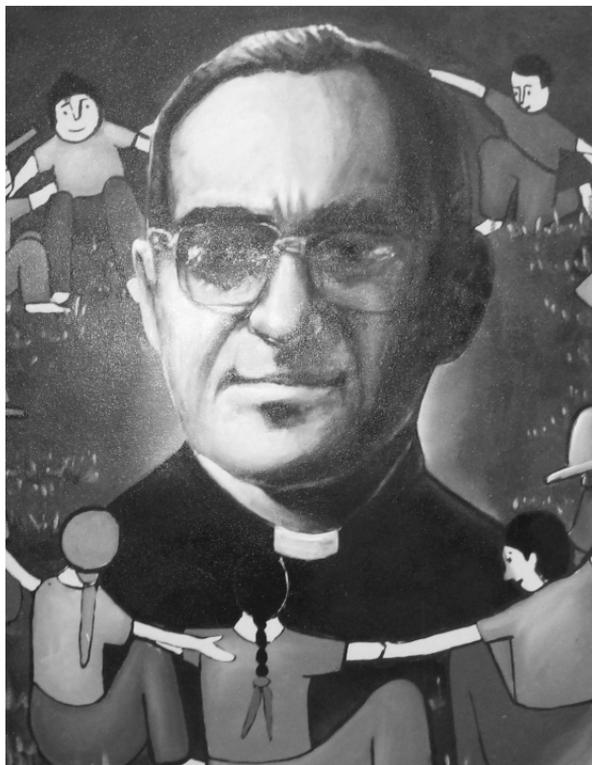


Archbishop Óscar Romero

The Living Legacy



On 24 March, 1980, Archbishop Óscar Romero of El Salvador was celebrating Mass in the Chapel of the Hospital de la Divina Providencia. During the Mass, at

6.25pm local time, a lone gunman entered the chapel and killed the Archbishop with a single shot. Monseñor Romero, as he was affectionately known to his people, fell to the ground beneath the large crucifix that was hanging behind the altar. At the end of his radio homily the previous evening, Romero had urged the Salvadoran military to lay down their arms, cease the repression and realise that they were not obliged to carry out orders to kill and maim their own people. His defence of the poor had catapulted him into the eye of the storm. The regime could not tolerate his defiant voice any longer; the flame of insurrection needed to be doused at its source. The killer was a professional hitman carrying out a contract killing for those in power. In an instant, all had changed irrevocably. The pastor of the people had been silenced. Two weeks before his murder, Romero anticipated his impending assassination but offered a message of hope to his people: “If they kill me, I shall rise again in the Salvadoran people. I am not boasting; I say it with the greatest humility ... if God accepts the sacrifice of my life, then may my blood be the seed of liberty, and a sign of the hope that will soon become a reality ... A bishop will die, but the church of God - the people - will never die” (Romero in Sobrino, 1990:100-101).

The tension between grassroots Christian communities and the ruling elite in El Salvador had escalated to crisis proportions in the years before Óscar Romero became archbishop in February 1977. Catholic priests, nuns, teachers and lay workers had been arrested, tortured, beaten and killed for siding with the poor and spurring them onwards to believe that they could one day own their own land and earn a fair wage. Retribution would ruthlessly befall anyone who dared to sow seeds of discontent. The struggle for land dates to the Spanish conquest and the

decision taken by governing powers in 1881 to abolish communal land rights in order to allow the coffee magnates to consolidate their holdings. The process of land theft continued until 1932, when the indigenous rose up to challenge the coffee barons' protectors, the Salvadoran military. In what Salvadorans refer to as 'the massacre,' the army responded viciously. More than 30,000 people were killed in one month. In her book *Under the Eagle*, Jenny Peace estimates that by 1961, 12% of the peasants were landless; by 1971, 30% were landless; and by 1980, 65% were landless (Pearce, 1981:209).

Romero came into office a year after a minimal land reform programme was initiated by the army colonel President Arturo Armando Molina, but efforts to redress the imbalance were impeded by the military might of the large plantation owners who responded with extreme force when the need arose. At this time, fourteen families controlled over 60% of the arable land in El Salvador. The ruling oligarchy felt threatened by the unnerving disquiet that was being drummed up on the outer realms of their dominion. Violence and terror were unleashed with uncompromising ferocity to stem the mounting discord. Few were safe.

