

## **Oscar Romero and the Nonviolent Struggle for Justice**

At one a.m. on November 16<sup>th</sup>, 1989, twenty-six soldiers, nineteen of them trained at the School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Georgia, stormed the Jesuit community at the University of Central America in San Salvador, El Salvador. They forced the six Jesuits to lie face down on the lawn, and shot them dead. They ransacked the house, and destroyed the word processors, file cabinets, theology textbooks and bibles. Afterwards, they discovered Elba Ramos, the cook, and her fifteen-year-old daughter Celina hiding in a room on the edge of the Jesuit compound. They shot them on sight.

Several days later, the surviving Jesuits noticed the large black and white photograph of martyred Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero which had hung in the entrance foyer to the theology center. The soldiers had first entered the building through this basement doorway; the Jesuits lived on the top floor of the theology center. On closer inspection, their friends noticed a bullet hole in the center of the picture. It appears that the first act of the soldiers that fateful night was to shoot Oscar Romero in the heart. Later, when the soldiers came across another large, glass-framed photo of Romero, they used a blow torch to set it on fire.

The deaths of the six Jesuits and their co-workers stunned the world. These scholars and priests and good women had publicly advocated for an end to the brutal war within El Salvador and the daily \$1.3 million in U.S. military aid that funded it. They had spoken out on behalf of the poor and oppressed, had urged negotiations between the Salvadoran government and the rebel forces of the FMLN, (the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front), as well as the U.S. embassy. They had preached the gospel and comforted the poor, and paid the price for their witness.

Though the Jesuits had long been proponents of justice, it was the life and death of Oscar Romero that propelled them to a faithful proclamation of the truth in the face of such overwhelming evil. They had known and loved Romero, directed his retreats, gone on vacation with him, written his homilies, dined regularly with him, suffered with him, mourned his death, and taken up where he left off. When Romero was assassinated in 1980, his spirit rose in them. They picked up his works of solidarity, peacemaking and truth-telling. When I visited those Jesuits in 1985, they told me about Romero's impact on their own lives, their work, their theology, their faith. Now they, too, like countless thousands of Christians in El Salvador, have joined Romero in martyrdom.

The government death squads knew that Romero's life gave strength to the Jesuits. That is why they stopped first to shoot another bullet into Romero's picture. Since 1980, despite their most brutal efforts, those soldiers had one great problem: Romero, like Christ, refused to stay dead.

What those Salvadoran and U.S. government death squads did not know was that bullets cannot kill the spirit. Bullets could not kill the spirit of Oscar Romero, just as they could not kill the spirit of Jesus, the four churchwomen, the 75,000 Salvadoran martyrs, or the Jesuit martyrs. Those who murdered the six Jesuits and their co-workers are believed to have been connected with the murder of Archbishop Romero,

the four churchwomen, and thousands of other unknown Salvadoran poor. They killed the bodies of these Christians, but they can not kill their spirits.

Perhaps these purveyors of death are beginning to learn a basic Christian lesson. Christianity maintains that those who love life and live a life of love, live on in the love of others. We Christians call this great truth, *resurrection*, the eternal spirit of nonviolent, revolutionary love that insists on justice and peace. It grows in the human community of love and truth that sides with the poor in the nonviolent struggle for justice. Whoever dies in that nonviolent struggle lives on in the spirit of those who take up the struggle anew. Someone always picks up where a martyr leaves off. The spirit of love and truth lives on, the coming of God's reign of justice and nonviolence gets closer and closer. Peace and justice become reality. Such is the lesson of martyrdom, the practice of resurrection, the essence of Christian love.

Just before I went to El Salvador in 1985 to live and work in a church-run refugee camp for displaced victims of the war, the Salvadoran military raided the camp and interrogated the church workers. These death squads found incriminating evidence among the few possessions of the church workers: they found an icon of Romero. To own such a picture was to take part in subversive activity. It was to side with the illegal, resurrected spirit of Romero, and could mean suffering the same fate as Romero, the fate of the poor, the fate of the Christ.

