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Looking to the example of Archbishop Oscar Romero

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

Like many, I'm hopeful about the new Jesuit pope from Latin America who takes the name Francis, but I'm concerned about reports of his silence during Argentina's "Dirty War." I grieve, too, as we mark the 10th anniversary of the evil U.S. war on Iraq, to recall that few U.S. priests and bishops spoke out against our wasteful war. I think we need church leaders who speak out prophetically against war, poverty, nuclear weapons and the destruction of the environment and point us to God's reign of justice, disarmament and nonviolence. We all need to do that.

Shortly before he was killed, 33 years ago this week, Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador said, "If one day, they took our radio station away from us, closed the newspaper or didn't let us speak; if they killed off all of our priests and the bishop too, then each one of you would have to be a microphone for God. Each one of you would have to be a messenger, a prophet." I think the time has come for each one of us to lend our voice so that together we can be a prophetic people for peace and nonviolence. We all have to become microphones for the God of peace and nonviolence.

This week, I've been reading a wonderful new collection of stories about Archbishop Romero called *Monsenor Romero: Memories in Mosaic* by Maria Lopez Vigil (Orbis, 2013). For many years, she collected stories by prominent church workers and ordinary "campesinos" who knew Romero personally. They are amazing and inspiring. Romero for me is one of history's greatest Christian leaders, perhaps the most outspoken, Gospel-based leader we ever had. More than a saint and a martyr, he is a prophet in the same league as Jeremiah and Isaiah. Just knowing that he existed, that we live in the age of Romero, that any of us can follow Jesus like that, gives me strength.

I'm reminded of a poster that used to hang over Daniel Berrigan's writing desk. It was a mammoth picture of Romero with a big bold caption that read: "We want more bishops like Romero."

Monsenor Romero: Memories in Mosaic tells of his greatness, his humanity, his struggles, his faith and his compassion. Of course, the book speaks to me because of my own foundational experiences in El Salvador in the 1980s, and I know many of the people in this book. But after all these years, Romero still leaves me speechless with awe and wonder.

Here are a few stories from the book:

Just after he was made archbishop of San Salvador, Romero had to preside in March 1977 at the funeral of his friend Fr. Rutilio Grande, the outspoken Jesuit who was the first priest assassinated. At that moment, the scales fell from his eyes and Romero took up where Grande left off. The military had turned Grande's town of Aguilares into an encampment of the death squads who stormed the church and desecrated the Blessed Sacrament. Hundreds were killed. When the military left the church in June, Romero held a special Mass, then decided to process through the town with the Blessed Sacrament to purify the village:

We left the church singing. It was a terribly hot day, and Monsenor Romero was soaked in sweat under his red rain cape. He held the monstrance high. Before him there were hundreds of people. We circled the main square singing and praying. The municipal offices across from the church were full of guardsmen who were watching us. When we neared, several of them went to the middle of the road and pointed their rifles at us. Then more of them came. They spread their legs defiantly and with their large boots formed a wall that we could not go through. Those at the front stopped and gradually those further back had to stop as well. The procession came to a halt. There we were, face to face with the rifles. When no one was moving anymore, we turned to look at Monsenor Romero, who was at the very back. He lifted the monstrance a little higher and said in a loud voice so that all could hear, "Adelante" -- "Let us go forward."

Then, little by little, we moved toward the soldiers, and little by little they began to back up. We moved forward. They moved backward. Eventually they backed up toward their barracks. Finally they lowered their rifles and let us pass. From that day on, when any important event occurred in El Salvador, whether you were with him or against him, you always had to look to Monsenor Romero.

Romero's homilies were broadcast to the whole nation, and millions of people listened to them. Sometimes they were more than an hour and a half long, yet everyone listened. Each week, he gathered a group of friends to discuss the readings and help him prepare his homily. He usually had no notes. He catalogued all the killings of each week and denounced the government killers. On Mondays, he always asked his secretaries what they thought of his homilies:

In our meetings with him, he was always so humble, and he never imposed anything on us. It was like he depended on us so much. One Monday when he asked me about the homily, I told him what was on my mind. "You're always so quiet when I see you, Monsenor. And then when I hear you in the Cathedral, I feel like you turn into a different person, even in the intonation of your voice. You project such strength and certainty. It can't all be the microphone!" "You feel that much of a change?" [he asked.] "Yes, it's like you're two people -- the everyday person, and the person who gives the homilies at the Cathedral."