The *Comunidades Ecclesiales de Base* were deemed by the authorities to be too closely associated with the peasant unions and were targeted by the armed forces in an attempt to quell the unrest. The prospect of a once obedient people taking their destiny into their own hands provoked a response. The priests and the people stood shoulder to shoulder in unswerving solidarity undeterred by the threats and the intimidation. The Gospel was their point of reference in an increasingly precarious and uncertain world: "Some priests, seeing in the peasant unions

a hope for social justice through political pressure, encouraged their development and themselves spoke of social justice and hope for a better world in their preaching. The Christian communities through their Bible study and discussions made peasants more aware of the misery in which they had to live and the hope, founded on the message of Jesus Christ, of achieving a more decent life” (Brockman, 1984:450). Many priests were prevented from visiting their parishioners and many communities of Christians were unable to meet together for worship and Bible study, especially in the countryside. Church buildings, schools, convents, the Church’s radio station and the Catholic university were all in the line of fire. The regime vented its fury through the callous onslaught of machine guns and bombs. The Church at the grassroots in El Salvador was under threat; the impetus for change that was gathering pace would be stifled no matter what the cost.

Archbishop Óscar Romero has been an inspiration to generations of advocates of human rights and social justice all over the world. Hope whispers resoundingly wherever Romero’s name is mentioned. His memory is regularly conjured up in the dances, songs, poems and theatre performances of the Salvadoran people, and on the murals and posters that cover the walls of their cities. The poor of El Salvador still feel his presence among them. His courage raised the spirits of an embattled people and continues to galvanise the hopes of the downtrodden around the world today. The words of Michael D. Higgins, President of Ireland, on his recent visit to El Salvador encapsulate the enduring significance of all that Romero lived and died for: “Thus Óscar Romero has become an illuminating icon not only for the Church but for the oppressed of the world

and those in solidarity with them” (Higgins, M.D., 2013:17). Monseñor Romero took the circuitous route on the road to his enlightenment. Seminal moments in his life changed the course of his ministry. It is time to re-trace his steps so that we too can begin to steer the Church closer to where it was always meant to be. His legacy lives on in those who walk in his way.

Transformation starts from within - A faith that is open to change

When Óscar Romero was installed as archbishop of San Salvador on February 22, 1977, the consensus was that Romero would drift inauspiciously into the slipstream of the ruling elite and conform to the norms that they imposed. Many viewed his appointment as a victory for the conservative oligarchy and expected him to rein in the subversives who were inciting the poor to become more vehement in their defence of their rights. His allegiance to Rome would inevitably lead him down the path of least resistance. So it appeared! Recalling the dread felt when he was elected and the likelihood that the hierarchy would become even more removed from the struggles of the people in El Salvador, Sobrino observed how “we all thought we faced a very bleak future” (Sobrino, 1990:5).

Romero feared that if the Church re-located to the margins, it risked aggravating the simmering antagonism between the state and the poor. To take sides would ultimately compromise the Church’s potential to heal conflict and to dismantle historic barriers between opposing factions. Even when he witnessed for himself the repression and suffering inflicted on the poor in the

early years of his tenure as bishop of Santiago de Maria, he was reluctant to speak out publically against the violence preferring to interpret the killings as ‘an aberration’ that “would be stopped once the government knew what was happening” (Dennis, Golden, Wright, 2000:9). Not surprisingly, his elevation in the Church was greeted at the grassroots with a collective sigh of resignation.

Gradually, though, a new voice rose within Romero as he came face to face with the sinister subworld of violence somewhat obscured beneath the daily grind of the coffee plantations in Santiago de Maria. Many workers who dared to raise their heads above the parapet and voice their legitimate needs and rights simply vanished without trace in a brutal showing of strength by the army. Most were never seen again. The troops were responding to their commands of their superiors whilst those they served cowered shamefully in the shadows of their crimes. Romero soon realised that the disappearances, the torture, the beatings and the murders were all part of an orchestrated campaign by the coffee barons and their allies in government to safeguard their land and their wealth. The seeds of future intolerance of injustice began to germinate internally at first and more overtly in time. Romero struggled to reconcile his concerns as pastor to his people with the stark and violent realities that they had to contend with. He became more forthright in his denunciation of the campaign of terror wreaked upon the peasants and made his home and diocesan buildings a shelter for those in need of refuge: “Slowly, the impoverished and violated people of his diocese led him to a better understanding of the reality they lived. Moved by compassion, he began to feel the fire of righteous anger stir in his soul and to distance himself

from the powerful ones who maintained the status quo” (Dennis, Golden, Wright, 2000:9).

