

**OSCAR ROMERO**  
**A ROLE MODEL FOR PEACE**



## THE BACKGROUND

### The country

El Salvador is a small country in Central America. It is the smallest of the nations there and it has the biggest population (around six million). El Salvador has a long history of violence and resistance against oppression. The indigenous population resisted the Spanish invasion in the 16th century for quite long. Then the country fought for independence from Spain.

After the independence, several mixed Spanish-indigenous families took over the government and economy. They did away with all the land protections and benefits that the indigenous people had. This gave rise to rebellions and revolts during the 19th century. The peasants and the poor people fought for their rights. They were not successful.

### American support

In the 20th century, around 14 families owned almost all the land in the country. When the peasants revolted again, there was a great massacre (1931) where tens of thousands of people died. The government was in the hands of the rich people and the military.

Because the revolts had been inspired by Communism, the United States supported the army and the oppressive government. They didn't want any Communist government just south of their own country. This was during the Cold War, when human rights and social rights were considered less important than which ideological "block" you belonged to.

### The Church

The dominant religion in El Salvador is Christianity. There are almost no other religions than Roman Catholic Christianity. This form of Christianity is very hierarchical. The country is divided into several different areas, called dioceses. Each diocese has a Bishop, who is the leader of the priests. In the capital, there is the most important among the Bishops, called the

Archbishop. The Archbishop is an important figure with considerable authority.

At the time when Oscar Romero became Archbishop (1977), some sections of the Church were very active for social justice among the poor. Some of them were quite inspired by Communism. The political situation was bad. The elected government had been replaced by a group of military officers. The army had begun persecuting poor people again, hunting socialists and communists and killing hundreds of people every month. Some of these were priests, nuns and workers in the Church. Still, the Church was silent. It was very dangerous to speak out against the military regime.

At this time, there were military regimes in many countries in Latin America. They were all involved in abuse of human rights. In almost all cases, they received silent (and material) support from the United States. It was felt that they were protecting Latin America against Communism. At the same time, nothing was done to help the poor. The United States had even formed a special Military Academy, called “School of the Americas”, where soldiers from Latin American countries received training. They later used this training to kill and torture dissidents in their own countries.

### **Conflict within the Church**

Because of the Cold War and the persecution of Christians in Communist countries, there was a strong tension within the Church: was it good to support social justice when it looked so much like Communism? Some thought it was better to be at the side of the rulers, so that they could influence them. On the other hand, the rulers (who were all officially Christian) were dictators and murderers. Many in the Church preferred to support the poor. This was the situation when Oscar Romero became the leader of the Church in El Salvador.

## THE STORY

### Priest and bishop

Oscar Romero was born on August 15, 1917. His father trained him as a carpenter, but when he was 13 he entered the seminary, the school for future priests. In 1937 he left for the national seminary in San Salvador, the capital. Then he continued his studies in Rome.

On April 4, 1942, Romero was ordained a Catholic priest in Rome. When he was 26 years old, he returned to El Salvador. There he worked as a priest for twenty years, then he became Rector of the seminary in San Salvador and Director of the diocesan newspaper. He got the reputation of being conservative.

This was during the time when many in the Latin American Church were strongly influenced by socialist ideals and thought that the Church must liberate the poor. They had developed a certain kind of theology, called “liberation theology.” This theology was not appreciated by the Pope and the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church. Romero followed the official line and rejected this kind of teaching.

That is why many priests involved in social justice were unhappy when he became assistant bishop in San Salvador in 1970. Later, in 1975, he became bishop of another diocese. And in 1977, he was appointed archbishop of San Salvador.

Romero was a compromise candidate proposed by conservative fellow bishops. He was considered predictable, an orthodox, pious intellectual who was known to criticize the priests who wanted land reform for the poor farmers and who supported the liberation theology. But an event would take place within three weeks of his election that would transform the new Archbishop.

