

I am the bread of life ....

- John 6:35

A sniper's bullet shattered the silence of that Chapel at the Carmelite Hospital that morning of 24 March 1980. Archbishop Oscar Romero was presiding at the Mass for the Carmelite Sisters that morning, something he had done frequently as he had his quarters at the Hospital. That morning he had just finished preaching and had taken his place at the altar to prepare for the consecration of the bread and the wine – an act that was never completed as he Liturgy prescribed, but in fact, it was completed in a far more symbolic and significant manner. Instead, he gave his life as a sacrifice that morning. He was 63 years old.

Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero y Galdamez was Archbishop of El Salvador for a mere three years when he was so brutally assassinated. He had served the previous three years as Bishop of a remote, poor rural diocese of Santiago de Maria. He rose to the episcopate as Auxilliary Bishop of San Salvador to Archbishop Luis Chavez y Gonzalez in 1970. It was therefore in the 10<sup>th</sup> year of his episcopate that Romero ended his life.

Looking back, though, one has to realize that Romero came from an ordinary Catholic and undistinguished family. Born 15 August 1917 into a large family of 10, as catholic families tended to be those days! He left school at 13 just as the sons of poor families did, and he had to work to augment the family income. He was fortunate though because his father could apprentice him as a carpenter. Already he lived in a country that was largely poor and rural in Central America. In fact, at the time 13 families owned 40% of the land! Even those days the church was at best under suspicion, or was persecuted as it stood up for justice for the poor and landless masses.

Turning his back on a promising career as a carpenter, Oscar Romero entered minor seminary at St Miguel, from there he entered the major seminary and completed his studies and formation at the Gregorian University in Rome, where in 1943 he obtained a doctorate in ascetic theology, aged 26. He had been ordained priest in Rome in 1942, in what was then Italy under Fascist rule. During war-time Europe he returned to El Salvador by some circuitous route, landing in prison in Cuba, and escaping to Mexico, and from there found his way back home in El Salvador.

His career in the priesthood was ordinary and undistinguished. From the start of his priestly life and ministry, Oscar Romero professed his calling to a holy life. He had, he said, this great desire for holiness. "I have been thinking of how far a soul can

ascend if it lets itself be possessed entirely by God.” This idea of the ascent of the soul was an expression typical of classical mysticism and asceticism that he must have been steeped in in his doctoral studies. By all accounts, however, he was a devoted pastor, especially to the poor. He was an orthodox, if rather conservative, Catholic who never strayed far from the then current teaching of the church. It is thought that, in later years, he was among those who had reservations about the can of worms that Vatican Council II would open for the church, and he was suspicious of its social teaching *Gaudium et Spes*. When he became the Head of the Secretariat of the Episcopal Conference of El Salvador he was clearly hostile to the then emerging liberation theology in Latin America, and his detractors accused him of steering the church in a very conservative direction. He was, a man of unshakeable conviction; and his conviction lay in the preservation of Catholic teaching.

His transformation, was gradual. In almost every respect it was driven by the pastoral conditions that confronted him as a pastor. As Bishop of Santiago de Maria he became aware that some protesting small-scale farmers and the landless peasants were having to stay outdoors without shelter while on strike, he opened the doors of his Bishop’s House for them to sleep overnight. His spiritual life was also orthodox, centering as it did on the daily eucharist, studying the scripture and a time of silence and prayer. His reading of the Bible was becoming engaged with God at a deeper level; and to encounter God in the conversations and discoveries of God’s people in the pages of Scripture. “To attend to the Word of God is to enter into conversation with God that transforms us to God’s friends.” For him, reading the Bible was like talking to a friend: ‘Habla-me, senora’ he would say.

Julian Filoschowski who had become great friends with Romero when the Julian was with the Catholic Institute for International Relations (CIIR) in London, and followed his career from Santiago de Maria to Archbishop of San Salvador. He attests that Romero loved praying the rosary from childhood till death, and that he developed a deep prayer life from which and through which he could retreat to be with God and pray through difficult challenges. He was also a deep practitioner of the Ignatian exercises, especially the *eksamen*, the daily examination of conscience. As such he could recommend, says Julian Filoschowski, the “intimate divine space of our conscience where we encounter ourselves and then go out and encounter God...” Romero taught, for example, that there was inside every heart of man “something like a small intimate cell to which God comes down for private conversation.” That is the seat of intimacy with God, a time and place of listening and encounter with God; and it is also where one encounters one’s own conscience, and works out one’s destiny. His conviction was that for many of us being burdened so much we could do well to become aware of our intimate inner selves, and “go into that little cell right

now, and from there, hear the Lord's voice speaking to us in our conscience, how much could each of us do to improve the environment, society and the family."