The murder of Fr. Rutilio Grande within three weeks of Romero’s installation as archbishop proved to be a defining moment in the life and ministry of Óscar Romero. Rutilio worked with a team of seminarians and catechists in Aguilares, a rural parish with a population of 30,000, building a cluster of tightly knit Christian communities to shield the people from their persecution and to guide them forward in their struggle for liberation. Here, thirty-five *haciendas*, or land owners, used most of the flat land in the area for sugar cane and left the rocky hillsides to the *campesinos*, or tenants, who were only paid during the cane harvest. The great majority were economically poor. They lived in very cramped dwellings without electric light, running water, adequate sanitation and toilets. This reflected the national pattern of a country where vast tracts of land were owned by the few who plundered the natural resources of the land and the reserves of the people to secure profitable yields in sugar, coffee or cotton.

Rutilio was a thorn in the side of the authorities. He questioned the machinations of a society that permitted the rich to profit from the captivity of the poor. A cruel irony was unfolding daily in Aguilares as those who reaped the harvest for the rich returned to the wretchedness of the hillsides each evening hungry and dispirited beyond endurance. Rutilio understood that the ideology which perpetuated such misery needed to be confronted head on: “This approach by Rutilio and his team inevitably brought them into conflict with those who were afraid that the peasants would organise, become self-confident and informed, and rise up against their suffering and

exploitation” (O’Sullivan, 2002:2).

Rutilio’s outspokenness on behalf of the economically poor led to his dismissal by the bishops from his post as lecturer in pastoral theology and director of the social action programme in the seminary. Even the hierarchy had turned its back on him. The people of Aguilares, in contrast, clasped his message of hope to their hearts. They started to believe in possibilities beyond their destitution: “Rutilio, in his sermons, denounced the injustice of a few dominating and exploiting the many for their own profit; and the experience of learning to apply the lessons of the Bible to their own lives was already opening the eyes and lifting the aspirations of the peasants” (Brockman, 1990:9).

Around 5pm on March 12, 1977, Rutilio set out from Aguilares to a rural outpost of his parish in nearby El Paisnal to say the evening Mass. The three-mile journey from Aguilares to El Paisnal took Rutilio along a road of dirt and stone between two fields of sugar cane. Two companions from Aguilares, Manuel, seventy-two years old, and Nelson, a fourteen-year-old who suffered from epilepsy, began the journey with him. Rutilio knew the road well as El Paisnal was the little town where he was born and grew up. His father had been the local mayor a number of times and some of his relatives still lived there. Rutilio’s unflinching commitment to the poor and their cause made him a prime target of the rich and the powerful. The agitator needed to be silenced if order was to be restored: “He was vulnerable. He knew that. He had been warned that his life was in danger, and suspicious people had been seen around the parish the very day he was due to say the evening Mass in El Paisnal. He was not deterred. The people would be waiting. He would go to them” (O’Sullivan, 2002:3).

Speaking on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the murder of Rutilio Grande, Michael O’Sullivan, a fellow Jesuit with Rutilio in El Salvador at that time, recalled what happened on the journey to El Paisnal. En route, Rutilio stopped his Volkswagen Safari to give three young children a lift. As he drove off again, it became apparent that a pick-up truck was following them. Ahead they saw a blue car with California plates. The car was stopped and there were men on either side of the road with some form of weapons by their sides. The pick-up accelerated and came up menacingly right behind them. Rutilio and his companions were clearly in danger. One of the men by the side of the road lit a cigarette. This was the signal for murder. The bullets came from both sides as well as from behind. They went into Rutilio’s neck and head and into his lower back and pelvis. They also killed old Manuel who appeared to try and shield Rutilio. The children in the back survived. They were allowed to run away. As they did so, a further shot was fired. It killed Nelson who had suffered an epileptic seizure, but was, apparently, still alive: “Today three small crosses mark the spot along the road where Rutilio and his companions were killed. No greater love persons can have than to lay down their life for those they have chosen as their friends. Rutilio Grande died for God and some of the poorest people in the world” (O’Sullivan, 2002:3).