### The turning point

On March 12, a progressive Jesuit priest, Rutilio Grande, who had been creating self-reliance groups among the poor peasants, was assassinated. His

death had a profound impact on Romero, who knew him and was his friend. He later said: "When I looked at Rutilio lying there dead I thought: if they have killed him for doing what he did, then I too have to walk the same path".

Romero urged the government to investigate the crime, but they ignored his calls. The press, which was censored, also remained silent. At the same time, the government started being suspicious of the Church. In his response to this murder, Romero revealed a radicalism that had not been evident before. Without endorsing liberation theology, he began to speak out against the poverty, social injustice, assassinations and torture taking place in the country. He began to be noticed internationally.

## **Fighting alone**

In 1979, the Revolutionary Government Junta came to power amidst a wave of human rights abuses from paramilitary right-wing groups and from the government.

This was the beginning of the Salvadoran Civil War. By January 1980, the left-wing political organizations united to form a single front against the government. The civil war lasted for over twelve years and was extremely violent. It included the use of death squads, heavy military equipment, the recruitment of child soldiers, the deliberate terrorizing and targeting of civilians, as well as other violations of human rights.

The United States contributed to the conflict by providing large amounts of military aid to the government, despite significant opposition from the American public.

Romero spoke out against military aid from the United States to the new government and wrote to the President, Jimmy Carter, in February 1980, warning that increased military aid would "undoubtedly sharpen the injustice and the repression inflicted on the organized people, whose struggle has often been for their most basic human rights". His letter was ignored.

## **Total persecution**



In 1980 the persecution of dissidents and poor farmers claimed the lives of 3,000 per month, with cadavers clogging the streams, and tortured bodies thrown in garbage dumps and the streets of the capital weekly. The Archbishop spoke out against it with increasing frequency. In the Church hierarchy, however, there was little support for Romero. With one exception, all the Salvadoran bishops turned their backs on him, going so far as to send a secret document to Rome, accusing him of being "politicized" and of seeking popularity.

Unlike them, Romero had refused to ever attend a government function until the repression of the people was stopped. He kept that promise. It won him the enmity of the government and military, and an astonishing love of the poor majority.

Archbishop Romero denounced what he characterized as the "persecution" of his Church:

*In less than three years, more than fifty priests have been attacked, threatened and slandered. Six of them are martyrs, having been assassinated; various others have been tortured, and others expelled from the country. Religious women have also been the object of persecution. The archdiocesan radio station, Catholic educational institutions and Christian religious institutions have been constantly attacked, menaced, threatened with bombs. Various parish convents have been sacked.*

## Death

Romero could not stop the violence. All he had to offer the people were weekly sermons broadcast throughout the country, his voice assuring them, not that atrocities would cease, but that the church of the poor, themselves, would live on. This was almost the only source of real news for the population. Millions listened to him.

*"If some day they take away the radio station from us . . . if they don't let us speak, if they kill all the priests and the bishop too, and you are left a people without priests, each one of you must become God's microphone, each one of you must become a prophet."*

Romero was shot to death on March 24, 1980 while celebrating Mass at a small chapel near his cathedral. The day before, he had given a sermon in which he called for soldiers, as Christians, to obey God's higher order and to stop carrying out the government's repression and violations of basic human

rights. He was shot when he lifted the chalice. It is believed that his assassins were members of Salvadoran death squads, including two graduates of the School of the Americas.

## **War until 1992**

There were more than 250,000 people from all over the world at his funeral. During the ceremony, a bomb exploded on the Cathedral square and subsequently there were shots that probably came from surrounding buildings. While almost no one died of the bomb or the shots, many people were killed during the following mass panic; official sources talk of 31 overall casualties, journalists indicated between 30 and 50 dead. Some witnesses claimed it was government security forces that threw bombs into the crowd, and army sharpshooters, dressed as civilians, that fired into the chaos from the balcony or roof of the National Palace. As the gunfire continued, the body was buried in a crypt beneath the sanctuary.