Oscar Romero lived and died in that nonviolent struggle for justice. His life message was a call to conversion, solidarity with the poor, a speaking of truth to power. He proclaimed life when the system around him demanded death. He announced peace when the government and the guerrillas waged war. He exuded hope when despair ruled the day. Because of this magnitude of spirit, he lives on in every Christian who enters God's nonviolent struggle for justice. The message of the Christian community today is as dangerous as the message of Romero: Jesus lives! The Salvadoran death squads, the Pentagon and the U.S. warmakers know it too: Romero lives! The nonviolent struggle for justice continues!

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For years, a story about Romero's conversion circulated among the Jesuits. Once, while visiting a desolate rural village in the poorest outlands of El Salvador, Romero, the newly appointed archbishop of San Salvador, was presented with a half-eaten tomato by a farm worker, a *campesino*. Romero was repulsed at the sight, so the story goes. He turned to a priest who was accompanying him and whispered, "Why would anyone offer me a half-eaten tomato?"

"This is all they have to offer," the priest replied. "It is their last possession, their sign of love, their gift to you."

Romero was stunned, and learned then and there once more the pain of poverty, the war of systemic injustice, the heartbreak of the poor. It was a moment of conversion, one encounter among many on his road to transformation. Slowly he began to understand the plight of the poor, their selfless love and faith, and the Gospel mandate to preach justice. Slowly Romero accepted that call to denounce the "principalities and powers" of violence and to announce God's reign of peace. Once Romero joined the nonviolent struggle for justice, he never quiet. For him, the journey to conversion was forever.

Romero's journey took him from the spoiled life of a quiet, conservative pious cleric whose silence blessed decades of poverty into a prophet of justice, "the voice of the voiceless" in war-torn, politically explosive archdiocese of San Salvador. He represented no political party or ideology, only the suffering people of El Salvador. He became a stunning sign of God's active presence in the world itself.

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Oscar Romero was born in the town of San Miguel on August 15, 1917. He entered the seminary at an early age, was ordained, studied theology in Rome, served as a parish priest, and by the 1970s worked at the archdiocesan seminary in San Salvador, where he befriended the seminary rector, a charismatic Jesuit priest named Rutilio Grande.

As the Jesuits began to speak out publicly for an end to hunger and poverty, the conservative archdiocese replaced Grande with another Jesuit, Amando Lopez, who started to agitate for justice as well. He too was replaced (and would be assassinated that November night in 1989).

Romero believed that priests should not rock the boat, but say their prayers and support the government. Yet his best friend Rutilio thought otherwise. He moved to the countryside and started organizing *campesinos* against the military and corrupt political establishment. Romero was named a bishop in 1974 precisely because he was so conservative, a chief proponent of the radical center, a friend of the wealthy elite, and thus a supporter of the military. He appeared oblivious to the conditions of the poor and the growing military repression, but later he confessed that he was just plain too scared to speak out. Still, he had a great gift of pastoral care and kindness to any person in need.

Rutilio Grande's demonstrations for justice attracted national attention, and he often met with Romero to urge him to speak out. On February 22, 1977, Romero was named archbishop of San Salvador to the delight of government officials, military personnel, and the death squads. He was deliberately chosen by Vatican officials because the Salvadoran bishops wanted a candidate who would not cause controversy. Like most priests and church workers, the Jesuits despaired of any hope for social change coming from the church.

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All that changed overnight on March 12, 1977, when Rutilio Grande, a young boy and an elderly farmer were assassinated as they drove from Aguilares to El Paisnal for evening Mass. When Archbishop Romeo arrived that night and saw the blood-stained body of his friend, scales fell from his eyes. In a flash, he realized that Rutilio's prophetic work for justice and peace was right, that Rutilio, not himself, had been faithful to the Gospel. As Jesuit theologian Jon Sobrino later wrote, "If Rutilio had died as Jesus died, if he had shown that greatest of all love, the love required to lay down one's very life for others--was this not because his life and mission had been like the life and mission of Jesus. Far from being a deluded, misled follower of Jesus, Rutilio must have been an exemplary one! It had not been Rutilio, but Oscar who had been mistaken! It had not been Rutilio who ought to have changed, but himself, Oscar Romero!"(1)

All at once, Romero understood that Grande had been murdered because he called for justice on behalf of the poor. Romero understood that Jesus had been executed for the same reason. In this moment of realization, Oscar Romero was born again.

