

OSCAR ROMERO - HOMILY ON THE OCCASION OF HIS CANONISATION

Preached at Mass in St Anne's Cathedral - BBC Radio 4 Live Broadcast, October 14th, 2018
[Due to time constraints the sections below in italics were omitted from the broadcast]

"In the name of God, and in the name of this suffering people whose cries rise to heaven more loudly each day, I beg you, I implore you, I order you, in the name of God, stop the repression".

These are the words of Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador who will be Canonised today in Rome by Pope Francis. They concluded a sermon he preached in the Cathedral of the capital city of San Salvador on March 23rd 1980.

The words were directed at the security forces of the Government responsible for killing poor people of the country who were standing up for their human rights. The very next day, during a Mass at which he was presiding in the nearby chapel of the Divine Providence Hospital, Archbishop Romero was himself assassinated by an agent of the regime,

Thousands came to his funeral at which the army fired into the crowd killing thirty of the mourners and injuring hundreds. Oscar Romero had been a *voice for the voiceless* and had become an aggravation to those in power who sought to repress, by intimidation and violence, any dissent to the manner of their rule.

Romero's words and example stirred me, years later, into active campaigning for the liberation from gross injustice of another long-suffering people: those of East Timor, a country in SE Asia, far away from here - and from El Salvador. *Spiritual influence, such as his, transcends time and space.*

In his homeland, and around the world, he has long been an inspirational person to those who are concerned about the suffering of the poor, the oppressed and the marginalised and who wish to remedy such situations. His canonisation today is a formal acknowledgment of his widespread influence, and an encouragement to follow his example - and to avail of his spiritual support.

Oscar Romero was not a firebrand; not aggressive in any way. In fact he had a gentle, quiet, sensitive character. But this very sensitivity engendered outrage in his heart when he came to know of the malevolent treatment of the weakest and most vulnerable people in his country.

Romero was *a devout Christian man, a conscientious and hardworking priest, a loyal and dutiful bishop. Always he was humble in disposition, respectful of his superiors, faithful to the traditional teaching of the Church,* pious and prayerful.

Accordingly he was attentive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit in his heart, and so was moved from deep within himself to respond to the cries of the poor. As the first Scripture reading in this Mass puts it: **I prayed and understanding was given me.**

In the Gospel Jesus tells us that the way into the fullness of life is to detach ourselves from the riches of this world so as to have the lasting 'treasure of heaven' in our hearts.

Oscar Romero was ready and willing to forego his personal comfort and security, and put his very life at risk, in order to promote justice and freedom for all his compatriots - especially those most in need.

For example, he was known to visit the families - and to see the bodies - of those murdered by the military. *He didn't believe in second hand information, and he wouldn't deny comfort to anyone who needed it.*

By the time of his death Archbishop Romero had built up an enormous following among Salvadoreans. He did this largely through broadcasting his weekly sermons across El Salvador on the Church's radio station. In these sermons he listed disappearances, tortures, murders, and much more.

On the importance of these broadcasts one writer noted that "the archbishop's Sunday sermon was the main source in El Salvador about what was happening. It was estimated to have the largest listenership of any programme in the country. Similarly his diocesan weekly paper 'Orientacion' carried lists of cases of torture and repression every week".

A lesser known fact about Romero is that the United Nations considers March 24th to be the 'International Day for the Right to Truth Concerning Gross Human Rights Violations and for the Dignity of Victims'. This date, that of his murder, was chosen to honour the Salvadorian prelate.

In 2014 El Salvador's main international airport was named after him.

Roberto Cuellar, a lawyer hired by the Archbishop to run a free legal assistance office in San Salvador, currently works as representative of the Organisation of American States in El Salvador. He describes Romero as "a precursor in the fight for human rights in the country' and 'the first one to openly criticise the corruption of its legal system'.

He recalls that: "Romero wanted weekly updates on the cases they were working on in order to decide personally which ones he could denounce from the pulpit...He wanted us to verify the facts, and to help the victims. Romero wanted justice to be available for all, not only those who could afford it".

Archbishop Romero was not a political revolutionary - he spoke a spiritual message. He preached that "The liberation urged by Christ and by His Church is not to be reduced to the dimension of a purely temporal project: to a material well-being, or only to initiatives of a political or social, economic or cultural order... The most profound social revolution is the serious, interior reform, of a person".

In 2007 Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Argentina reportedly told a Salvadorean priest: "To me Romero is a saint and a martyr. If I were Pope I would have already canonised him."

Today, that time has come and we will be invited to emulate in our own lives the gentle but courageous Archbishop of San Salvador and ask him to support our own efforts for human welfare in this world and beyond it.

(900 words)