Romero was close friends with Rutilio, and, whilst he empathised with the plight of the campesinos in Aguilares, he nevertheless had deep reservations about Rutilio’s pastoral ministry there. His work seemed to be too political and in danger of becoming too closely associated with the revolutionary wing of the peasant movement. Romero feared that Rutilio’s style of evangelisation would only stir up an already volatile

situation. Rutilio never deviated from his course. His people were his compass. The experience of viewing Rutilio's body and witnessing the despair of the people that evening in Aguilares jolted Romero to the core. The shockwaves that followed would never subside. Romero felt the profound desolation of the poor who had lost their leader in Rutilio. Their shared grief united the pastor with his people like never before. The spirit of Rutilio was etched in the faces of those before him: "There is not a sound as the archbishop walks up the aisle to the spot where the three bodies lie beneath white sheets before the altar. After Romero prays he turns to begin Mass, and he looks out at the faces of the poor. Hundreds of peasants stare back at him. They say nothing. Their silence interrogates Romero. The peasants' eyes ask the question he alone can answer: Will you stand with us as Rutilio did?" (Dennis, Golden, Wright, 2000:29).

Romero had reached the edge of the precipice; in an anonymous chapel on the darkest of evenings his life was stripped of all that once defined him. Rutilio challenged the Monseñor in death as he did in life. In his inner depths, Romero was arriving at his own epiphany. Sobrino observed that as Romero "stood gazing at the mortal remains of Rutilio Grande, the scales fell from his eyes." (Sobrino, 1990:10) The 'scales' were fear of anything that might "immerse the church in the ambiguous, conflictive flesh of history." (Sobrino, 1990:8) For Sobrino, the moment was decisive: "I believe that the murder of Rutilio Grande was the occasion of the conversion of Archbishop Romero ... It was Rutilio's death that gave Archbishop Romero the strength for new activity... and the fundamental direction for his own life" (Sobrino, 1990:9-10). The man who was normally reticent in larger crowds dropped his defences in helpless bewilderment at

all that he surveyed. In an act of unscripted spontaneity, Romero drew nearer to those in need of his embrace. He chose not to eulogise about his friendship with Rutilio but rather to place the sacrifice of Rutilio, Manuel and Nelson within God's liberating plan for the people of Aguilares. For Romero, standing as a bystander to the suffering of his people was no longer an option. A peasant pastoral worker could sense the catharsis that was taking place before the intuitive gaze of the people: "As we listened to him we were very surprised. "He has the same voice as Father Grande!" we all said. Because it seemed that at that moment the voice of Father Rutilio passed to Monseñor. Right then and there. Really" (Ernestina Rivera in Dennis, Golden, Wright, 2000:27).

The transformation was not completed that night, but it had begun. Romero consulted with the clergy of the archdiocese and began a series of initiatives that openly defied what the government expected of him. He decided to have one single commemorative Mass for Rutilio, the young boy and the elderly farmer in the plaza outside the cathedral in San Salvador which was attended by over 100,000 people; he made public his support for all priests who were in danger of persecution; he demanded that the government investigate the murders and promised the people that the Church would be on their side; he suspended classes for three days in all Catholic schools and publically promised that he would not participate in official government functions until these crimes had been solved and the repression had been stopped. As archbishop, he never attended an official event from that day onwards. The cry of the people in Aguilares that night was his call to service. The baton had been passed on from one friend to the next. Nothing would obstruct him on

his way. God's guiding love was closer than he had realised: "From his new starting point in the poor, Archbishop Romero discovered that God is theirs – their defender, their liberator. Among the poor he discovered that God is God become small – a suffering God, a crucified God. But this also led him to sound the depths of the mystery of an ever greater, transcendent God, the last reserve of truth, goodness, and humanity, on whom we human beings can rely" (Sobrino, 1990:16).

Truths made known in times of crisis

Violence and terror cast a dark shadow over El Salvador. During the first two years of his governance, 30,000 were killed. Romero exposed the insidious harshness of a regime that sought to terrify the people into submission. The Monseñor and his people refused to surrender. In his weekly homilies, he named the massacres and tortures, unmasking the hideousness of a war directed against civilians. The archdiocese's radio station carried his words to most of El Salvador except when bombs silenced it or government jamming interfered with its transmissions. His voice, though somewhat hushed at first, rose in righteous condemnation at the campaign of violence waged against the poor.

