

# **27<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF ASSASSINATION OF ARCHBISHOP OSCAR ROMERO**

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**SACRED HEART CHURCH, LAURISTON**

**SATURDAY 24<sup>TH</sup> MARCH 2007**

## **INTRODUCTION:**

It is indeed a privilege being with you today celebrating and preaching at this Mass on the 27<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the assassination of the late Archbishop Oscar Romero in the Chapel at the Divine Providence Hospital in San Salvador.

As you know His Excellency Archbishop Faustino Sainz Munoz, the Apostolic Nuncio is here with us this evening and will speak to us at the end of this Mass. Also His Excellency Mr Francis Campbell, the British Ambassador to the Holy See, has flown from London to be with us.

I am here with you as a Patron of the recently established Archbishop Romero Trust – but also as a Bishop trying to follow like so very many others in the footsteps of the saintly Archbishop Romero.

I have tried to grow in my knowledge of Archbishop Romero and his people in El Salvador during three visits which I have made to that country along with my brother priests – and have also tried to follow in the footsteps of Archbishop Romero on my further visits to Africa, Central America and India but particularly here in my apostolate in Scotland.

I know that anything I say about my own following of Archbishop Romero can easily be applied by yourselves in your own lives and consequently I would ask you to make that application as I am speaking.

I single out three aspects of “following in Romero’s footsteps”: Spirituality; care of the poor and oppressed; and rejection of oppression.

## **SPIRITUALITY OF ARCHBISHOP ROMERO AND HIS PEOPLE:**

Oscar Romero came from a simple background being the second eldest of six children born in a village in El Salvador’s mountains in 1917. He was educated at junior seminary then in Rome where he was ordained a priest at the age of 24. He loved his people and was eventually ordained Bishop and then Archbishop of San Salvador.

He had a great love of Christ and of Christ in his people. It is believed that his “conversion moment” came shortly after he had moved back to San Salvador to replace the retiring Archbishop. A rural parish priest Father Rutilo Grande SJ along with an old man and a little boy had been ambushed and murdered as they walked to Mass. Romero reacted strongly to that murder closing down all the schools in his diocese for three days of reflection and protest and even cancelled all Masses one Sunday except for the one in the Square before the Cathedral which was attended by more than 100,000 people.

He celebrated Mass, he preached the Gospel in his churches and in his Cathedral and through the medium of the local radio denouncing whenever he could examples of oppression of which he was aware so that he became the real voice of the suffering people of his country.

His simple spirituality based on his love of the Mass and the Sacraments including especially his gift of preaching was something which was to follow him to his death. Having appealed one day directly to the Military urging soldiers not to obey orders contrary to the laws of God he made a special plea to the Army to stop killing their brothers and sisters. It was the very next day that he was assassinated by a death squad that burst into the chapel at the Divine Providence Hospital where he was celebrating Mass – he was shot through the heart while he was preaching and he died at the Altar.

### **CARE FOR THE POOR:**

Oscar Romero had ample opportunity to care for the poor in his suffering country.

When he became a Bishop it was well known that eighteen families owned 90% of the wealth of San Salvador while 60% of the population lived in abject poverty. It was impossible for the Bishop not to become more and more deeply aware of the hardship and injustice that marked the lives of his poor people living in the countryside.

Unequal division of wealth was difficult enough but El Salvador was under the thumb of a Military armed by outside countries – a Military not adverse to killing either by shooting into the protesting crowds or sending in death squads to take out anyone thought to be opposing the Regime.

Romero became a voice for the poor – and used his position to proclaim their just cause. He was indeed a popular local radio preacher and in addition edited the local Catholic paper and promoted lay organisations to help his people in his diocese. As Archbishop his preaching became evermore powerful and was popular with all his people on the national radio despite the Government's attempts to get them off the air.

One of my fondest memories on visiting his ramshackle Cathedral in San Salvador and approaching his tomb was to be asked by a hunched up old man speaking in broken Spanish: "Have you come to see Monsignor?" It was indeed as if Romero was still alive in the Cathedral – but although dead he was fulfilling that prophecy which he had made "If I am assassinated I will continue to live on in my people!".

