



“The last shall be first” Oscar Romero and the Joy of the Gospel

A sermon by Fr Martin Maier SJ

Brothers and sisters, dear friends of Monseñor Oscar Romero,

I feel honoured and happy to speak to you in this ecumenical service in this church of St Martin-in-the-Fields, well-known for her outreach to the poor and homeless in London and well-known through the Academy of St Martin-in-the-Fields for wonderful music. First of all I would like to apologize for my limitations in English and for all the harm I will do this morning to the wonderful language of Shakespeare.

Archbishop Romero has changed my life. He brought me to El Salvador and this year he brought me to Britain. What most deeply impressed me in his life was the change that took place in him. Until he was appointed archbishop he was rightly considered as a conservative and anxious man who wanted to keep the church out of politics and conflicts. But this changed on 12 March 1977 when Fr Rutilio Grande was killed. Rutilio Grande was assassinated by the rich landowners for his commitment to the poor and for social justice. Rutilio did not die alone. It was tragic but also very significant that an older man who served as sacristan and a young boy who served as an altar boy were killed with him. So his blood really mingled with the blood of the poor. When Romero stood this evening in front of the still bleeding corpses something very profound was happening in him. Oscar Romero was a friend of Rutilio but he had been critical about his pastoral commitment. He felt now that he had to follow the way of Rutilio which was the way of Jesus. Many spoke about the “miracle Romero”. Archbishop Arturo Rivera y Damas, his later successor put it in these words: “One martyr gave birth to another.” A first point I want to make is: change is possible. It is possible on a personal level, but it is also possible in the church, in the society and in the world.

Change is a theme in the gospel we have heard. The rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus to his father’s house to warn his brothers so that they will change their ways. But Abraham’s answer is: “They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.” Among these prophets is Oscar Romero. Today we came together to listen to him so that also we may change.

For a year we have been witnessing a big change in the Church with Pope Francis. I must confess that first I was shocked by his election as many were shocked and disappointed in El Salvador 37 years ago when Oscar Romero was appointed archbishop. But later I became hopeful that with Pope Francis major changes were under way and that he wants to bring the Church back to the Gospel – as did Archbishop Romero.

Pope Francis obviously wants the beatification of Romero and therefore he sees him as a model of a bishop. In this address I would like to put Monseñor Romero and Pope Francis into a dialogue about the theme of our celebration: The last shall be the first – Oscar Romero and the Joy of the Gospel. They are brothers in the spirit and allies in the option for the poor.

1. The Joy of the Gospel

Let us begin with the Joy of the Gospel. This is the title of Pope Francis’ apostolic exhortation. I find this very meaningful. If we really believe in the Good News that God is a loving father and that Jesus is the human face of God’s unconditional love, naturally joy comes up. Pope Francis writes in the Joy of the Gospel, not without humour: “There are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter.” Especially after his conversion Oscar Romero was a joyful person. He especially liked jokes. I will tell you one of the jokes he liked best. In a convent of religious sisters

mysteriously the fridge gets emptied at night. As this happens repeatedly Mother Superior disguises herself as the devil, hides in the kitchen and waits. At midnight a sister appears and starts taking things out of the fridge. Mother Superior switches the light on and says with a terrible voice: I am the devil. The sister answers: thanks be to God you are not Mother Superior!

The theme of Romero's homily on 20 January 1980 was "Christ shows his glory in happiness". He pronounced this homily in the midst of a situation of violence and turmoil: "It can almost sound sarcastic to proclaim such words when we, in El Salvador, experience so much affliction and fear and live with so many different forms of psychosis. Nevertheless, I believe that no other call is more important for our country, for the people of El Salvador, than the call of this morning's liturgy: a call to the joy of optimism. ... God is not a God of sadness but a God of celebrations and feasts, a God of happiness. Therefore in the heart of people who have faith there is no room for pessimism."

What made Romero especially happy and joyful was his experience of God in the poor. How can this be explained? Simply by the words of Jesus that he is present in the poor, the hungry, the suffering and the marginalized. And that the one who sees him sees the Father. So Romero could say: "I came to know God because I came to know my people." And "A bishop always has to learn a lot from his people." And "The people is my prophet." "I have to listen to the Spirit who speaks to me through his people." And again "With this people it is not difficult to be a good shepherd."

Also for Pope Francis the joy of the Gospel is linked with the poor and the little ones: "Jesus felt it when he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and praised the Father for revealing himself to the poor and the little ones (cf. *Lk* 10.21)." And he continues very personally: "I can say that the most beautiful and natural expressions of joy which I have seen in my life were in poor people who had little to hold on to." (EG 7)

The theme of the joy of the Gospel leads us to my second point: the option for the poor.

