

**ARCHBISHOP ROMERO'S HOMILIES
A THEOLOGICAL AND PASTORAL ANALYSIS**

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The Archbishop
Romero Trust

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FOREWORD

Like a beggar in a gold mine

Seated on a park bench in Madrid I spent many hours studying the seven volumes of homilies preached by Archbishop Romero. This collection of sermons is his testimony of prophecy, sealed with his own blood. He was murdered on account of these spoken words, proclaimed in the name of the God of Life, in defence of the vulnerable, and, naturally, in denunciation of the killers.

For those reasons, the words of Archbishop Romero acquire a meaning of deeply- rooted humanity and deep religious feeling which separates them sharply from the majority of abstract and disincarnate words spoken from church pulpits by ethereal preachers.

I took these seven volumes with me in my suitcase on leaving El Salvador, in April 1994, after having spent seven years and seven months being evangelised by the Salvadorean people in a rural parish in the department of Chalatenango. In a way, the words of Archbishop Romero are an eternal symbol of the unbreakable spirit of the poor.

THE VILLAGE ALMOND TREE

“It’s a nice tree that”, says Corina,
nodding beyond church railings.
I see tree’s thick foliage spread
from far-reaching boughs,
casting deep shade and mystery,
protecting wary wayfarers
from bright light of sun’s rays.
Verdant and alive, sprouting strong,
proud phallic tree unbowed,
seen daily through house’s square window,
refreshing sight that tree.
“Yes”, I agree,
“It’s a beautiful, beautiful tree”.
With her smile concealing rage and grief
Corina responds,
“Eleven years gone
the death squad hung till dead my brother,
from that tree”.

INTRODUCTION

Rodolfo was quixotic in his appearance, with his sad demeanour reminiscent of Don Quixote. His drooping moustache and well-worn wellington boots summed up his personality to a tee. In a way it was possible to consider Rodolfo as the prototype of the peasant farmer forced to flee into exile on account of the military persecution which swept cruelly through El Salvador in the dawning of the nineteen eighties. Vulnerable, they took to the hills until they found political asylum in neighbouring Honduras.

In August 1988, under the protection of the United Nations and other organizations of humanitarian aid, hundreds of these refugees repopulated, creating new communities, taking possession of land, and rebuilding destroyed houses, in the ‘conflict zone’. The ‘resurrected’ community to which Rodolfo belonged was Teosinte, a hamlet surrounded by mountains covered in pine trees, to the north of Chalatenango, to the north of San Francisco Morazán.

One dark night, in the Church of Teosinte, under the flickering light of the Coleman lamp, I remember that, during the homily of a eucharistic celebration, we began to talk about Archbishop Romero. It surprised me to see the normally reticent Rodolfo get to his feet and speak. On that memorable night, Rodolfo gifted us a beautiful homily in nine words filled with emotion, truth, and meaning. He said simply: “On two occasions I shook hands with Archbishop Romero”.

Life was teaching us how a humiliated peasant farmer felt his dignity returned to him by having shaken the outstretched hand of Archbishop Romero on two occasions.

One day in 1992, at the end of the civil war, Rodolfo, accompanied by his young son, set out to repair his own house, destroyed and abandoned throughout ten years of civil war. (He intended to return to his place of birth). After a birth in the Salvadorean countryside, there exists the custom that the father of the recently born child buries in the mother earth of his cornfield the placenta and umbilical cord. This gives fertility and good fortune to the family, blessing their work in the fields. During the years of exile on account of the civil war the country folk yearned to return to their umbilical cord and live in justice and peace, enjoying life in the land of their birth. Rodolfo wanted to “return to his umbilical cord” and live in his place of origin, but sadly, it was not to be. Rodolfo climbed in to the roof of his sunken house and without realizing it, he dislodged a live explosive device, concealed among the slates. The bomb killed him instantaneously.

I will always remember Rodolfo, not so much for his resemblance to Don Quixote, but as a poor, anonymous, peasant farmer who shook hands with Archbishop Romero on two occasions. That is to say, Archbishop Romero was a person who gave dignity to Rodolfo and the poor of his country. In this lies his greatness.

The following work is intended as sign of gratitude and tenderness to the people of El Salvador, and to their Archbishop, Oscar Romero, who shook hands with Rodolfo on two occasions.

It is true that Archbishop Romero is the Salvadorean most known throughout the world, but his words are not readily available to the majority of people, and this is not as a result of the high level of illiteracy in Latin America. In El Salvador itself there are not a lot of people possessing the seven volumes of the martyr-bishop’s homilies, and less, those who have read them in their entirety. The homilies have only recently become available in English, and are still not widely known. Perhaps the best we can hope for is redaction and more translation of the Archbishop’s works, although translation is always treacherous and lacking the precision of the original. But, be that as it may, the homiletic words of Archbishop Romero are of universal relevance, especially in these nations who are the victims of

structural injustice within societies, especially in the southern half of the hemisphere of our planet, and other nations whose peoples suffer exploitation and misery at the hands of tyrannical governments and conglomerates of the rich.