Romero opened the doors of the archbishop's residence to the besieged people of his homeland and opted to live in a simple room in the grounds of the nearby hospital. He travelled extensively to meet the people and they, in their multitudes, converged on his offices in San Salvador to meet with him. He listened to their stories of killings, of loved ones taken away, of homes burned and crops destroyed. It was the poor especially who

filled his cathedral at Sunday Mass and greeted him afterwards, who came out to meet him when he visited their villages, who encouraged him in hundreds of simple letters. They reminded him of what was essential. Their courage and humanity had transfigured the landscape of all he once knew: “Being incarnate in the real world, Archbishop Romero discovered the deepest of this world’s truths: the poverty that cries to heaven. This poverty had concrete faces, and these faces were beloved to him: children dying, campesinos with neither land nor rights, slum-dwellers, the tortured corpses of his people, whose only crime had been their desire to break free of poverty and oppression” (Sobrinho, 1990:194).

Closeness to the poor instilled a new confidence in Romero. The ambivalence of the past gave way to a clear resolve to speak his truth boldly and without equivocation. The poor had stirred something deep within. Their pain moved him and disturbed him, both in equal measure: “These poor persons broke his heart, and the wound never closed” (Sobrinho, 1990:195). Photojournalist Jim Harney’s recollections of the experience of hearing Romero speak capture the imperishable warmth that existed between Romero and the poor: “When Romero entered the cathedral and walked down the aisle, he was followed by applause. It was as if he himself was the word of hope even before he spoke. And then when he spoke ... leading up to the point when he would list the deaths and assassinations of the week, the clapping would swell to a crescendo ... the audience became part of the homily’s force and imagination” (Harney in Dennis, Golden, Wright, 2000:36). A beautiful new alliance was forged: “His people filled his heart. He let himself be loved, and this is the most radical way to span distances and burst

boundaries, which always exist between those of high and low estate” (Sobrino, 1990:35). God’s grace had crept into his world and awakened him from his slumber in ways he least expected. Everything had turned full circle; the poor had become the source of his liberation: “He fairly rushed to the poor, in order to receive from them, to learn from them, and to enable them to impart to him the good news” (Sobrino, 1990:34).

Romero did not lecture the people but articulated their concerns and their fears. At the peak of their repression and persecution, Romero urged the poor to find their own prophetic voice. Their voice and his had become one: “If some day they take the radio station away from us, if they close down our newspaper, if they don’t let us speak, if they kill all the priests and the bishop too, and you are left, a people without priests, each one of you must be God’s microphone, each one of you must be a messenger, a prophet” (Romero in Brockman, 1998:142). As Sobrino comments, “The impact of words like these on the people was like a jolt of electric current” (Sobrino, 1990:35). In an interview conducted by Marie Adele Dennis with Romero, he alludes to how the poor had wrestled him free from his self-imposed exile: “Their plight began to gnaw at my soul. I began to see with new eyes what was happening. I began to hear in a new way what my priests closest to the poor were saying.” (Dennis, 1997:27).

The poor led him to a new vantage point from where he could see more clearly. Their dignity, their sense of humour in spite of their terror, their resilience in the face of unimaginable hardship revealed a deeper mystery. The agony and anguish of the people was Christ’s suffering on the cross laid bare in the world: “The face of Christ is among the sacks and baskets

of the farmworker; the face of Christ is among those who are tortured and mistreated in prisons; the face of Christ is dying of hunger in the children who have nothing to eat; the face of Christ is in the poor who ask the church for their voice to be heard” (Romero, 1978:327).

Romero invited the poor to critically engage in the historical reality in which they lived so that they would come to grasp the root cause of their oppression and its tragic consequences. He was in no doubt that a more organised, educated people would one day become architects of their own history. Acts of kindness and mercy only reached so far. Romero initiated pastoral programmes that provided the poor with opportunities to improve their skills and understand their entitlements. He was convinced that education of this kind would serve as a necessary precursor to social change. An empowered people could anticipate the steps necessary to scale new horizons. Romero’s pastoral letters and homilies called on the people to become participants in their troubled history and to generate a new hope into their shattered communities: “The world of the poor teaches us that liberation will arrive only when the poor are not simply on the receiving end of handouts from governments or from the churches, but when they themselves are the masters and protagonists of their own struggle and liberation” (Romero, 1985:184). Romero stood firm, steadfast in his conviction that their solidarity and love was strong enough to withstand the tumult and the persecution. His words had the power to reassure: “Let us not tire of preaching love; it is the force that will overcome the world. Let us not tire of preaching love. Though we see that waves of violence succeed in drowning the fire of Christian love, love must win out; it is

the only thing that can” (Romero in Brockman, 1998:7).