At the local mass the next day, Romero preached a sermon that stunned the Jesuits and the people of El Salvador. Like the sermons of Martin Luther King, Jr., Romero defended the work of Rutilio Grande, demanded justice for the poor, and called everyone to take up Grande's prophetic solidarity. In protest against the government's suspected participation in the murders, Romero closed the parish schools for three days and cancelled all masses in the entire country the following week. Over one hundred thousand people attended the single Eucharist at the Cathedral in a bold call for justice. While the government and military were concerned, the *campesinos* were inspired and many returned to the faith. On that day, a church was born again with Romero's conversion.

Within six weeks, Romero issued his first pastoral letter urging all Salvadorans to take up Jesus' radical demands in the Sermon on the Mount. "I cry out against injustice," Romero declared, "but only to say to the unjust: Be converted! I cry out in the name of the suffering, of those who suffer injustice, but only to say to the criminals: Be converted! Do not be wicked!"(2)

As more priests and church workers were assassinated, Romero spoke out more intensely, even publicly criticizing the president on several occasions. As the government death squads began to take over villages, attack churches, and massacre *campesinos*, Romero's protest became louder and more regular. In the growing climate of fear and war, his word of truth in a culture of violence and lies was nothing less than a subversive act of nonviolent civil disobedience.

Within a period of months, everywhere Romero went he was greeted with applause. His Sunday homilies were now broadcast nationwide on live radio and heard by nearly everyone in the country. Letters poured in from every village, thanking him for his prophetic voice and confessing their own new found courage.

As Romero gained strength in his role as spokesperson for justice and truth, and as he exhorted the Salvadoran people to the nonviolent struggle for justice and peace, he never lost his simple faith and pious devotion. He prayed his rosary, paid homage to Our Lady of Peace, and joined in parish celebrations and local feasts. From this devotional piety which he shared with all Salvadorans, he paved a new way into active Gospel peacemaking. He preached God's preferential option for the poor, justice and peace. In his opposition to the government's silence, he refused to attend the inauguration of the new Salvadoran president on July 1<sup>st</sup>. The church, he announced, is "not to be measured by the government's support but rather by its own authenticity, its evangelical spirit of prayer, trust, sincerity and justice, its opposition to abuses."(3)

"Peace is a product of justice," Romero preached, "but justice is not enough. Love is also necessary. The love that makes us feel that we are brothers and sisters is properly what makes for true peace. Peace is the produce of justice and love."(4)

As the months passed, many more were arrested, tortured, disappeared and murdered. Romero made two prophetic institutional decisions which stand out for their rare Gospel vision. First, on Easter Monday, 1978, he opened the seminary in

downtown San Salvador to all displaced victims of violence. Hundreds of homeless, hungry and brutalized people moved into the seminary, transforming the quiet religious retreat into a crowded, noisy shelter, make-shift hospital, and playground. Second, he stopped construction on the cathedral until justice and peace are established. When the war was over and the hungry were fed, he announced, then we can resume building our cathedral. Both moves were unprecedented and historic and cast judgment on the Salvadoran government.

Romero's preaching escalated each month to new biblical heights. "Like a voice crying in the desert," he said, "we must continually say No to violence and Yes to peace." His August 1978 pastoral letter was a call for nonviolence and justice which would root out the causes of violence. He outlined the evils of "institutional violence" and repression, then advocated "the power of nonviolence that today has conspicuous students and followers...The counsel of the Gospel to turn the other cheek to an unjust aggressor, far from being passive or cowardly," he wrote, "is the showing of great moral force that leaves the aggressor morally overcome and humiliated. 'The Christian prefers peace to war,' said the bishops' conference at Medellin, alluding to the moral force of nonviolence... We proclaim the supremacy of our belief in peace and we call upon all to strive positively for its construction....We believe our most urgent task is to establish justice," he concluded. "There is an unshakable moral principle that says one cannot do evil in order to achieve good."(5)