Throughout the last three years of his ministry, Archbishop Romero became a sign of contradiction in El Salvador. He sided with the victims of State repression and this meant an unavoidable confrontation with the rich and powerful. In a very short time Archbishop Romero became a figure slandered in the press owned by the controlling families of El Salvador's wealth. They smeared his good name, accusing him of being mad, because in a phase of crisis years past he had undergone a course of psychotherapy. He was also falsely accused of being the spokesperson of the Marxists and of instigating hate and class struggle. But the accusation of madness, above all, must have hurt deeply this "man who was timid as regards interpersonal relationships", who in his demeanour gave "the impression of vulnerability".

My methodology for this book has consisted in reading all books and articles within my reach regarding the theme of Archbishop Romero, giving special attention to his homiletic works which constitute my source.

Preachers repeat with consistency themes which resurge from their unconscious as being of special relevance given the vital time and place in which they find themselves. This is especially true in time of persecution and martyrdom. I find the fluency of Archbishop Romero's homilies fascinating. He was gifted with an inspired use of metaphor which enlightened the reality around him. He interpreted the signs of this time and place with intelligence, and he denounced evil forcibly. Studying these words I get the impression of being a privileged beggar discovering gold nuggets, marvelling in the discovery of this richness in expression. Digging requires effort, but it is worthwhile exposing these beautiful words of wisdom to the world and not letting them lie buried and hidden.

Blessed Oscar Romero, defender of the poor

Many saints nowadays are mute statues, because little is known of their works and nothing of their words. And so, in faithfulness to history and truth we are obliged to draw into the light the words of Archbishop Romero. It is not enough to know that this saintly man was martyred. Rather, we ought to investigate why he was murdered and by whom. To put it plainly, the rich and powerful assassinated him because they could not endure the power of his prophetic denunciation against the abuse of the human rights of those poor and weak.

One day, in the Cathedral of San Salvador, I watched an old man humbly approach Archbishop Romero's tomb with a bunch of purple flowers which stuck out from a tin which had once contained powdered milk. He placed his offering of wild flowers at the feet of the martyred bishop with the same simple devotion that the people use for their statues of saints. For this old man and for thousands upon thousands more Archbishop Romero is a saint, declared so by the infallibility of the people of God. The Brazilian Bishop Pedro Casaldáliga has given Archbishop Romero the title of "Saint Romero of Latin America" in one of his poems. This is restrictive because Archbishop Romero belongs to the poor of the whole world. The person of Romero has become known throughout vast regions of our planet. And now the *sensus fidelium*, the intuition of the ordinary faithful, has led to the beatification of Archbishop Romero on 23 May 2015.

The Archbishop of San Salvador is an example of life and faith for all Christians and for human beings the world over. His profound spirit of prayer, austerity in his way of life, his tenderness for people suffering and his courage in defending the rights of the poor and oppressed are signs of exceptional sanctity. This defenceless, fragile bearer of the word of God was a true prophet and died a true prophet,

his blood spilled in libation before the altar. He fell to the floor being hit near the heart by a sniper's bullet on the 24th March 1980. He was celebrating the eucharist and had just finished the homily when he was murdered in the chapel of the Divine Providence Sisters who care for those terminally ill in their hospital.

The figure of this man takes on a universal dimension, and not only an ecclesial one, because he has incarnated human sensibility for victims throughout history.

The poor are historic victims because their condition of victim has been caused in the course of history by the repression of the powerful. They are not natural victims claimed by chance or evolution. Their condition of victim is imposed upon them by inhuman acts by greedy and all-powerful fellow human beings.

In El Salvador, for instance there are enough resources to feed and provide dignified lives for everyone. But the truth is that unjust distribution causes hunger, illness, and slow death. And when the oppressed organize themselves politically and protest against this situation of structural injustice they are violently repressed and end up being cruelly murdered at the hands of the powerful. The greatness of Archbishop Romero lies in the compassion and humanity which impelled him to side with the victims of history and to suffer their same fate. In this Romero differs from Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, murdered in the 12th century for defending the rights and liberties of the Church. Archbishop Romero was assassinated for defending the poor of the Kingdom of God.

José María Valverde, professor of Aesthetics of the University of Barcelona has summed it up in the following verses:

In obscure centuries past it was told
some bishop died
by regal command,
sprinkling with his blood the chalice
for defending the Church's freedom
face to face with the powerful

That is very well, but
since when has it not been told
that they slew a bishop at the altar
who made no claim to the Church's freedom,
but simply because
he sided with the poor
and proclaimed his thirst for justice
that clamours to highest heavens?
Perhaps we must go back to the very beginning
to the one they murdered
with the death of a subversive slave

CHRONOLOGY OF THE LIFE OF OSCAR ROMERO

15th August 1917, 3a.m.	Birth of Oscar Arnulfo Romero Galdámez in Ciudad Barrios, El Salvador, