunciation from Romero and serving as a catalyst for his work and leading to conflicts, both with the government in El Salvador and within the Catholic Church.

Throughout his human rights work Romero denounced both the violence of El Salvador's incipient civil war and the deeply-rooted patterns of abuse and injustice which bred it, using the moral authority of his position as archbishop to speak out on behalf of those who could not do so for themselves for fear of violence.

In 1980, Romero called for soldiers to disobey orders to fire on innocent civilians and wrote an open letter to U.S president Jimmy Carter, speaking out against U.S. military support for the government of El Salvador. Soon after, on March 24th, 1980, Romero was assassinated through the open door of a chapel, while leading service and serving Communion. It is believed that those who organised his assassination were members of Salvadoran death squads, including members of the Salvadoran government's military and two graduates of the School of the Americas.

Foreseeing the danger of assassination, the archbishop spoke of it often, declaring his willingness to accept martyrdom if his blood might contribute to the solution of the nation's problems. "As a Christian," he remarked on one such occasion, "I do not believe in death without resurrection. If they kill me, I shall rise again in the Salvadoran people."

Romero is in the process of receiving sainthood in the Catholic Church and is already viewed by many in El Salvador as a saint.

Sections from Oscar Romero's *The Violence of Love*

“Peace is not the product of terror or fear.
Peace is not the silence of cemeteries.
Peace is not the silent result of violent repression.
Peace is the generous, tranquil contribution of all to the good of all.
Peace is dynamism.
Peace is generosity.
It is right and it is duty.

Liberation that raises a cry against others is no true liberation. Liberation that means revolutions of hate and violence and takes away lives of others or debases the dignity of others cannot be true liberty. . .

We [as a Church] have never preached violence, except the violence of love, which left Christ nailed to a cross, the violence that we must each do to ourselves to overcome our selfishness and such cruel inequalities among us. . .

When we struggle for human rights, for freedom, for dignity, when we feel that it is a ministry of the Church to concern itself for those who are hungry, for those who have no schools, for those who are deprived, we are not departing from God's promise. He comes to free us from sin, and the Church knows that sin's consequences are all such injustices and abuses. . .

For the Church, the many abuses of human life, liberty, and dignity are a heartfelt suffering. The Church, entrusted with the earth's glory, believes that in each person is the Creator's image and that everyone who tramples it offends God. As holy defender of God's rights and God's images, the Church must cry out. It takes as spittle in its face, as lashes on its back, as the cross in its passion, all that human beings suffer. For they suffer as God's images. . .Whoever tortures a human being, whoever abuses a human being, whoever outrages a human being abuses God's image, and the Church takes as its own that cross, that martyrdom.”

— Oscar A. Romero, *The Violence of Love*