

Memorial Service for Monseñor Oscar Arnulfo Romero

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It is with a profound sense of humility that I stand before you today. I am not an orator, and I am much less a sacred orator. My mission has never been to edify, exhort, or judge by preaching. It has been, rather, to instruct, to analyze, to enlighten by teaching and writing. The lectern is my home, not the pulpit. Nevertheless, I have accepted your gracious invitation to speak at this Memorial Service in honor of Monseñor Oscar Arnulfo Romero with distinct pleasure. There is, after all, a tradition in sacred oratory known as the university sermon, in notable absence nowadays. I should like, if you would so kindly allow me, like to draw on it for this occasion.

My pleasure comes not only from the privilege and honor that you have afforded me by such an invitation but also from the fact that I get to speak

This homily was delivered in Perkins Chapel at Southern Methodist University during Fernando Segovia's scholarly visit sponsored by the Center for the Study of Latino/a Christianity and Religions at Perkins School of Theology.

about Archbishop Romero. Last year, I had the great honor and privilege of serving as the Dom Hélder Câmara Professor for Liberation and Justice at the Free University of Amsterdam, which gave me the opportunity to speak about Dom Helder in my keynote lecture at the Hermitage Museum. This year, I sit as the Visiting Professor of the Center for the Study of Latino/a Christianity and Religions at your School and University, which allows me the opportunity to speak about Monseñor Romero in this Memorial Service at Perkins Chapel.

These are, I need not tell you, two luminaries of the Christian tradition in Latin America. The fact that I get to represent both through my voice and my work accounts for this sense of overwhelming humility on my part. Indeed, humility cannot even begin to describe my sense of being then and at this point. Let humility express itself in profound gratitude to all of you for such a memorable charge. Now, let us press on, ¡Adelante!

Monseñor Romero was assassinated on March 24, 1980. It was a Monday, during the fourth week of Lent. The day before, March 23, the Fourth Sunday of Lent, he had preached at the Cathedral for a very long

time. In an early edition the printed text takes up twenty-six pages in all.¹ The sermon was carried by the radio station of the Archdiocese, YSAX, and by Radio Noticias del Continente, which brought the address to a variety of countries in Central and South America. It was an audience, therefore, that extended far beyond the faithful gathered at the Metropolitan Cathedral of El Divino Salvador del Mundo in San Salvador that day.

It was by no means the type of sermon that one hears uniformly across parishes today in the United States. What prevails now is a combination of jaded doctrinal teachings and psycho-pop individualist spirituality, which has nothing to do with the world at hand and its travails, even, ironically, those that afflict the ranks of believers as individuals. The result is a glazing of the eyes and a stupor of the mind, even among those who would benefit from a bit of solace and direction in the midst of such travails. This was a bold sermon. It amounted to the lighting of a match in a tinder box.

¹ The full text, under the title “Última Homilía del 23-3-80,” may be found in Arnaldo Mora Rodríguez, ed., *Monseñor Romero: Selección de material y notas*. San José (Costa Rica): EDUCA (Editorial Universitaria Centroamericana, 1981) 264-299.

Its structure, fourfold in nature, was typical of the Sunday sermons from the Cathedral. The Introduction speaks of the season of Lent as a whole, its combination of cross and resurrection, of suffering and victory. Romero speaks of the Calvary of Jesus and of El Salvador. He speaks of the need to analyze the social, economic, and political realities of the country. Romero also speaks of the Pasch of Jesus and of El Salvador. He speaks of the need to keep in mind the hopes of the country. Such is the way of Christianity, he declares, and such is his own way as a Christian. It is, he explains, a way of bringing the theory of Vatican II, of Medellin and Puebla, to praxis, even if only as a voice crying in the wilderness.² There follows an explication of the Scriptures. Its heading reveals its character and objective: “The Church, a Service of Personal, Communitarian, and Transcendental Liberation.”³ This is a threefold reflection on the concept of liberation: the dignity of the human being; the redemption of a people; the transcendental

² The Introduction is brief, about five pages in length, and begins with a simple vocative, “Queridos hermanos” (Dear brothers) (264-68).

³ The exposition of the Scriptures is extensive (268-281). The title in Spanish is as follows: “La Iglesia, un servicio de liberación personal, comunitaria, trascendente” (268). This title forms part of the homily, for it is announced as such, “A la luz de las palabras divinas de hoy voy a presentar esta reflexión con este título:” (“I will present my reflection, in the light of the sacred words for today, under the following title:”).

dimension.⁴ Then, comes an account of the events that have transpired during the preceding week in the churches as well as in the country.⁵ Lastly, the Conclusion is an exhortation in the light of the previous analysis of the Scriptures and the ecclesial as well as national contexts.⁶ It is worth analyzing in detail.

