

"Aportes de Oscar Romero"

ARCHBISHOP OSCAR ROMERO – A PERSONAL REFLECTION

Last year I sat one day in a shack made of pieces of wood, rusted zinc, and cardboard. It was terribly hot, and the zinc ceiling was a few centimetres above my head. In a few minutes the perspiration was running off me. All around me were more than 5000 similar shacks – just one of many shack settlements in the diocese where I minister in South Africa. It is in places like this that the poorest of the poor try to survive, but so many die in misery.

In that shack, on a bench in front of me sat a young, single mother, Agnes; next to her a little baby, her only child. Both of them were dying of AIDS. The perspiration ran down her face – she was so sick. There was nothing to eat or drink. Her eyes looked at me. I saw what I have seen so often in the diocese where I have worked for many years – the look of fear, and even more the look of despair. The woman said to me: "Father, there is no hope; Father I have no hope". And the tears ran down her face and mine as she looked at her dying baby.

She was right. In a relatively developed country like South Africa, there are more than 8 million people who live like this in shacks in appalling misery; more than 22 million of our people who try to survive on less than 1 dollar a day. And there is no hope yet because it is the social, cultural, economic, religious and political systems of this world that condemn a mother like Agnes to an awful death in poverty and sickness.

As I looked into the eyes of this young mother – she died within a few weeks – I knew that the wonderful women with whom I work in that settlement would care for her and her baby. Now I have a hospice where we bring the most vulnerable and poor who are ill with AIDS so that they can die in peace and dignity, knowing that God loves and cares for them because our carers and nurses reveal the love of God to them. But that is not enough because there is a pain in my spirit as I contemplate this reality.

As I looked into the eyes of that young mother, I asked myself again the many questions which I carry in my heart. I think of our Church, and more so the leaders of our Church - what message, what word do we actually share with these "little ones" of our societies – here in Central America, where I am in Africa, wherever there is misery, poverty, sickness and hopelessness in our world? Is our word, is the message of the Church truly experienced by the poor as a word of hope, a word of liberation, a word which challenges the reality which the poor feel so deeply? Does our word reveal the word of God, that God's promise of true life, of a liberation that frees us to live in dignity, will indeed happen for the poor?

Even more – how is the Church and her official teaching and practice experienced today by the poor of our world? What kind of community is the Church today for the poor of the world? Where are the prophets in the Church today who analyse the oppressive systems of the modern world from the perspective of the Gospel and the poor, and fearlessly stand with the poor in the quest to transform a world that becomes more and more unjust, a world where the gap between rich and poor grows steadily greater? Are we a Church which rejects all forms of power and control, a Church which forms real community with the vulnerable, the oppressed, and the hopeless of our world today? Do we, the Church, turn the look of despair in the eyes of the poor into eyes which are wide with peace, hope and indeed expectation of a better future?

A prophetic voice once called out 25 years ago: "The poor masses of our land find in the church the voice of Israel's prophets. There are among us those who sell the just for money and the poor for a pair of sandals, as the prophets said. There are those who pile up spoils and plunder in their palaces, who crush the poor, who bring on a reign of violence while reclining on beds of ivory, who join house to house and field to field so as to take up all there is and remain alone in the land (cf. Amos 6: 3-4; Isaiah 5: 8).

These texts of the prophets are not distant voices that we read with reverence in our liturgy. They are daily realities, whose cruelty and vehemence we live each day.

And therefore.....the church suffers the fate of the poor, which is persecution. Our church glories that it has mingled the blood of its priests, its catechists, and its communities with that of the massacred people

and has continually born the mark of persecution. Because it disquiets, it is slandered, and its voice crying against injustice is disregarded.

The church's good name is not a matter of being on good terms with the powerful. The church's good name is a matter of knowing that the poor regard the church as their own, of knowing that the church's life on earth is to call on all, on the rich as well, to be converted and to be saved alongside the poor, for they are the only ones called blessed."

Monsignor Oscar Romero spoke thus on 17 February, 1980 - 25 years ago.

I truly believe that his word, his challenge is as relevant for me and for us today as it was in 1980 for the people and the church of El Salvador. His word is a challenge to me personally to seek what God is calling me to reflect on today as we remember and celebrate with thanksgiving this great prophet among his people – Monsignor Oscar Romero. What does my brother bishop Oscar Romero and his life mean to me and to the poor of my country and the world whom God has given to me?