He had indeed, through his care for the poor in his country, given them a great sense of our own value and their own worth, he empowered them in every way.

### **STANDING UP TO OPPRESSORS:**

The Ministry of Archbishop Romero did extend from being a local bishop to one whose voice was heard proclaiming day in and day out the Gospel message of Jesus Christ and the Church's strong teachings about the rights of the poor and the oppressed.

The Government regarded him as an enemy who must be destroyed and one indeed whose body they did manage to destroy through his sacrilegious assassination.

Although the wealthy called him a friend of revolution, Romero was indeed a peacemaker. He knew that simply ending rebel violence would not end the greater violence induced by poverty, hunger and oppression. For him, society had to be restructured, so that children would not die of malnutrition and disease while their parents could not find decent work. Though he encouraged peaceful reform, when violence in the face of oppression was unavoidable, he still worked to overcome the spirit of hatred and of vengeance. He stated quite simply: “I am a shepherd who, with his people, has begun to learn a beautiful and difficult truth: Our Christian Faith requires that we submerge ourselves in this world”.

### **LASTING LESSON OF ARCHBISHOP ROMERO:**

There are visible signs of the memory of Archbishop Romero in various places in our countries. On the front wall of Westminster Abbey there are engraved the figures of Martin Luther King and Archbishop Oscar Romero side by side.

Near the entrance to the University Halls of Residence beside the Commonwealth Pool there is “Romero Place”. A plaque honouring the life and work of Archbishop Romero was unveiled by the then Lord Provost of the City of Edinburgh and dedicated by myself – his inspiration lives on to inspire generations of students.

The Catholic Aid Agency CAFOD, the equivalent to SCIAF, has along with SCIAF been at the forefront of promoting Romero ever since they changed the address of their offices from Garden Close to Romero Close in 1988. And now of course the Archbishop Romero Trust has been inaugurated.

As I indicated earlier on in my words it is up to us not just to think of the inspiration of Romero but to put into practice in our own lives some of the inspirations which he has given to many people not only during his life on earth but for the past 27 years.

We ourselves should consider **our own spirituality** – our devotion to the Mass and the Sacraments to our times of prayer and our union with the suffering Christ. We should be more and more aware of the care which we should be giving to the poor and the powerless both throughout the world but also here at home. Romero never passed by any of those “little ones” of Our Lord.

We must also be more than scrupulous with regard to our **care for the poor**. Thank God, our outreach from this country is magnificent, both with regard to our missionary endeavours and our ongoing funding with regard to development aid all over the world. Perhaps, however, we could be more careful with regard to our care for the poor on our doorsteps. Difficult decisions have often to be made by each one of us as we pass by those who seem to be pathetically begging at the sides of our streets. However, I am sure that our voices must be regularly raised to speak out for the poor and the powerless, those who in our midst have no one else to speak for them.

We must be prepared to **stand up and speak out in the face of oppression of any kind**. Archbishop Romero listened daily to the sufferings of those who were oppressed in every sort of way. When mothers and wives realised that their children had disappeared and their tortured bodies were found, Romero once remarked: “It’s my job to retrieve the dead”.

Perhaps that is something of the vocation of each and every one of us – it is our task as Christians to “retrieve the dead”; to give new life to those who have no hope; and to speak out in the name of those who are indeed in the greatest need in our Church and world at this present time.

**CONCLUSION:**

On my successive visits to El Salvador as also to other places of suffering in Africa and Central America I hang my head in shame when I realise that the same poverty still exists year by year by year with little or no sign of improvement.

Even today standing here in this beautiful church dedicated to the Sacred Heart in Edinburgh I think back to the end of Make Poverty History campaign some two years ago now as we prepare for another such campaign prior to the G8 summit taking place in Germany.

What has changed? How little has changed? What have we done?

Again we must repeat that call to “Make Poverty History!” and our voices must continue to echo out in the name of the poor and the powerless.

As we commemorate this anniversary day may the life and example of Romero continue to help and inspire us as we continue his apostolate in the Church and the world being other Christ's' in the place of that one Jesus Christ, the Son of God who came on earth to suffer, die and rise again for us all.