Already within the next year some 200 catechists and farmers who watched Romero walk into that country church were killed. Altogether over 75,000 Salvadorans would be killed, one million would flee the country, another million left homeless, constantly on the run from the army.

In 1990, the UN began peace negotiations and on January 16, 1992, a final agreement, The Chapultepec Peace Agreement, was signed by the combatants in Mexico City, formally ending the conflict.

## SOME WORDS OF OSCAR ROMERO

We have never preached violence, except the violence of love, which left Christ nailed to a cross, the violence that we must each do to ourselves to overcome our selfishness and such cruel inequalities among us. The violence we preach is not the violence of the sword, the violence of hatred. It is the violence of love, of brotherhood, the violence that wills to beat weapons into sickles for work.

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When we struggle for human rights, for freedom, for dignity, when we feel that it is a ministry of the church to concern itself for those who are hungry, for those who have no schools, for those who are deprived, we are not departing from God's promise. He comes to free us from sin, and the church knows that sin's consequences are all such injustices and abuses. The church knows it is saving the world when it undertakes to speak also of such things.

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Beautiful is the moment in which we understand that we are no more than an instrument of God; we live only as long as God wants us to live; we can only do as much as God makes us able to do; we are only as intelligent as God would have us be.

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I don't want to be an anti, against anybody. I simply want to be the builder of a great affirmation: the affirmation of God, who loves us and who wants to save us.

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We must overturn so many idols, the idol of self first of all, so that we can be humble, and only from our humility can learn to be redeemers, can learn to work together in the way the world really needs. Liberation that raises a cry against others is no true liberation. Liberation that means revolutions of hate and violence and takes away lives of others or abases the dignity of others cannot be true liberty. True liberty does violence to self and, like



## Peace Role Models: Oscar Romero

Christ, who disregarded that he was sovereign, becomes a slave to serve others.

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There are many things that can only be seen through eyes that have cried

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Peace is not the product of terror or fear. Peace is not the silence of cemeteries. Peace is not the silent result of violent repression. Peace is the generous, tranquil contribution of all to the good of all. Peace is dynamism. Peace is generosity. It is right, and it is duty.

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I will not tire of declaring that if we really want an effective end to violence we must remove the violence that lies at the root of all violence: structural violence, social injustice, exclusion of citizens from the management of the country, repression. All this is what constitutes the primal cause, from which the rest flows naturally.



## THE VISION OF OSCAR ROMERO

Oscar Romero never wrote a book to tell his vision. He held sermons in Church. Other people collected these sermons and made books out of them. Romero didn't formulate a particular vision; as a Bishop and as a Christian, his vision was simply to follow Jesus. He considered that if Jesus had given his life for others, then we also should give our lives for others. If Jesus had got new life, we could also hope for new life after death.

This is the Christian faith. It was shared by his fellow Bishops and everyone in the Church. What made Oscar Romero different was the conclusions he drew from this. When he saw that his friend Rutilio Grande had been killed because he served the poor, he seems to have realized that Grande had done what Jesus had done. In that case, he himself, Romero, would have to do the same.

What did this mean? It meant that he must oppose all violence. There is something that is stronger than violence, and that is love. The book of his sermons is called "The Violence of Love". Romero wanted to show that love is a force that destroys walls, breaks down resistance, opens up the prisons. It is "good" violence. This is the force of God.

This force is resisted by fear and selfishness. Because some powerful people were afraid to lose what they had, Grande was killed, and his good work destroyed. Romero understood that if the Church really is to be the centre of this "violence of love", it must be on the side of all who are oppressed, who suffer and who are threatened.

It is important to remember that Romero didn't come to this conclusion because he had read some special kind of philosophy or theology. He simply took his faith seriously. He believed that this force of God is stronger than all violence. But he also knew that fear and selfishness can be extremely dangerous. He knew he would probably be killed. But he also knew, and proclaimed, that violence is useless: true liberty cannot be won by killing others. True liberty is only to be found in service of those who are vulnerable.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF OSCAR ROMERO TODAY

### Similarities

Oscar Romero was a priest and a Bishop in a Christian nation involved in civil war, on the American continent. Bangladesh is a mainly Muslim country in Asia, with no civil war. Why is Oscar Romero important for us?