Oscar Romero was a spiritual leader in the context of El Salvador at that time of brutal oppression and crimes against the people. When I became a bishop in the apartheid regime in South Africa, it was Oscar Romero who inspired me to reflect on my calling as a spiritual leader in the midst of my oppressed people where I lived and ministered. He was my brother, my mentor, whose witness challenged me to take a prophetic stance (a very personal form of suffering) and to walk with the poor – even if this meant danger to my life. Because of him, I tried to see the face of Jesus in the face of my oppressed people. Just two examples. One day I led a peaceful protest march against an injustice. The army and police blocked our procession, and suddenly the command went out: "Shoot the priests". The soldiers jumped down from their armoured vehicles and opened fire on us with live ammunition and dangerous teargas projectiles. Like everyone there, I ducked and tried to avoid the fire. By the grace of God I was not hit, but two young men near me were hit with bullets. One died immediately and the other was injured. Many others, including old women, were severely beaten by the soldiers.

Some time later, one of the liberation movements – which is now the Government - asked permission to use the mission where I live for a meeting. Every weekend the trade unions, liberation movements, and the civilian movements used to meet under my protection at the mission because they were banned by the government. This time there was to be a mass meeting. A few days before the meeting, I was visited by the security police who demanded that I cancel the meeting. I refused, and kept on refusing even though they argued with me and threatened me for more than 2 hours. The day before the meeting the church where the meeting was to take place was blown up by a powerful bomb at 4 o'clock in the morning. No one was injured, fortunately. As I stood next to the severely damaged church, one of the religious of my diocese attacked me verbally in front of the people for putting the work and ministry of the religious and priests in danger by my opposition to the unjust regime which was oppressing the poor.

Yes, I experienced something (a very small part) of the loneliness and pain of my brother Oscar Romero. On the many occasions when I had to suffer danger and rejection, I felt his close presence and inspiration. In 1997 I was called by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to testify about these two incidents of injustice and oppression. I was so humbled as I sat next to women who had been brutally raped by the security police because they opposed the regime. Yes, I truly felt on that day that God had blessed me abundantly in being able to share in some small way the suffering of the poor and oppressed. So often I remembered the pilgrimage which Oscar Romero shared with the poor and oppressed of El Salvador. I thank you, dear brother of mine, Monsignor Oscar, for showing me the way to be faithful to God in the life and suffering of the poor and oppressed of my land.

But in the modern world, the challenge seems to me to be even more complex. Yes, today the global institutions like the United Nations are slowly becoming more aware that the brutalities of oppression, violence, genocide, war crimes and other atrocities cannot be tolerated in any way by the world community, and that the global community must act to protect the vulnerable ones of our societies. Today the world is slowly realising that solidarity with the poor, the suffering and oppressed must come before solidarity with corrupt and brutal political leaders.

But we have a long way to go before the poor and oppressed will truly be free to live a life which is in accordance with their dignity as those created in God's image. The genocide in Rwanda occurred just 11 years ago; the ethnic cleansing and atrocities in the Balkans are not distant memories. Even as I speak the little ones in the Darfur region in Sudan are being subjected to unspeakable crimes of rape and mass slaughter. A religious sister, Sister Dorothy, was recently assassinated in Brazil because she dared to confront the powerful ones in her solidarity with the poor. Yes all over the world, the pilgrimage of the martyrs continues as it did in El Salvador more than 25 years ago.

But there is also a much more subtle and sophisticated oppression occurring, and this oppression is in the hands of those who shape the economic systems of the world, with the backing of the multinational organisations, and with the political support of the powerful ones who control our future. This is like a huge octopus whose tentacles reach into every nation and community. It traps the poor of the world in a cycle of hopelessness as they are sacrificed on the altar of greed - the greed and desire for power of the few elites of our world. The poor are so often sacrificed to the modern-day gods - the "strategic interests" of the developed nations which determine the fate of the millions who have no chance.

I return to the woman, Agnes, in the shack. Why did she die of AIDS in unspeakable poverty and misery? This is her story. She left her own country in the central regions of Africa. She left her country because that country is so poor and because she could not find any work - she could not survive. She had heard about South Africa - perhaps there was a way out for her. So she came - an "illegal" economic refugee, and she ended up in that shack. A short distance away was a platinum mine, and a hostel for male workers. These workers had left their homes far away in other parts of South Africa or in other countries. Agnes heard about this - those miners had jobs, they had money. Perhaps she could find a way out of poverty if she came to live in that shack settlement.

But she found she was in a trap. Because she was illegal, she had no documents. She could not therefore apply for any social grant from the Government. She could not get a job because she needed an identity document, and she was illegal. She had no family, no one to help her. Sadly, she discovered that there was only one way out of the trap of poverty. She had to become a sex worker, a prostitute. She had to sell her body to the miners and others for money so that she could buy some food to survive - just for the next 24 hours. She had to do this day after day. And so, without knowing it, she was infected with the HI virus, she fell pregnant and her baby was born also HIV positive. And because they were so poor, because they could not eat properly, because they lived in squalor in shocking conditions, she and her baby were now dying.

And there are hundreds of thousands of women like Agnes among the 30 million people with AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa. These people, all of them very poor, will die - because the one thing that brings HIV positive people quickly to an awful death is poverty, hunger, and terrible living conditions. This is reality. It cannot be thought of or responded to only in terms of an *ethic of sexuality*. Faced with such a serious situation, I believe that in the Church of today we need - *much more* - an ethic of human dignity and human rights. We need an ethic of authentic life. Such suffering is a call to justice, and to prophetic action and solidarity with these "little ones" who have no options.

Why is all this happening? Because the economic systems of our world, controlled by the rich and powerful, condemn the countries of Africa, and the rest of the poorest nations on earth, to this kind of sub-human existence. Firstly, the terrible debt burdens in the poorest countries, where such countries are struggling to pay back merely the interest on their debt which exceeds the amount they can spend on health, education, and social services. Then, the totally unfair trading systems which make it impossible for poor countries to compete with the rich and developed world. Thirdly, the agricultural subsidies paid to the northern and developed farmers by their Governments, which condemn the poor farmers of the under-developed world to a hopeless quest to sell their produce on the open market.

These are the unjust economic systems which keep the poorest nations impoverished, and which lead to the corruption and maladministration which exploits the poor, which takes away any future for the poor of our world. This is subtle and sophisticated and the poor have no chance. This is a sinful system crying to heaven for redress. This is systemic sin.

And where must the Church stand in relation to all this? Our Catholic Social Teaching, which Monsignor Oscar Romero lived out with such courage and faith, calls us to see the face of Jesus in every face, but more especially in the little ones. It challenges us to prophetic action so that the common good, solidarity, and above all the primacy of the poor become a goal that is being realized, rather than an impossible dream. The present unjust globalized market forces must be changed into a globalization of solidarity, a solidarity which leads to the transformation of the oppressive social, cultural, economic and political systems which condemn the poor of the world to despair and misery. Instead all must work towards a global community of care and sharing, so that there can be a future for all – because unless a future and a life with dignity is made possible for the poor, there will soon be no future for anyone, including the rich and powerful.

What our world today needs more than ever is an ethic of justice. We have to struggle for justice without which there will be no true peace or security. We have to struggle for a justice that is infused with the spirit of compassion and solidarity, so that the poor feel the presence of the God who cries when the poor of our world cry. And until we cry each time the poor cry, we will not be filled with the anger and the passion that will drive us to struggle for justice – no matter what the cost. We clearly see this anger and passion in Jesus – and never more clearly than when he condemned the spiritual leaders of his time who placed impossible burdens on the shoulders of the people, but did they lift a finger to help them carry these burdens? “Not them,” said Jesus.

What would Jesus say to the spiritual leaders of our time? What would Jesus say to me – because I am one of the spiritual leaders of our time? That is the question I must constantly discern as I meet the poor of my world in South Africa every day and every week. My brother Oscar Romero has inspired me and shown me the way to follow, the way of Jesus. Monsignor Oscar Romero’s life, his witness shows the way that the Church and the Church leaders in particular must follow for the future. We must be a humble, listening Church. We must search for the answers to complex questions and challenges today, and not presume that we know the answers. Often, we must admit humbly that we don’t have the answers – that all we can do is reveal and share the love and compassion, indeed the passion of our God with the struggling poor and oppressed of our world. We must be a Church which rejects all forms of power and control, and especially in the internal life of the Church throughout the world. We must be a Church in which the little ones of the world feel safe, feel protected, feel understood, feel supported and loved. We must be a Church which prefers rejection rather than compromise in any way the values of the Gospel of Jesus. We must be a Church which fearlessly denounces all forms of injustice and oppression, and stands with the poor in the struggle for a way of life which accords with their dignity as people made in God’s image – even if this means that the pilgrimage of the martyrs will continue until there can be true peace and a development that is based on justice.

I salute you, my brother Oscar Romero. The poor of El Salvador rejoice in you as their brother and leader. I rejoice in you as God’s gift to me and my people in South Africa. You have shown that Jesus’ desire can and must be fulfilled, Jesus who said: “I have come so that they may have life, and life to the full” (John 10:10).

Bishop Kevin Dowling C.Ss.R
Diocese of Rustenburg, South Africa
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