From very early on in his ministry, Monsignor Romero, as he was popularly known, developed a craft for broadcast ministry. His Sunday sermons were regularly broadcast on radio, and in later years this became a great source of inspiration to the el Salvadoreans, and it was for him a medium of communication beyond the confines of his Sunday worshippers. In other words broadcasting became for him an essential element of his teaching ministry. His other remarkable tool for teaching was the Pastoral Letters. The Pastoral letters were no mere bishop's letter to the clergy. They were actually deeply considered theological treatises that went into the heart of the church's teaching on social and spiritual matters, as well as on Biblical interpretation, ethics and pastoral life. Through these pastoral Letters (in the three years as Archbishop Romero had produced 4 of these weighty documents) he assisted the parish priests in their teaching, and provided guidance to a whole army of pastoral workers to engage with the world in the full knowledge of the church's teaching. He regularly sought to help the Catholic faithful to understand the teachings of the church, the Papal encyclicals, as well as the documents of CELAM, like Medellin and Puebla, were, if you like, his syllabus. Through them he gave meaning to the church's teaching on the preferential option for the poor, and promoted the base ecclesial communities as a means of pastoral engagement by every Christian in every square inch of the soil of El Salvador.

His sermons at the Cathedral Sunday by Sunday were no mere 10-minute affairs. He regularly preached for an hour, and there were times he would preach for two hours. His sermons were broadcast live on the diocesan radio station, and it is said that wherever they were the peasants listened as they worked the land, or just sat and listened wherever they may be, in today's language, they were 'show-stoppers'.. Romero's radio broadcasts were said to be the talking newspaper of the poor because he reported weekly on the security situation, the dead, the disappeared and the tortured. He called on the faithful to pray for those who sacrificed so much for justice.

But the times were very troubled in El Salvador. Like in so many Latin American states, El Salvador was under a right-wing military junta; democracy had been subverted; there were marauding gangs of right-wing assassination or death squads, who were acting in cahoots with the military regime, the landowners and the upper classes were in total control of the fortunes of the populace, and all forms of protest and popular action was visited with incredible brutality. In such an environment, the justice system had been subverted in that judges were nominees of the junta and

served only under the dictat of the junta. The police and other security and law-enforcement agencies, often acted often outside of the law. Mass arrests were not uncommon, revenge killings, and so were extra-judicial murders, detention without trial, torture and killings and assassination of opponents of the regime. There was a Marxist guerilla war raging in the countryside, and many young people, especially among the educated classes and from among the Catholic faithful joined the guerilla war So widespread was this that it was causing alarm. Among the many who were targets of attention by the repressive machinery of the state were priests, nuns and pastoral workers. Many of them had taken the cause of the poor as an imperative of the gospel; many fought alongside the poor and the Marxist revolutionary elements in opposing the system, and many were killed in what they believed was a legitimate cause of the gospel. It is thought that Romero was very skeptical about the extent of the involvement by priests and nuns in the political activities against the regime. He accepted that the regime was evil but tried to find a means of expressing it that would not compromise the church.

In the midst of all this, Romero was a surprise appointment as Archbishop of San Salvador in 1977. There was widespread opposition and alarm among the social activists, but relief and appreciation from the political and business establishment. The man himself was rather coy and diffident. He too was surprised, but for different reasons. He did not think that he deserved it. He knew only that he needed help from wherever he could get it. He was all humility and reserve about the task that lay ahead. In February 1977 he was installed at the Metropolitan Cathedral in San Salvador.

That was so until his dear friend Rutilio Grande, a Jesuit priest who was deeply involved in the work of establishing cooperatives among the poor and to empower the peasants landless, was brutally murdered, barely a month since he took office. One day Rutilio was caught in an ambush with a group of peasant grassroots pastoral activists and they were all shot and killed. Deeply distraught and in shock, Romero went to the Paisnal to view the lifeless body of his dear friend, and that of the old man and a seven year old who were killed with him. There was nothing but shock and silence all round. In that packed country church, it is said that Romero, encountered the silent endurance of peasants facing unrelenting and escalating terror. It is reported that all that the peasants could say to their Archbishop is "Will you stand with us as Rutilio did?" That night in that church he underwent a conversion experience. He went in as Archbishop and friend, and he came out a partisan in the cause of justice for the poor.