2. The option for the poor

The theme of this address "The last shall be the first" is another way to express the option for the poor. The option for the poor was the heart of Oscar Romero's spirituality and his pastoral action. The option for the poor is also at the heart of Pope Francis' wish to renew the church. Francis refers to his predecessor Benedict XVI who, in his opening speech for the Latin American bishops' conference in Aparecida in 2007, gave a wonderful theological and Christological foundation for the option for the poor: this option "is implicit in our Christian faith in a God who became poor for us, so as to enrich us with his poverty." And Pope Francis goes on: "This is why I want a poor Church for the poor. We have to state, without mincing words, that there is an inseparable bond between our faith and the poor."

When we speak of poverty we have to differentiate. Gustavo Gutiérrez, the father of liberation theology, makes distinctions between material poverty, voluntary poverty and spiritual poverty. Real poverty means privation, or the lack of goods necessary to meet basic human needs. It means inadequate access to education, health care, public services, living wages, and discrimination because of culture, race or gender. Gutiérrez reiterates that such poverty is evil; it is a subhuman condition in which the majority of humanity lives today, and it poses a major challenge to every Christian conscience and therefore to spirituality and theological reflection.

Spiritual poverty is about a radical openness to the will of God, a radical faith in a providential God, and a radical trust in a loving God. It is also known as spiritual childhood, from which flows the renunciation of material goods. Relinquishing possessions comes from a desire to be more possessed by God alone and to love and serve God more completely.

Voluntary poverty is a conscious protest against injustice by choosing to live together with those who are materially poor. Its inspiration comes from the life of Jesus who entered into solidarity

with the human condition in order to help human beings overcome the sin that enslaves and impoverishes them. Voluntary poverty affirms that Christ came to live as a poor person not because poverty itself has any intrinsic value but to criticize and challenge those people and systems that oppress the poor and compromise their God-given dignity. It involves more than detachment, because the point is not to love poverty but to love the poor.

I do not want to idealize or to romanticise the poor. Among them you also find hatred, violence and sin. But if we take Jesus' sermon of the last judgement seriously, where he identifies himself with the poor, the hungry, the captives, the refugees, it is they who are his vicars. That is why Romero also established a relationship between the cross of Jesus and the suffering of the poor and called them the "crucified people".

One way to approach the option for the poor is by experience. One of Romero's famous sayings is: "I have experienced God because I have experienced my people." In their capacity to relate the Bible to reality the poor became Romero's teachers in faith. Father Salvador Carranza who was in Rutilio Grande's team in Aguilares told me that on one occasion Romero listened for an hour to a group of campesinos when they were discussing a text from the Bible. Then he stepped aside. Father Salvador was worried that there was something wrong. But when he came closer to him he saw tears in Romero's eyes and he heard him saying: "I thought that I knew the Gospel but now I am learning to understand it with new eyes." The poor opened his eyes to a new understanding of the Gospel.

I want to establish a dialogue between Oscar Romero and Pope Francis. So let us switch to the Joy of the Gospel where Francis says in paragraph 48 "The Church has to go forth to everyone without exception but to whom should she go first? When we read the Gospel we find a clear indication: not so much to our friends and wealthy neighbours, but above all the poor and the sick, those who are usually despised and overlooked, 'those who cannot repay you' (Lk 14.14)." The last shall be the first.

In his address during his visit to the Astalli Center, a Jesuit-run Refugee service in Rome Francis says very much in the spirit of Romero: "The poor are also the privileged teachers of our knowledge of God; their frailty and simplicity unmask our selfishness, our false security, our claim to be self-sufficient. The poor guide us to experience God's closeness and tenderness, to receive his love in our life, his mercy as the Father who cares for us, for all of us, with discretion and with patient trust."

Because of his insistence on the option for the poor Romero was quickly accused of being against the rich. All the same he did not want to exclude the rich but to call them to conversion. So does Pope Francis: "The Pope loves everyone, rich and poor alike, but he is obliged in the name of Christ to remind all that the rich must help, respect and promote the poor." (EG 58)

Romero also became aware that charity was not sufficient but that you also have to tackle the structures and the system. This is what Archbishop Helder Câmara from Brazil expressed in the words, especially well-known to CAFOD: "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist." Pope Francis takes exactly this line in his speech at the Astalli Centre: "Charity that leaves the poor person as he or she is, is not sufficient. True mercy, the mercy God gives to us and teaches us, demands justice; it demands that the poor find the way to be poor no longer."