There are at least three reasons why Oscar Romero is important for us today in Bangladesh, and there is one great similarity between El Salvador thirty-five years ago and Bangladesh today.

The similarity is the hard opposition between different groups in the country. There are people who have plans for the future of this country that are totally opposed to each other and sometimes use violence to try to suppress each other. This was the case in El Salvador before the civil war, and it is the case today in Bangladesh. Oscar Romero couldn't stop the civil war from beginning and he was one of its victims. For us in Bangladesh, it is important to see the signs in our society and understand them, so that we can avoid escalating violence.

It is also important to learn from people who have found, not only that violence is not an option, but that there is an alternative to violence. Oscar Romero was such a person.

### Transformation through empathy

The first reason why he is important today is that his commitment to peace and justice was totally unexpected. When he was Archbishop, he was expected to disturb nobody. He was known as a traditional, conservative intellectual. He turned out to be a courageous, radical activist. So here is the first lesson: people can change.

Why did he change? Romero said himself: There are many things that can only be seen through eyes that have cried. There are things you understand only when your heart is touched or even wounded. When his friend Rutilio

Grande had been killed, simply because he did good things to the poor, Romero understood that this was not a war against Communism, but against goodness – against all that is good in the human being. He could see this because he had himself been touched by the violence through the death of his friend.

You must let your heart be wounded. Romero saw innocent people being killed, women raped, farmers thrown out from their homes. Instead of closing his eyes and his heart, he suffered together with them. In Bangladesh, we see slums destroyed, people evicted, the rich becoming richer, innocent people losing their land, their savings, their health; we see girls being trafficked and sold, poor workers being exploited, politicians becoming millionaires, corruption everywhere... Are we closing our eyes and our hearts?

### **Never feed the violence**

The result of suffering is often that the heart becomes hard. Spontaneously, we want to hit back when we are hurt. Many people in El Salvador had stopped believing that the rich and powerful could change. They wanted to use violence to take power and transform the society. They wanted to kill those who wanted to kill them.

Romero didn't side with them. He was never on one or the other side of the civil war. In his view, freedom simply cannot come through killing and destroying. That is an illusion. God shows another way, which is just as dynamic, but which brings transformation and justice: the way of self-giving love. When we want to retaliate, take revenge, hit back and use violence, this energy must be transformed into self-discipline and the dynamism of non-violence. Only then will the killing stop. This is the second lesson: confronted with violence and terrorism, never use violence.

### **Success and failure**

So what do you do? Romero first of all appealed to all who were in power, in the country and in other countries. He asked the government to investigate the murder of Grande. When he found out that the United States was supplying arms to the Salvadorian army, he wrote to the President of

the United States. When the war was escalating, he wrote and asked for an international intervention. Nobody answered.

Then he appealed to the people through sermons and radio emissions. The people responded but were powerless.

At the end he appealed to the soldiers who were carrying out the orders of the officers to kill and persecute poor people and dissidents. He asked them to stop obeying unjust orders. The next day he was killed.

In one way, Romero was totally unsuccessful. Nobody except the poor listened to him; he couldn't stop the war. In another way, he was absolutely successful. He showed that a man can be transformed. He surprised all the cynics and those who believe that everyone is selfish. He said that if Jesus had died for others, he would too; and then he died, standing up for justice, peace and Christian love until the very last moment. He did exactly what he wanted to do, and so he was totally free. He became a sign that transformation, courage, honesty and faith are still possible in this world.

We have to remember that he was not expected to do this. Nobody would have been surprised if he had remained silent, only taking care of the Church as an institution. The surprise was not only his radical response to the violence, but his courage. His courage clearly came from the conviction that this was what he had to do: he followed his conscience. So, the third lesson is: follow your conscience without fearing the consequences.