Romero also challenged the revolutionaries who took up the machine gun. He met privately with two rebel representatives and spoke to them of "the Christian ideal of nonviolence."(6) Though he did not persuade them, he deepened his own commitment to nonviolent resistance. Romero never blessed or approved of violence in any form. He wanted all the killing to stop. Like Gandhi, he did not want a new society built on bloodshed. He understood why enraged powerless people resorted to violence in their struggle, but he tried to point to a higher path of change. Likewise, he criticized comfortable North Americans who simply condemned the revolutionaries but did nothing to stop the massive U.S. military aid that funded the death squads.

"Let us not tire of preaching love," Romero declared. "It is the force that will overcome the world. 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."(7)

Throughout those difficult years, Romero experienced a deep sense of peace and inner calm. His energy level and peacefulness increased with the persecution, much to his own surprise. His co-workers later attributed this grace to the deep sense of union Romero felt with God. Romero was a contemplative, a mystic, who prayed long into the dark night. It became a familiar occurrence for Romero's advisors to watch him quietly leave the room during an intense debate on the latest crisis and walk to the nearby chapel to pray. After a while, as they grew more and more divided, they urged him to go to the chapel and pray. Just before she was assassinated, Jean Donovan wrote that Archbishop Romero not only inspired her to stay with the poor no matter what the risk, but to pray. "He shows me the power of prayer," she testified.

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After the murder of Fr. Octavio Ortiz and four teenagers attending a youth retreat in January, 1979, Romero once again issued a strong appeal for conversion. "Christ

calls us today to conversion. To grow in that new world of the reign of God, and to be the light of the world, salt and light for the earth." Octavio Ortiz and his companions were witnesses to God's reign announced by Christ and models of conversion, Romero said.(8) When the government denounced the murder priest and the retreatants as armed guerrillas, Romero called the accusations pure lies "from beginning to end." As he began to face public attack himself from the government, he explained that it was necessary to preach the truth and accept the consequences. In this way, he and the Salvadoran people were becoming the true church that God had intended them to be, a faithful Christian community. "The church must suffer for speaking the truth, for pointing out sin, for uprooting sin. No one wants to have a sore spot touched, and therefore a society with so many sores twitches when someone has the courage to touch one and say: 'You have to treat that. You have to get rid of that. Believe in Christ. Be converted,'" he insisted. "What is important is to be converted to God."(9)

"A church that suffers no persecution but enjoys the privileges and support of the things of the earth--beware! It is not the true church of Jesus Christ," Romero declared.(10) "What society and priests and bishops and all Christians must do is to be converted to the preferential option for the poor. The church must denounce error and sin and preach conversion. It must unmask the idols of society. The church must be on the side of the poor, but direct its call for conversion to the poor and rich alike."(11)

"To be converted is to turn to the true God, and in that sense I feel that my contact with the poor, with the needy, leads to a growing sense of need for God," Romero told the press at the bishops' conference at Puebla. "I, too, seek conversion in order to be able to put my trust in God and through God, be able to provide a word of consolation, a response to the poor's anguish, and if possible, point out the way to those who can resolve these predicaments."(12)

Romero lived simply in a three room hermitage on the grounds of a hospital run by a community of nuns. He associated on a daily basis with hundreds of the poorest of the poor. He traveled the countryside constantly, and assisted those who suffered most. He frequently commented that his duty as pastor had become the task of claiming the dead bodies of priests and campesinos and to defend the poor by calling for an end to the killing. One Salvadoran told me how Romero drove out whenever necessary to a large garbage dump where bodies were often discarded by the government death squads. He looked among the trash and the dead bodies for relatives of family members whom he accompanied. "These days I have to walk the roads gathering up dead friends, listening to widows and orphans, and trying to spread hope," he said.(13)

