

A Cold War perspective on Romero's death

Phillip Berryman | Apr. 6, 2010



Archbishop Oscar A. Romero greets people after Mass at the doors of the cathedral in San Salvador in November 1979.

Commentary

In that last Sunday sermon on March 23, 1980, Archbishop Oscar Romero followed his familiar format, starting with an extended reflection on the scripture texts of the day. He eventually described and denounced incidents of government violence against civilians in recent days.

This had been his practice since he became archbishop three years earlier in the midst of a political crisis: Government troops had ended a weeklong demonstration in a plaza protesting fraudulent elections. Dozens of protestors had been killed. At a pastoral meeting the next day, Romero listened to reports on the violence and then suggested the meeting be suspended and all return to their parishes and be available to provide help to those who needed it. Within days, the murder of his friend Fr. Rutilio Grande triggered a church-state conflict that lasted for months and included the military occupation of the area of Grande's parish. Given the lack of media able or willing to criticize human rights abuses, Romero's sermons became a source of alternate news, and a denunciation of the abuse of power.

Yet, in his last sermon, I sensed something new. After he described incidents where troops had killed unarmed peasants, Romero addressed soldiers and guardsmen -- his voice was being broadcast nationwide by radio -- and he said that these peasants were their own brothers and sisters. He then said, "No human command is above God's law: 'Thou shalt not kill,'" and then, to thunderous applause, "I beg you, I order you: Stop the repression."

This was a challenge to military discipline: He was in effect telling troops to disobey orders, if those orders were to kill unarmed people. It was obviously a political act. And yet it was simply the reiteration of the commandment -- or a statement that the commandment was applicable to this situation. Romero's ministry as a bishop had political implications, but it grew directly from his evangelical and pastoral mission.

That night I remember wondering whether this sermon might not cost him his life. He had long been receiving death threats; now they might be carried out. The next day we were all stunned by the news that he had been

shot -- stunned, but not entirely surprised. After all, several more priests had been killed since Grande's murder.

The pattern continued after Romero's assassination, notably in December 1980, with the rape and murder of four American churchwomen. By the end of 1980, approximately 12,000 Salvadorans had been killed, virtually all civilians, and many of them lay church activists. Throughout Latin America, priests, sisters and even bishops were arrested, tortured, deported and sometimes killed.

How do priests, sisters and bishops 'deserve' to be killed? I got one clue from a representative of the Salvadoran business community who in 1978 began our interview by saying, 'To understand El Salvador you have to start in Moscow.' The military and the wealthy elites were convinced that they were on the front lines of a worldwide battle against communism in which ideas were as dangerous as bullets.

After the Cuban revolution in 1959, many Latin Americans came to believe that a different model of society was needed; it would be 'socialist' since the existing capitalist model did not seem capable of bringing about a decent life for the majority of people. Military coups in Brazil (1964), Chile (1973), Argentina (1976) and elsewhere were the response to growing political and grass-roots militancy. Those militaries had been encouraged by training from the United States and by ongoing contacts with U.S. military advisers.

One memory of Romero in October 1979 remains etched in my mind. A week earlier a coup had overthrown the military-led government in El Salvador and installed a new civilian-military government that was promising to make radical changes, obviously with the aim of preventing a revolution similar to that of the Sandinistas, who had recently overthrown the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua. However, government-sponsored violence increased, as I had seen that morning when a protest march was attacked by National Guard troops and at least three people were killed. That evening, Romero challenged the new government by drawing attention to a list of 179 people who had 'disappeared' under the previous government. Unless the new government could account for their whereabouts or their fate, it would show that it was unable or unwilling to confront the violence, let alone address the country's deeper problems.

This was Romero's way, to clear-sightedly and fearlessly confront the situation of his country and his people. It was rooted in his origins in a rural family in San Miguel, his experiences as bishop of a rural diocese, and his constant pastoral contact, visiting rural areas. When I went to the modest chancery office on the seminary grounds, I inevitably found myself in the waiting room with groups of poor peasants waiting their turn.

Romero's assassination seemed to mark a point of no return, as the country slid toward civil war, which formally opened with a guerrilla offensive in 1981, just before Ronald Reagan's inauguration in the United States. Over the ensuing decade, the United States poured billions of dollars into propping up the Salvadoran military and government in order to prevent 'another Nicaragua.' Neoconservatives and the Reagan administration portrayed Central America as a security threat to the United States. The Salvadoran guerrillas fought the military to a stalemate, while tens of thousands of civilians were killed, overwhelmingly by pro-government forces. Archbishop Arturo Rivera y Damas, Romero's successor, continued to insist that the solution had to be political, not military.

The decade ended with another assassination -- that of the six Jesuits, their housekeeper and her daughter in November 1989. That killing, by the U.S.-trained Atlacatl battalion, showed the bankruptcy of U.S. policy. The whole premise for 30 years of counterrevolution in Latin America evaporated.

If some were soon celebrating 'victory' in the Cold War (the Berlin Wall also fell in November 1989), Salvadorans were among the many losers. Not only were an estimated 75,000 killed, but no progress was made toward a society in which all Salvadorans would have an opportunity and would be treated as equal citizens.

Our world is very different from that of Romero, not only in Internet connections and cell phones. Today it is

clear that bringing about true human development is not a battle between capitalism and socialism, but rather a matter of assuring effective and accountable government, a strong and diversified private sector, high levels of education, health care for all, development of human capital, control over corruption, and strong institutions. The example of Costa Rica shows that it can be achieved, even by small Central American countries historically dependent on agroexport crops.

Romero lived by the conviction that each Salvadoran -- especially each poor Salvadoran -- is God's image, and must not be sacrificed for an ideology. That conviction remains valid after a decade in which untold thousands have been sacrificed in a misnamed "war on terror," consciously modeled by its architects on the Cold War. As in El Salvador, it is the poor and the weak who pay the price in the lands along the Afghan-Pakistani border, where today civilians are being killed by drones piloted from halfway around the world.

More than two years before he died, Romero said, "Whoever tortures a human being, whoever abuses a human being, whoever outrages a human being abuses God's image, and the church takes as its own that cross, that martyrdom."

Thirty years later, we still have much to learn from Oscar Romero.

[Phillip Berryman is a translator and writer who followed events in El Salvador while living in Guatemala (1976-80).]

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