First, Romero states his desire to analyze the events recounted with respect to the churches and the nation as an evaluation of the new government. This is an administration that has been in power for only a few months and that had assumed power with the express aim of bringing the country out of chaos. For the sake of time, not to abuse the patience of his listeners, he does not. What he does do is to summarize such an evaluation.

⁴ These three sections are also titled—all of them at the beginning; then, each before its respective development: (a) “La dignidad de la persona es lo primero que urge liberar” (“To Begin With, it Is Imperative to Liberate the Dignity of the Human Being”); (b) “Dios quiere salvar a todo un pueblo” (“God’s Wish Is to Save the People as a Whole”); (c) “La trascendencia de la liberación, su verdadera y definitiva dimensión” (“The Transcendence of Liberation, its True and Definitive Dimension” (268).

⁵ This account, quite expansive as well, has a twofold division, each with its own heading: (a) “Hechos eclesiales” (“What Has Happened in the Churches”) (281-90); (b) “Hechos nacionales” (“What Has Happened in the Country”) (290-98).

⁶ The concluding exhortation is quite brief (298-99). Here there is no heading. Its beginning, however, is unmistakable, given a strategic vocative of conclusion after the long recitation of events (“Queridos hermanos”).

A government, he declares, that is not rooted in the people has no power, much less so when it tries to force its way by blood and suffering.

Second, he follows with a call to the armed forces—above all, to the National Guard, the Police Force, the local precincts. The call, which turns into a command, is to stop the killing of their fellow citizens, especially the peasantry. It is written in capital letters in the text. No one, he thunders, has the right to go against the law of God, “NO MATAR” (“Do Not Kill!”)

Lastly, he concludes with a return to the Scriptures and the doctrine of liberation in and for the church. Such liberation, he reiterates, lies in respect for the dignity of a human being, the welfare of the people, and the transcendence that God has in mind, which derives from God all hope and all strength.

This overt challenge of the government and its corresponding appeal to all official bodies bearing arms to disobey the orders of the government sets all of San Salvador and El Salvador further on edge. An already hyper-tense city and country, rife with rumors and fears of all sorts, is close to explosion. It would not take long.

On the following day, a funeral mass is to be celebrated at the chapel of the Divine Providence Hospital, a cancer hospital run by the sisters of Divine Providence, in whose grounds Archbishop Romero has his residence. This was to be a memorial service for the first anniversary of the death of Doña Sara Meardi de Pinto, Doña Sarita, the mother of Jorge Pinto, the editor of one of the two independent newspapers of El Salvador, “El Independiente.” They are friends of Romero and much admired by him. Against all advice, the mass is announced in the local media. Neither homily nor mass would be properly concluded.

Today, with the thirty-fourth anniversary behind us and the thirty-fifth now ahead, I should like to look at this last testament and will.⁷ I do so fully conscious that our own Memorial Service takes place at the same time of the Liturgical Year, between the Fourth and the Fifth Sundays of Lent. I chose the reading from John 12 for this occasion. I did so, first, because it was the

⁷ An English translation of this homily, by James Brockman, may be found in Michael J. Walsh, ed., *Voice of the Voiceless* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985) 191-193 (“Last Homily of Archbishop Romero, March 24, 1980). (It is reproduced in: <http://backoftheworld.com/2013/03/23/oscar-romeros-final-homily/>) This volume is a translation of R. Cardenal, I. Martín-Baró, and J. Sobrino, eds., *La voz de los sin voz: La palabra viva de Monseñor Oscar Arnulfo Romero* (San Salvador: UCA Editores, Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas, 1980).

reading for that occasion as well, customary for funerals and memorial services. I did so also because it anticipates and summarizes Jesus' last will and testament in the Gospel of John.

To begin with, Romero looks back on the figure and life of Doña Sarita. Beyond her many personal qualities, she is praised for the central message conveyed by her life: the true liberation of the people. As such, she is presented as an example of the Christian life, in herself and for all. She embodies the kernel of wheat that gives life. She ignores the division erected between the religious-theological and the social-cultural and gets involved in the risks that history and circumstances throw against her. Such is the way of the Christian tradition.