His last few Sunday sermons in late 1979 and early 1980 issued strong calls for conversion to justice and bold denunciations of the daily massacres and assassinations happening everywhere. His plea to the wealthy elite who supported the death squads was pointed and prophetic. "To those who bear in their hands or in their conscience, the burden of bloodshed, of outrages, of the victimized, innocent or guilty, but still victimized in their human dignity, I say: Be converted. You cannot find God on those paths of torture. God is found on the ways of justice, conversion and truth."(14)

Every day, Romero took time to speak with dozens of persons threatened by government death squads. People came to him to ask for the help or protection, to complain about harassment or murders, or to find some guidance and support in their time of grief and struggle. Romero received and listened to everyone of them. His prophetic voice became stronger and angrier as he learned of their pain and suffering.

In February 1980, when Romero heard that President Jimmy Carter was considering sending millions of dollars a day in military aid to El Salvador, Romero was shocked. Deeply distressed, he wrote a long public letter to Carter, asking the United States to cancel all military aid. Carter never responded to Romero, and sent the aid.

In the last week of February 1980, Romero made his annual silent retreat, which his Jesuit spiritual director later said was like Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane. Romero suspected that he would soon be murdered and confessed his fear of a violent death. On March 10<sup>th</sup>, a large suitcase full of dynamite was discovered in a downtown church. The day before, Romero had presided there at a Eucharistic celebration for a political leader murdered by a death squad. The bombs had failed to go off. At the end of the week, he made a dramatic appeal to every segment of society. "Let us be reconciled," he declared, "and we shall make El Salvador a land of brothers and sisters, all children of one God who awaits us all with out-stretched arms."(15)

On March 23, Romero exploded with his most direct appeal to the members of the armed forces. Resounding applause interrupted throughout his dramatic plea for peace:

I would like to make an appeal in a special way to the men of the army, to the police, to those in the barracks. Brothers, you are part of our own people. You kill your own *campesino* brothers and sisters. And before an order to kill that a man may give, the law of God must prevail that says: Thou shalt not kill! No soldier is obliged to obey an order against the law of God. No one has to fulfill an immoral law. It is time to recover your consciences and to obey your consciences rather than the orders of sin. The church, defender of the rights of God, of the law of God, of human dignity, the dignity of the person, cannot remain silent before such abomination. We want the government to take seriously that reforms are worth nothing when they come about stained with so much blood. In the name of God, and in the name of this suffering people whose laments rise to heaven each day more tumultuously, I beg you, I ask you, I order you in the name of God: Stop the repression!(16)

The next day, March 24, 1980, Romero presided at a special evening mass in the chapel of the hospital compound where he lived, in honor of someone who had died one year before. On the way to Mass, he stopped by to receive the sacrament of reconciliation with his Jesuit spiritual director. "I want to feel clean in God's presence," he said.

During Mass, Romero read from John's Gospel: "Unless the grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains only a grain. But if it dies, it bears much fruit."(Jn. 12:23-26) Then he preached about the need to give one's life to others as Christ did.

You have just heard in Christ's gospel that one must not love oneself so much as to avoid getting involved in the risks of life that history demands of us, and that those who try to fend off the danger will lose their lives, while those who out of love for Christ give themselves to the service of others will live, like the grain of wheat that dies, but only apparently. If it did not die, it would remain alone. The harvest comes about only because it dies, allowing itself to be sacrificed in the earth and destroyed. Only by undoing itself does it produce the harvest... Every effort to better society, especially when injustice and sin are so ingrained, is an effort that God blesses, that God wants, that God demands of us....Dear brothers and sisters, let us view these matters at this historic moment with that hope, that spirit of giving and sacrifice. Let us all do what we can. We can all do something.(17)

Romero concluded by saying that the Eucharist they were celebrating was an act of faith. "May this body immolated and this blood sacrificed for humans nourish us also, so that we may give our body and our blood to suffering and to pain--like Christ, not for self, but to bring about justice and peace for our people. Let us join together, then, intimately in faith and hope at this moment of prayer.(18)

Just at that moment of prayer, Romero was shot in the heart by a man with a rifle standing in the back of the church. Romero fell behind the altar and collapsed at the foot of a huge crucifix depicting a bloody and bruised Christ. Blood covered Romero's vestments and the floor of the church, and he gasped for breath. Some sisters rushed to his side, but there was nothing they could do. Within a few minutes, he died. He had given his all, left his word and offered his life for the redemption of humanity.