The funeral service of Fr Rutilio was turned into a pilgrimage of faith. Romero decreed that no services be held in any of the parish churches the Sunday in which the funeral was to be held. Instead the entire Archdiocese gathered for Mass at the cathedral and filled the piazza outside the Metropolitan Cathedral in San Salvador, and he concelebrated the Mass with 150 parish priests. During the mass snipers bullets from the surrounding buildings killed more people, and the people had to take cover, and there was chaos and pandemonium in the place of mourning and pain. Archbishop Romero's stand provoked the anger not only of the authorities, but also of his fellow bishops and especially the Nuncio who was actually in cahoots with the military establishment.

Early on in his ministry as Archbishop of San Salvador Romero expressed his task in ministry, and following the death of Fr Rutilio, and aware of the charges against him especially by his fellow bishops, in the following words (I quote in full):

Following Christ's teaching in theory is very easy. But when it becomes a question of living out these saving teachings, of embodying them, and making them real in the history of the suffering people like our own, that is when conflicts arise. Not that I have unfaithful... never! On the contrary, I feel that today I am more faithful than ever because I experience the test of suffering and the deep happiness of proclaiming (and not only in words and with lip service) a doctrine that I have always believed in and loved, I am trying to bring into life for the community the Lord has entrusted to me. And I beg you, dear brothers and sisters, that if we really want to honour the word of Christ's followers, that we must not be afraid of bringing forth blood, life truth and history from this doctrine. Taken from the pages of the Gospels, it is made current by the doctrine of the Councils and the Popes who try to live the vicissitudes of their time as pastors (July 2, 1978).

So committed to listening to the voices of the people that on one occasion he stopped outside the cathedral and had a conversation with the homeless peasant and beggar outside the Cathedral. He sought to bring the ordinary people into the conversation he had just had with the experts and professionals and experts. His these were unity of purpose and unity of the character of the church – those who were within the walls of Mother Church and others on the margins of the life of the Church.

The terror perpetrated by the state, however, did not abate. By 1980 the "war" was claiming about 3000 lives per month, with dead bodies strewn in the streets, and tortured bodies thrown in garbage dumps in the streets, and thousands disappeared. Romero had by then become quite convinced that the church was being targeted with persecution as large numbers of priests, nuns and pastoral workers were killed, and continued to get killed, others had disappeared; yet many had had to flee into exile. The church was being tortured with the people. The

incredible thing for him, though, is how complacent the church was to all this. The bishops, all except one, not only refused to support him, but they were downright hostile towards him. They joined in plots against him, and with the help of the Nuncio, sought to persuade the Pope to remove him as Archbishop. He was accused of merely seeking popularity and of being overly politicized.

But in three years of arch-episcopal ministry he was tired and lonely, except, of course, for the love and prayers of the poor and the faithful. He could trust no one among his peers and fellows. In the words of Fr Timothy Radcliffe OP, it was an incredible three years of ministry of compassion and challenge, of courage and pain; there were “temptations. The agonies. The insults. The plotting. The hostility of the elders of the church (especially the Nuncio and his fellow bishops)! The death threats; and then the public execution.” All these were enough to cause even the best of us stress and anxiety. This is all too tempting to cause one to draw parallels with the earthly ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, and at least say, in the words of Liberation theologian, Gustavo Gutierrez, “if Jesus, the Word made flesh, is the homily of God, then Oscar Romero was the homily of Jesus Christ.”

By now Archbishop Romero was acutely aware that he was destined to share the treatment meted out to those with whom he sought to identify the church. His own life he judged as inevitable, that it had become tied up with the lives of those who suffer. In the weeks before his death Romero appears to have had a deep sense of foreboding about his inevitable end. 30 days before his assassination he said in a newspaper interview, as narrated by Monsignor Ricardo Urioste, his Vicar General and Administrator of the Cathedral at the time, he had accepted death at the hands of the agents of the repressive regime as inevitable. His spiritual adviser had counseled him to be at peace with his end. But what was important for him was that he would give to God his whole life and “live for Him” (God alone).