Romero then turns to the Second Vatican Council, by then fifteen years past. He does so by placing Doña Sarita within the spirit of the Council as described in *Gaudium et Spes* (#39), the Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World of 1965. The document speaks of the consummation and transformation of the earth and humanity. In this new dwelling place and earth, justice will abide and blessedness will reign beyond all

expectations of the human heart. Yet, this new creation is to infuse our concern for the present earth. Here we are to contribute to the better ordering of human society. How so? By furthering the values of human dignity, of social solidarity and freedom, of the good fruits of nature and enterprise. Such values are the values of the Kingdom of Christ and lay the foundations for the new creation.

Lastly, Romero calls his audience to follow the example of Doña Sarita, of the call of Vatican II, and of the message of John 12. All are to be inspired by the effort to improve society, under the mantle of the Kingdom of Christ. All are to add their grain of wheat in these times of struggle and hope, for the sake of a better world.

Romero declares, “Let us all do what we can. We can all do something, at least have a sense of understanding and of sacrifice.”⁸ This declaration brings the message of that Memorial Service to us in this Memorial Service. That message puts us all in a tradition that goes back to Romero, to Doña Sarita, to Vatican II, to John 12, and to Jesus of Nazareth. It is a complex

⁸ Walsh, *Voice of the Voiceless*, 193.

and conflicted tradition, to be sure, but it is the tradition nonetheless. A tradition that calls for bearing fruit in the world—in some way, at all times, and in all places.

This tradition compels us to a way of thinking and a way of life. It compels us to analyze the world and to critique it—for the sake of a better world, even in the face of mounting dystopia. To be a part of this tradition is a gift to be treasured and a challenge to be appropriated. It is a conviction that the dignity of human beings matters, that freedom and justice and welfare in society and culture do matter, and that the tradition of God in Christianity, when embraced with utter integrity and in dialogue with other religious traditions, also matters. For allowing me to share in this tradition with you today, to become part of your Wesleyan tradition in and through the figure of Romero, I reiterate my profound humility and utter gratitude. Now, let us get to work! ¡Adelante!

Resumen/Traducción

Es con un profundo sentido de humildad que me presento ante ustedes hoy. Yo no soy un orador, y mucho menos un orador sagrado. Mi misión no ha sido la de exhortar, o fungir como juez por la predicación. Mi misión ha sido, más bien, para instruir, para analizar, para iluminar a través de la enseñanza y la escritura. El atril es mi casa, no el púlpito. No obstante, he aceptado su gentil invitación a hablar en este servicio conmemorativo en honor de Monseñor Oscar Arnulfo Romero, con gran placer. Hay, después de todo, una tradición en la oratoria sagrada conocida como el sermón de la universidad, la cual brilla por su ausencia en la actualidad.

Me gustaría, si ustedes me lo permiten, basarme en esta tradición para esta ocasión. Para mí ha sido un placer no sólo por el privilegio y el honor que me han proporcionado por esta invitación, sino también por el hecho de que tengo la oportunidad de hablar de Monseñor Romero. El año pasado, tuve el gran honor y el privilegio de servir como profesor Dom Hélder Câmara de Liberación y Justicia de la Universidad Libre de Amsterdam, que me dio la oportunidad de hablar sobre Dom Helder en mi conferencia inaugural en el Museo del Hermitage. Ahora, estoy delante de ustedes como profesor visitante del Centro de Estudios de Religiones y Cristianismo Latinos-as en esta escuela y en esta universidad, las cuales me han dado la oportunidad de hablar de Monseñor Romero en este servicio conmemorativo.

Monseñor Romero fue asesinado el 24 de marzo de 1980. El día anterior,

el 23 de marzo, el cuarto domingo de Cuaresma, él había predicado en la Catedral un sermón un tanto largo. El sermón fue llevado por la estación de radio de la Arquidiócesis, YSAX, y por Radio Noticias del Continente, que llevó la homilía a varios países de Centro y América del Sur. Era un público, por lo tanto, que se extendía mucho más allá de los fieles reunidos en la Catedral Metropolitana de El Divino Salvador del Mundo en San Salvador. En su sermón, Monseñor Romero enfatiza los siguientes puntos: En primer lugar, Romero afirma su deseo de analizar los hechos narrados con respecto a las iglesias y la nación como una evaluación del nuevo gobierno. Este es un gobierno que ha estado en el poder durante sólo unos meses y que había asumido el poder con el objetivo expreso de sacar al país del caos. Por razones de tiempo, y para no abusar de la paciencia de sus oyentes, no lo hace. Lo que él hace es resumir dicha evaluación. Un gobierno, declara, que no está arraigado en el pueblo no tiene poder, mucho menos cuando se trata de forzar su camino por la sangre y el sufrimiento.