Romero's funeral was the largest demonstration in Salvadoran history, some say in the history of Latin America. The government was so afraid that they threw bombs into the crowd and opened fire, killing some thirty people and injuring hundreds. The funeral Mass was never completed and Romero was hastily buried.

"I have often been threatened with death," Romero told a Guatemalan reporter two weeks before his assassination. "If they kill me, I shall arise in the Salvadoran people. If the threats come to be fulfilled, from this moment I offer my blood to God for the redemption and for the resurrection of El Salvador. Let my blood be a seed of freedom and the sign that hope will soon be reality. You may say, if they succeed in killing me, that I pardon and bless those who do it."(19)

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Oscar Romero stands out as a saint and a martyr, but also as a prophet of justice, a friend of the poor, a servant of God, and a peacemaker. He has become the martyred shepherd of the third world, the spokesperson of the poor and oppressed, not only of El Salvador, but all of Latin America and the third world, calling us all to conversion, disarmament, compassion and justice.

"I can imagine someone saying, 'So now he thinks he's a prophet!'" Romero once remarked shortly after becoming archbishop. "No, it's not that I think I'm a prophet," he said. "It's that you and I are a prophetic people. Everyone baptized has received a share in Christ's prophetic mission...Because it is God's work, we don't fear the



prophetic mission God has entrusted to us.”(20) Like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and other prophets, Romero was willing to speak the truth to a hard-hearted ruling class. He wants us to do the same.

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Romero was a walking invitation to conversion. He underwent conversion when he saw the blood body of his friend, Rutilio, and he never turned back. He allowed the poor and the martyred people to convert him. Every word he spoke from then on was an invitation to join him on road to conversion. He called upon the wealthy, the people of the United States, and the church to be converted. Like Jesus, he announced that “the time for justice is now,” that God’s nonviolent revolution is at hand. “I call to everyone: Let us be converted so that Christ may look upon our faith and have mercy on us...Turn your eyes to the church of the poor and show concern for the poor as for yourselves.”(21)

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Once we start down the Gospel road to conversion, according to Romero, we must consciously choose to side with the poor. This solidarity with the poor and oppressed means we must think with them, feel with them, walk with them, stand with them, and become one with them. As the persecution of the poor touched his friends, Romero stood side by side with the poor. From that preferential position of solidarity, he called everyone to conversion.

But as Jon Sobrino wrote, Romero did not just opt for the poor--he loved the poor. Because of this deep Christian love, Romero let them lead him. His decisions, actions and life were based on their needs and requests. The natural consequence of this solidarity could only be martyrdom. Romero lay down his life for those in need.

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Perhaps Romero’s most significant contribution was his consistent, daring proclamation of the truth. He spoke the truth about life and death, about government death squads and U.S. military intervention, about injustice and disarmament, about peace and Jesus Christ. He spoke the truth, and accepted the consequences of speaking the truth. Speaking the truth in El Salvador in the 1980s, like in every culture of war, was illegal. The truth exposes violence, injustice and poverty.

Every human being has a piece of the truth, Gandhi noted. But our insight into the truth depends on where we stand. If we stand with the Salvadoran death squads and believe in violence as a way of life, we will see the poor as subversives and evil-doers. If we stand with the Pentagon and the nuclear weapons manufacturers, we will see all those who work for social change for the poor as a threat to our way of life. If we live in a wealthy, North American suburb, isolated from others, possessing more than we could ever need, we will not understand the reality of life for the majority of human beings.