Access to truths of timeless importance often comes through the darker corridors of suffering and despair. Romero penetrated through the layers of confusion and turmoil and arrived at a new clarity. His wisdom was translated into a language that people could understand. His antennae leaned towards the poor as he reached out to them in a spirit of love and respect. The people no longer languished on the sidelines: “Let us not measure the church by the number of its members or by its material buildings ... The material walls here will be left behind in history. What matters is you, the people, your hearts” (Romero in Brockman, 1998:24). What was happening in the *Comunidades Eclesiales de Base* across El Salvador was a microcosm of what was needed in the Church the world over. The unique energies at the grassroots inspired Romero to glimpse all that could be achieved when those once silenced seize the initiative and allow their creative vision flow through the life of the Church. He could see that the catalyst for the reform in the Church must come from the people if it was going to have real impact: “Don’t be waiting for which way the bishop will lean, or for what others will say, or what the organization says ... You have to be critical and see the world and individuals using your own judgment and Christians must learn to sharpen their distinctive Christian judgment” (Romero in Brockman, 1998:178).

A Church that bears the force of Love

Romero’s return to Aguilares three months after the murder of Rutilio would put him on a collision course with the ruling

authorities. The people needed a sign that an end of their tyranny was in sight. Hope was fast dissolving into the ether of a bloodshot sky. Their spiritual home was under siege. The army had occupied the parish, killing the sacristan, expelling a foreign priest and turning the church into a military barracks. How would Romero respond? Any action on his part to repel the hostility and reclaim the church would have consequences and he knew it. Oblivious to the on-looking troops, he entered the church, walked purposefully towards the now desecrated altar and addressed the multitudes that followed him: “You are the image ... of Christ, nailed to the cross and lanced by the spear. You are a symbol of every town, like Aguilares, that will be struck down and trampled upon; but if you suffer with faith and give your suffering a redemptive meaning, Aguilares will be singing the precious song of liberation” (Romero in Dennis, Golden, Wright, 2000:41).

The Eucharist was shared out among the people. During Mass, he imparted the Word. After Mass, he exemplified its significance. A procession was held from the church out into the open square where the military had gathered. Romero held the Blessed Sacrament aloft and the people led the way. Sobrino was present in Aguilares that day and captures the magnitude of the moment: “As the procession drew near the town hall we stopped. We were uneasy. In fact, we were afraid. We had no idea what might happen. And we all instinctively turned around and looked at Archbishop Romero, who was bringing up the rear, holding the monstrance. ‘Adelante (Forward!),’ said Archbishop Romero. And we went right ahead. The procession ended without incident. From that moment forward, Archbishop Romero was the symbolic leader of El Salvador” (Sobrino, 1990:27-28).

The people and their pastor, in that instant, had disarmed the

troops and rendered their aggression futile. Their victory, though fleeting, would keep the flame of hope alive. Romero believed that the Gospel, by its very nature, needed to be vindicated in the midst of the historical struggle of his people. He understood that the Word finds its deepest resonance when absorbed into the turbulent realities of each new age: “Some want to keep a Gospel so disembodied that it doesn’t get involved at all in the world it must save. Christ is now in history. Christ is in the womb of the people. Christ is now bringing about the new heavens and the new earth” (Romero in Brockman, 1998:102). Implicit in Romero’s theology is a belief that civilisation is incomplete and that God’s work is unfinished. God wishes to bring the story of civilisation to a point where humanity no longer has to endure persecution and suffering and the El Salvadoran people are integral to this task: “God and human beings make history. God saves humanity in the history of one’s own people. The history of salvation will be El Salvador’s history when we Salvadorans seek in our history the presence of God the Savior” (Romero in Brockman, 1998:173). Romero’s embodiment of the Word became the most potent feature of his ministry. His witness paved the way for others to follow: “Archbishop Romero was a gospel. Archbishop Romero was a piece of good news from God to the poor of this world, and then from this starting point in the poor, to all men and women” (Sobrino, 1990:58).