Two weeks later he told a newspaper reporter that he was not afraid of death; he believed in the Resurrection. He went on to say, “I tell you without any boasting, with the greatest humility... (that) as a pastor I am obliged by Divine Order to give my life for those whom I love, that is for all Salvadoreans, even those who kill me ... Martyrdom is a grace of God I do not believe I deserve. But if God accepts the sacrifice of my life, may my blood be the seed of liberation and a sign that hope will soon be a reality... You could say, if they should kill me, that I forgive and bless those who do it.” His credo towards his end appears to have been that one must not love oneself so much that, as to avoid getting involved in the risks of life that history demands of us, and those that fend off danger will lose their lives.

Challenged by the rise in innocent deaths, and tired of the killings, and also tired in body and soul, Romero observed that the ministry of the Archbishop in San Salvador had become roaming the streets picking up dead bodies and rendering final ministrations to those who died in the hands of their captors. He then addressed the military and the militia directly in broadcast sermon on the Sunday before his assassination. He called out “Stop the assassination. Stop the repression. Stop the killings. He the challenged them directly under his authority as Archbishop. He told them that they did not have to obey unlawful orders. They did not have to kill they fellow brothers and sisters. “thou shalt not kill,” he charged, “No soldier is obliged to obey an order against the law of God...”

As a matter of fact though he had been teaching about the violence of love, “The violence we preach ... is the violence of love, of brotherhood, that violence that wills to beat weapons into sickles for work”. In this he turned both the meanings of violence and of love on their heads. Love, indeed was about passion, and violence was an act of passionate intensity. What was needed, though, is to turn this urge for passion into something more meaningful and positive. It is love. *The Violence of Love* is now a book that contains all Romero’s major statements and quotations conveniently available in one book. Archbishop Romero had declared his deep yearning for peace. He said that “Peace is not the product of fear of terror”, however. “Peace is not the silence of cemeteries. Peace is not the silent result of violent repression.” His yearning was for a just peace – or peace with justice!

This was all just too much for the state machinery to bear from this troublesome priest. They moved their assassination plans into top gear. Agents thought to have been hired by a militia death squad, and former Mayor of San Salvador a Major Roberto d’Aubuisson was known to have been the mastermind behind the assassination plot. Seconds before the assassin’s bullet struck him Archbishop Romero had said the following words to end his sermon:

May this Body immolated and the Blood sacrificed for Mankind, nourish us also, that we may give our body and blood over to suffering and pain like Christ – not for Self but to give harvests of peace and justice to our people.

And as the bullet struck, he is reported to have said: “May God have mercy on the assassins.” That was the end. He could anticipate death with equanimity because of his profound spiritual magnanimity: “We accomplish in our lifetime”, he said, “only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God’s work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us. No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession brings perfection. No pastoral visit brings wholeness. No program

accomplishes the church's mission. No set of goals and objectives includes everything." These were not his own original words, but it is a prayer that he had made his own. He died very much as he lived – at peace with himself and with his world. No one has ever been charged or convicted for this crime.

In 2009 the government of El Salvador accepted responsibility for the murder of Archbishop Oscar Romero, and on 24 March 2010, the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Romero's assassination, the government of El Salvador offered an official state apology. To the best of my knowledge, there has not been any acknowledgement of responsibility from the government of the United States of America who armed and trained the military regime in El Salvador, and despite regular protests by Romero, continued to do so even as hundreds of Salvadoreans were being killed by the regime.

The Church of England has perhaps gone the furthest in recognizing the sacrifice of Archbishop Oscar Romero. He appears among the 10 statues of the Martyrs of Our Time above the Great West Door at Westminster Abbey in London. The new Church of England Lectionary to *Common Prayer* has a commemoration to Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador, Martyr on 24 March.

In the Roman Catholic Church efforts are underway to achieve the beatification of Oscar Romero. The first step in that has been achieved, with the declaration by Pope John Paul II of Oscar Romero as a "great witness of the gospel." In 1997, Pope John Paul II declared Romero a "Servant of God." The movement towards the canonization of Archbishop Oscar Romero is gaining momentum around the world.