En segundo lugar, él sigue con un llamado a las fuerzas armadas-por encima de todo, a la Guardia Nacional, la Policía, los recintos locales. La convocatoria, que se convierte en un comando, es detener la matanza de sus conciudadanos, especialmente el campesinado. Está escrito en letras mayúsculas en el texto. Nadie, tiene el derecho de ir en contra de la ley de Dios, "NO MATAR". Por último, concluye con un regreso a las Escrituras y la doctrina de la liberación en y para la Iglesia. Tal liberación, reitera, se encuentra en el respeto a la dignidad de un ser humano, el bienestar de la gente, y la trascendencia que Dios tiene en mente, que deriva de Dios toda

esperanza y toda fuerza. Hoy, nuestro propio servicio conmemorativo se lleva a cabo en el mismo momento del año litúrgico cuando Romero predicó su sermón, entre el cuarto y el quinto domingo de Cuaresma. Por eso, elegí la lectura de Juan 12 para esta ocasión. Primero, porque era la lectura para una ocasión así, habitual para los funerales y servicios conmemorativos, también porque anticipa y resume la última voluntad y testamento de Jesús en el Evangelio de Juan.

Romero inicia su mensaje haciendo alusión a la vida de doña Sarita, quien él presenta como un ejemplo de la vida cristiana. Para él, ella encarna el grano de trigo que da la vida. Ella hace caso omiso de la división entre lo religioso y teológico y la social y cultural y se involucra en los riesgos de su comunidad, siguiendo el camino de la tradición cristiana. Romero luego hace referencia al Concilio Vaticano II, lo hace mediante la colocación de Doña Sarita dentro del espíritu del Concilio, como se describe en la *Gaudium et Spes* (# 39), la Constitución Pastoral de la Iglesia en el Mundo Moderno de 1965. El documento habla de la consumación y la transformación de la tierra y la humanidad. En este nuevo lugar de morada, la justicia y la bendición reinarán mas allá de todas las expectativas del corazón humano.

Sin embargo, esta nueva creación es infundir nuestra preocupación por la tierra actual. Aquí estamos para contribuir a ordenar mejor la sociedad humana. ¿Cómo es eso? Por el fomento de los valores de la dignidad humana, de la solidaridad social y la libertad, de los buenos frutos de la

naturaleza y de la empresa. Estos valores son los valores del Reino de Cristo y de la nueva ereación. Por último, Romero llama a su audiencia a seguir el ejemplo de Doña Sarita, de la convocatoria del Coneilio Vaticano II, y del mensaje de Juan I2. Todos han de inspirarse en el esfuerzo por mejorar la sociedad, bajo el manto del Reino de Cristo. Todos han de añadir su grano de trigo en estos tiempos de lucha y esperanza, en aras de un mundo mejor. Romero deelara: "Vamos todos a hacer lo que podamos. Todos podemos hacer algo, al menos, tener un sentido de comprensión y de sacrificio". Este mensaje nos pone a todos en una tradición que se remonta a Romero, a doña Sarita, al Concilio Vaticano II, a Juan I2, y a Jesús de Nazaret. Es una tradición compleja y conflictiva, pero es la tradición, no obstante. Una tradición que llama a dar sus frutos en el mundo, de alguna manera, en todo momento y en todo lugar. Esta tradición nos obliga a una forma de pensar y una forma de vida. Esto nos obliga a analizar el mundo y criticarlo-en aras de un mundo mejor, incluso en la cara de la distopía.

Ser parte de esta tradición es un don que debe ser atesorado y un desafio que debe de ser apropiado. Es la convicción de que la dignidad de los seres humanos, la libertad y la justicia y el bienestar de la sociedad y la cultura son importantes, y que la tradición de Dios en el cristianismo, cuando es abrazada con integridad absoluta y en diálogo con otras tradiciones religiosas, también es importante. Por permitirme compartir esta tradición con ustedes hoy, para convertirse en parte de su tradición Wesleyana en y a través de la figura de Romero, reitero mi profunda humildad y absoluta gratitud. Ahora, pongámonos a trabajar. ¡Adelante!



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