Romero could see in the collective synergy of the *Comunidades Eclesiales de Base*, the prayer groups and the peasant unions evidence of a greater power at play in the lives the poor of El Salvador. The activities of the peasant unions, though not explicitly religious in their motivation, were shaping the history of the El Salvadoran people in a way that reflected

everything that God intended for them. God's love infiltrates this world in a myriad of ways: "Everyone who struggles for justice, everyone who makes just claims in unjust surroundings is working for God's reign, even though not a Christian. The church does not comprise all of God's reign; God's reign goes beyond the church's boundaries" (Romero in Brockman, 1984:38). Romero repeatedly emphasised the importance of promoting unity and solidarity among the many peasant unions and the base communities so that together they could realise their shared aspirations. The old divides had to yield to something more inclusive and more real: "What we developed as we walked with poor people – campesinos, the homeless, the urban poor – was a new awareness of injustice and a passionate commitment to social transformation. What we encountered was real life – raw, painful, beautiful, sometimes ugly – but real" (Romero in Dennis, 1997:38-39).

A persecuted Church is the supreme sign of the incarnation of Christ's compassion and love for humanity. Nuns, priests, co-ordinators, catechists and pastoral agents in El Salvador at this time shared the same fate as the poor. Romero recognised the powerful symbolism of their sacrifice: "It would be sad that in a country in which there are so many horrible assassinations there were no priests counted among the victims. They are the testimony of a church incarnated in the problems of its people." (Romero in Brockman, 1990:177) With these words he was going against centuries of ecclesiastical tradition that distanced the leaders from their people. He could not tolerate a system that would buy his silence. Rutilio's death had revealed a noble, if unforgiving, truth: "Rutilio taught Óscar, by his death, that he himself must not be different to the people, that he must

live his empathy and solidarity with them to the point even of being vulnerable to assassination like them” (O’Sullivan, 2010:2). During his funeral two days after Romero’s murder, a bomb went off outside the Cathedral and the panic-stricken mourners were machine-gunned, leaving an estimated thirty to forty people dead and several hundred wounded. The elite were determined to trample on his memory. The bishops of El Salvador stayed at a safe distance. Their absence confirmed their cowardly indifference: “The majority of the bishops had opposed Romero while he was alive, and even though he had been shot dead while celebrating Mass, thus evoking the Last Supper and the bloody death of Jesus on Calvary, these bishops still did not show solidarity with him or the people by taking part in his funeral” (O’ Sullivan, 2010:5).

The poor claimed Romero as their own amidst the gunfire and the shells. His crucifixion was theirs to bear. Romero’s persecution, like his people’s, would herald a new dawn for El Salvador. His untiring quest for a better world remained resolute to the end: “If we follow in his footsteps we shall further the cause of justice and peace, truth and love; we shall help denounce atrocities, destruction, and repression; we shall help to shorten and humanize our wars; we shall defend the cause of the poor throughout the world - and certainly, in El Salvador, we shall defend the cause of a people that Archbishop Romero loved so much that he gave his life for them” (Sobрино, 1990:201). Romero had the courage to take the road less travelled. The pastor’s journey parallels the direction the Church must take if it is to reclaim its credibility in the world. The tribute of fourteen-year-old student, Elena, to Monseñor Romero thirty-four years after his murder says all that needs to be said about the legacy

he leaves in his wake. The Monseñor's sacrifice and that of countless others must not be in vain. His spirit lives on in those who sing to the tune of his love.

Poem to

Monseñor Romero

When the shepherd cries out, everything trembles.

When he speaks the truth, all are quiet.

When he begs for justice, they do not bring it ...

Yet, how great is the harvest of love that he sows.

We had in El Salvador a living saint,

Whom they did not want to canonize ...

How can the church silence the voice of the prophet

And not hear his song?

This was Óscar and his love,

Upright man of profound prayer.

I wish today to sound my own song,

And tell him: you live on in this pain.

IN THE HANDS OF THE PEOPLE

Gave of himself in living

A saintly and holy life.

Gave of himself with madness,

A madness of loving until death.

Yet, you live on in your people,

You came back to life in your homeland good shepherd.

My generation calls you simply: Monseñor,

May you light up our hearts from the heavens.

(Excerpts from a poem written by fourteen-year-old student Elena, from the Externado de San José, San Salvador in Hopper, 2014:7)