Romero wanted a church similar to Christ, a church serving humankind and especially the poor and needy. So does Pope Francis. I am convinced that we can find much inspiration to build up a poor church for the poor from Archbishop Romero. According to him the church has to continue the life and the work of Jesus. For this she continually has to convert herself to the reign of God and the poor. This corresponds to Pope Francis' frequent call against ecclesial introversion and self-

centredness - “making the Church constantly go out from herself, keeping her mission focused on Jesus Christ, and her commitment to the poor.” (EG 97)

For Romero the church’s outreach is first to the poor: “I have tried to state that the proper theological and historical criterion of the church's praxis must be the world of the poor. Depending on whether it benefits the poor, the Church should support this or that political project. We believe that the only way for the Church to retain its identity and transcendence is by participating in the socio-political processes in our country. In this it will be judged by the poor, in so much as it supports the process of liberation and brings justice and peace to the people...” In a very similar way Pope Francis states: “It is no longer possible to claim that religion should be restricted to the private sphere and that it exists only to prepare souls for heaven. We know that God wants his children to be happy in this world too, even though they are called to fulfilment in eternity.” (EG 182)

A church faithful to the Gospel and to the way of Jesus enters into conflicts. This was Romero’s experience: “The Church is respected, praised, even granted privileges, so long as she preaches eternal salvation and does not involve herself in the real problems of our world. But if the Church is faithful to her mission of denouncing the sin that brings misery to many, and if she proclaims her hope for a more just, humane world, then she is persecuted and calumniated, she is branded as subversive and communist.” It is very interesting that from ultraconservative people Pope Francis, with his clear criticism of our dominating neoliberal economic system which kills, is also accused of being a Marxist.

Once Romero described his duty as a bishop as “going around picking up dead bodies”. This fits with Pope Francis’ vision: “The thing the Church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the Church as a field hospital after the battle. ... to heal wounds. ... I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.”

3. A new model of civilisation

Today’s gospel of the rich man and Lazarus can also be understood as a description of the current global economic and financial order which is profoundly unfair. 20 percent of the world population consumes 80 percent of the resources and are responsible for 80 percent of climate-damaging emissions. Two billion people must survive on less than two dollars a day. Almost one billion are suffering from hunger. There is also the fact that the global financial crisis, as well as the consequences of global warming, most severely hit the poor in developing countries. But they are the least responsible for both of them.

Romero in his search for a different global order took up John Paul II’s vision of a civilisation of love. But he decidedly links this civilisation of love with justice: “A civilisation of love is not sentimentality, it is justice and truth. A civilisation of love that did not demand justice for people would not be true civilisation... Because of this, it is only a caricature of love when we try to patch up with charity what is owed in justice, when we cover with an appearance of benevolence what we are failing in social justice. True love means demanding what is just.”

Pope Francis shares a similar concern: “The planet belongs to all mankind and is meant for all mankind; the mere fact that some people are born in places with fewer resources or less development does not justify the fact that they are living with less dignity.” In his message for the World Day of Peace he argues: “The succession of economic crises should lead to a timely rethinking of our models of economic development and to a change in lifestyles... It is well known that present production is sufficient, and yet millions of persons continue to suffer and die from hunger, and this is a real scandal.”

In *Evangelii Gaudium* he points to new forms of poverty and vulnerability: “the homeless, the addicted, refugees, indigenous people, the elderly who are increasingly isolated and abandoned”. (EG 210) He considers the migrants a particular challenge for him “since I am the pastor of a Church without frontiers, a Church which considers herself mother to all. For this reason, I exhort all countries to a generous openness which, rather than fearing the loss of local identity, will prove capable of creating new forms of cultural synthesis.”

For Romero the option for the poor has to be the guiding principle for the necessary changes in the Church: “Incarnation and conversion is to get closer to the world of the poor. The most important changes in the Church in pastoral care and teaching, in religious and priestly life and in the lay movements will not come through introspection, but by turning to the world of the poor.” Pope Francis almost literally confirms this: “It is important for the whole Church that welcoming the poor and promoting justice not be entrusted solely to ‘experts’ but be a focus of all pastoral care, of the formation of future priests and religious, and of the ordinary work of all parishes, movements and ecclesial groups.”

I come to my end. We started saying that change is possible. Oscar Romero and Pope Francis are witnesses for this. They are also witnesses of the joy of the Gospel. They experienced the joy of the Gospel especially from and in the poor. Personal, ecclesial and social change is inseparably linked with the poor. So let us be actors and collaborators in Pope Francis’ project to renew the Church as a poor Church for the poor. And let us also be actors and collaborators in building up a new and more just world order.