Well, it is true that studies in ancient mysticism taught us that mysticism is about communing with God, and those who did so were those who were spiritual in that they paid no heed to their bodily natures. It meant in other words an abstraction from what is material or a denial of material nature. Ascetics were those who punished their bodily desires and urges, and denied themselves. The effect of this tended to be that the ascetic was uninvolved with or disinterested in earthly matters like the well being of human nature; his was a life of prayer in abstraction. The result could have been that they were indifferent to matters of justice and equality, or the pain of humanity at a material level. Mysticism was prayer with inactivity, or passivity. That, of course, is merely one representation of a long and complex tradition.

Grace M Jantzen in an essay on *Feminists, Philosophers and Mystics* charges that the privatisation of spirituality denies social justice (*Hypania vol 9, no. 4 (Fall 1994):202*). The net result, in her words "is the reinforcement of the societal status

quo, as intellectual and religious energy pours into an exploration of private religiosity rather than into social and political action for change.” In other words, the net effect is the misguided view that struggles for social and political justice are in and of themselves devoid of spiritual content. Nothing could be further from the truth, at least as far as Romero was concerned. Archbishop Oscar Romero clearly proves that thesis wrong to a large degree. He graced his life from early years to the pursuit of closeness to God, and it was through that ascent to the heart and soul of God that connected him to the struggles for justice. His striving was for holiness that was wholesome and connected to the heart of God beating in the heart of God’s people. In his Introduction to *The Violence of Love*, Henri JM Nouwen reflects on the impact of Archbishop Romero’s words:

The encounter with Oscar Romero, the humble but confident man of God calling me to conversion and action for peace and justice, was the fruit of the texts this book contains.

There are two things that this tells me about our own situation in our country today. First, it tells me that the search for and the practice of holiness or holy living is an appropriate state for the Christian. It says that, holiness, if you like, is a balanced life, or wholesome life. Oscar Romero taught about the idols of the modern age in his pastoral letters, and among these were the idols of the security state, and of materialism. He urged that Salvadoreans be freed from the idolatry and worship of “things” and of “thing-ness”. It had become a false doctrine that led many astray especially in seeking shortcuts and behaving in unprincipled fashion. It is, I submit, that same prevailing and pervasive idolatry, or elevating of things into a god-fetish that is alarming and in which most South Africans have become trapped. of things that has trapped so many South Africans either into corruption, or living beyond their means, or having to mortgage their lives into forms of bondage to capital and other immoral activities. This attitude and tendency actually marks much of contemporary religiosity in our country. Churches have become business entities, and the prosperity gospel has come to define much of Christian life.

With materialism there is another scourge that the seeks to attach the spiritual well-being of South Africans. It is that of individualism Much of the material world is about individualism, and not about my neighbour’s keeper That may well explain that the church, the very core of whose theology is community, the Incarnate Christ who came to dwell among us, and the flow of beings within the fellowship of the Trinity, has been unable to guide the faithful into an alternative lifestyle. No, instead, we are connected to the creeds of self-enrichment and nepotism- a culture of bling! That explains that poverty has become so pervasive in our society, and growing, even though with the rich becoming poorer so that the poor can get richer we have

solutions to the problems of social breakdown in our society. It is obvious that the poor cannot take it any longer, and they ought to count the church among its fiercest advocates in this. Inequality can no longer be checked; that public policy is wedded so much to individual want, and none of the political proposals in front of us as we face an election promises anything else but more of the same.

Oscar Romero said that Christians should aspire not to have more but to be more. Should we not, therefore, rather grow men and women who have the capacity to become more – to grow in the magnanimous being of their true humanity? Instead we have entrenched a calculated greed and consumerism that knows no bounds.

That indeed is what lies behind our text today. It is about sacramental life. That which is outside of us can never be enough to make us better than who we are. It is only when the outside enters into our being and dies, and transforms that we can truly be transformed into a new nature. That means that what is offered by God externally and materially has no value or meaning unless it is appropriated internally. William Temple, the Archbishop of Canterbury during wartime, says referring to this passage that the sacrament of Bread and Wine must not be isolated from God's general activity in the world, or from the fullness of Christian life (*Readings in St John's Gospel*: 81).

In every respect, then, Monsignor Oscar Romero is a saint and martyr for our times.

N Barney Pityana  
Cathedral of St Michael & St George  
Grahamstown  
Lent IV, 30 March 2014.