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At the Latin American conference of bishops meeting in Puebla, Romero asked London activist Julian Filochowski for advice on speaking to the press. (Earlier, Julian had organized the campaign to get British parliamentarians to nominate Romero for the Nobel Peace Prize.)

"Just respond to the thing you're really sure about, because whatever you say is on record forever," [I said.] Basic advice. He seemed really nervous to me, but when he was in front of the sea of journalists, it was like it was with his homilies. He became another man! When they asked him about the divisions among the bishops in El Salvador, he answered: "Unfortunately, there is division. But I think there's a verse in the Gospel that announced the coming of these kinds of things. It's when Christ says that he has not come to bring peace, but a sword. When he explains this, he talks about divisions in the family. That's because true unity is not romanticism. It's not appearances. The kind of unity that Christ calls for is unity in truth. And that truth is hard sometimes. It means giving up things we like. True unity means that kind of sacrifice. So it's not hard to understand that within the church there might still be division."

Lutheran Bishop Medardo Gomez recalls seeing him in a traffic jam:

I was afraid of him. Terrified. I won't deny it. Monsenor Romero called a lot of ecumenical meetings, and out of fear, I never went. Who among us didn't know that they were after him? I admired him because he kept taking greater risks, but those same actions made me stay away. That was my dilemma.

One day, I was driving my car along one of the central streets of San Salvador, and a huge traffic jam started to build up. It was the kind of congestion that exhausts your patience. Then I noticed that right next to me, driving his little car, was Monsenor Romero.

We were there a good long while, and things weren't getting any better. Then it was as if Monsenor Romero just got fed up. He must have been in a hurry because he decided to get out of the car, leave it there, and continue on foot. I was watching him from my car, which wasn't going anywhere. Nearby there was a pickup truck full of rich boys also stopped in traffic. When they saw Romero, they started to whistle and yell nasty things at him. "Priest of Beelzebub!" "Why don't you go back to Moscow?" "Romero, you should be the first to go!" They goaded him, stuck their tongues out, even threw something at him? Monsenor didn't even look at them. He just kept walking along. He didn't stop or quicken his pace. The whole thing made me feel terrible ..."

On March 17, one week before he was killed, Romero met with a young Salvadoran priest who had gone to work in Nicaragua but returned to San Salvador to help out Romero.

"You should really leave the country," Romero told the stunned young priest. "Go back to Nicaragua. You won't be able to do anything here. You won't be able to work or move around. These people in the ruling class are in such a frenzy that you wouldn't last 24 hours. They'd kill you. Me too. Soon, they're going to get rid of me, too." He moved his hand up to the cross around his neck, held it, and let it go. "But you'll see. There will be other times, better times. We have to create a little reserve with all of you priests that are out of the country right now so that when El Salvador changes, you can come back. Your experience in Nicaragua is going to be important for everybody. For me, too. You know, we really have to rethink that word I used to be so afraid of -- the word 'revolution.' That word carries a lot of the Gospel in it."

"It's important not to love ourselves so much that we're not willing to take the risks that history demands of us," Romero said in his last homily, one minute before he was assassinated at the altar. That's an important lesson for all of us -- laypeople, priests, bishops, archbishops, cardinals and popes included. History, and the Christ of history, demand we take risks on behalf of suffering humanity and creation itself. Romero shows us we do not have to be afraid. We, too, can go forward, do what we can, speak out as best we can, and try to make a difference.

In these days of rapid change, I look to the example of Archbishop Romero and hope for a new "Catholic Spring" where we might all rise to the occasion, take the risks history demands of us, become microphones for the God of peace and point the way toward God's reign of justice, disarmament and nonviolence.

John Dear will lead a retreat, "Jesus the Peacemaker," April 5-7 in East Stroudsburg, Pa. To see John's speaking schedule for 2013 or to invite him to speak in your church or school, go to John Dear's website. One of John's essays appears in the new book *A Faith Not Worth Fighting For*. His book *Lazarus, Come Forth!* explores Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. John's talk at the 2011 Sabeel conference in Bethlehem is featured in the new book *Challenging Empire*. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings*, *Put Down Your Sword* and *A Persistent Peace*, are available from Amazon.com.

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