But if we stand with the world’s poor and oppressed, we will see life from a new perspective, from the bottom up. If we stand in a Salvadoran refugee camp as the

U.S. bombs fall around us; if we hold a starving baby while U.S.-backed soldiers steal a village's entire food supply before our very eyes; if we encounter a child who has seen his parents murdered in cold blood; we will see reality differently. We will see the fallout of violence, injustice, and death upon the poor, powerless people of the earth. We will begin to see the world as God sees the world. We will see the world as Jesus learned to see the world, from the perspective of the poor and oppressed. Then, we will learn the truth and be empowered to speak it. We will be granted a vision of the beloved community, the common unity shared by every human being as a child of God.

To speak the truth, one need only side with the poor in a spirit of service, humility, unconditional love, nonviolence and compassion. Speaking the truth requires deep trust in God. Romero saw reality and told the world what he saw, that the rich and powerful were slaughtering the poor and powerless, and what's more, that they were murdering Christ again in the process.

Romero criticized the left and the right: no more killing, no more hunger, no more bombings, no more poverty, no more U.S. military aid, no more guns. He critiqued every form of violence, and proclaimed the truth of nonviolence. He would never water down the truth. He would not deny it. Shortly before he was killed, he told a friend, "Even if I wind up alone, I'm going to carry on."(22)

In this steadfast devotion to truth, Romero was most like Jesus, who spoke the truth, identified with the truth and embodied the truth. Jesus declared that anyone in search of truth would hear his voice. Pilate could not understand the truth. His imperial culture of violence and death knew only lies. He ordered the assassination of Jesus because Jesus threatened to overturn his world of lies. Romero did as Jesus did. He asked people to be open to the truth. His public proclamation of the truth threatened the world of lies which the United States and the Salvadoran governments had so carefully constructed. The authorities responded to his truth-telling by assassinating the truth-teller.

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The truth which Romero spoke was the living Word of God, and it lives on today. The prophet was killed, but the Word of God, he knew, could not be killed. In 1979, he said, "This week I received accusations from both extremes: from the extreme right, that I am a communist; from the extreme left, that I am joining the right. I am not with the right or the left. I am trying to be faithful to the word that God bids me preach, to the message that cannot change, which tells both sides the good they do and the injustices they commit."(23)

Romero's truth, the truth of the Gospel, still stands. The truth is like a half-eaten tomato offered to us from the poor, from Christ, from Monsenor Romero. It is an invitation to conversion, solidarity, justice and peace. We are forgiven and invited to change our ways. To accept this invitation is to embrace salvation.

To accept the truth is to join the nonviolent struggle for justice. It means resisting our country's wars, military aid, military budget, and weapons. It is to walk with hope on the Gospel road to justice and peace.

The truth invites us to undergo the conversion Romero underwent, to stand with the poor, and in turn, to speak the truth. It is the least we can do.

### **Notes**

1. Jon Sobrino. *Archbishop Romero*. New York: Orbis Books, 1990, 10.
2. Oscar Romero. *The Violence of Love*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988, 17.
3. James Brockman. *Romero: A Life*. New York: Orbis Books, 1989, 71.
4. Ibid. 84.
5. Ibid., 142-143, 172.
6. Ibid., 190-191.
7. Romero, *ibid.*, 9.
8. Brockman, *ibid.*, 156.
9. Romero, *ibid.*, 35; Brockman, *ibid.*, 230.
10. Romero, *ibid.*, 152.
11. Brockman, *ibid.*, 190.
12. Ibid., 160.
13. Oscar Romero. *Voice of the Voiceless*. New York: Orbis Books, 1985, 6.
14. Romero, *The Violence of Love*, 90.
15. Brockman, *ibid.*, 239.
16. Ibid., 241-242.
17. Romero, *Voice of the Voiceless*, 191-193.
18. Ibid., 193.
19. Brockman, *ibid.*, 248.
20. Romero, *The Violence of Love*, *ibid.*, 173.
21. Ibid., xi.
22. Ricardo Urioste, "Reviving the Truth, Making It Heard: The Life and Death of Oscar

Romero." *Commonweal*, March 23, 1990, 179.

23. Romero, *The Violence of Love*, 163.