## **Universal witness**

Oscar Romero was a priest in a Christian country. He never had to develop any thinking that would be acceptable to people of other faiths, like Mahatma Gandhi or Abdul Ghaffar Khan. In this he was similar to Martin Luther King. He simply took his own tradition and followed it in a radical way. When he did that, however, he became to a large extent universal. We can still admire the way in which the Archbishop resisted the violent and corrupt government and stood by the side of the poor, even if we don't share his religious convictions. We can find inspiration in his vision of a love that is stronger than all violence, and of a communion between human beings that simply cannot be destroyed (this was the Church for him: he said that even if all the Bishops and priests are killed, the Church will still be there).

## Peace Role Models: Oscar Romero

Romero became Archbishop a little before the war started. Nobody had planned that – it just happened. He was probably surprised himself at what happened after this. All his education, all his reading and praying suddenly became sheer action. There is a lesson in this too. If ever we want to be able to respond courageously and correctly to an unexpected challenge, we have to prepare ourselves. If we spend our days having fun and doing nothing, then we will not have the strength to do, on our scale, what Oscar Romero did.

That is why Romero is a model not only in his last few years, when he was a dynamic and inspirational leader and became a martyr, but also in the long, hidden years of study and prayer. When the challenge came, he was prepared.



## **YOU CAN DO IT YOURSELF**

### **Humble and honest**

We have looked at the example of Oscar Romero. Now, we have to look at what you can do in Bangladesh today. You are very likely to be young and without influence. You are very unlike Oscar Romero. But you are not supposed to copy him, or anyone else. If you look around you, you will see that there are many things that you can do.

Two things are important in the example of Romero. They are patient humility and courageous honesty. Romero seems to have a very reliable and capable person. He did his job. He was a parish priest; he was a Rector at the Seminary; and he was Director of a newspaper. He did what he was supposed to do and therefore he got the reputation of being slightly boring and very traditional.

What people didn't realize (perhaps he didn't himself) is that different situations ask for different attitudes. When he became a Church Leader in a violent and oppressive situation, he did what he was supposed to do: he opposed the violence.

### **Do what you believe is right**

It is as simple as that. You can also do that. Only you need to know a few things about yourself. What are you supposed to do? Well, if you are a student, you are supposed to study. If you are an employee, you are supposed to do your work.

But you must believe in what you do. Romero's father wanted his son to be a carpenter, and he seems to have been good at carpentry. But that was not what he felt he wanted to do, so he chose another occupation. So, you too should try to figure out what you think is right to do. You must learn to know your conscience, to hear the inner voice.

We cannot always do exactly what we want to. Much depends on circumstances. But we can listen to our inner voice and try to be honest and reliable in what we are doing.

## **Let yourself be touched**

Now, remember what it was that moved Romero into action. It was the painful experience of empathy. He accepted being hurt by the sufferings of others. This was because he was the friend of someone who cared for the poor.

Do you have friends among the poor? Do you ever think what it may be like being oppressed by thugs, rich people, or, for the women, by men? No doubt you have experienced corruption. What is your reaction – despair and acceptance, or a will to confront this evil, so that nobody shall have to have the same experience as you?

We don't have the same situation in Bangladesh as in El Salvador in 1979. Hundreds of people are not killed every week. But every week hundreds of women are raped or beaten, and every year poor people lose land and property to rapacious, rich land-owners or money lenders; there are drugs, murders and suicides of out despair and shame. We don't have a civil war, but there is great suffering in the country.

Let your heart be touched by this. Perhaps you cannot do anything, but it will prepare you. Think about the non-violent response to this. What could be done? Remember that Romero wrote letters to the government and the President of the United States. He knew they could do what he himself was incapable of. Who are the people who can do something about the difficulties in your part of town, in your village, in your district, in the whole society of Bangladesh? You can also appeal to them. And you can start talking about the problems you see. If you just do what you think is right – if you just do what you feel you are supposed to do – you will be prepared if, one day, you receive a real challenge. Just follow your conscience, carefully.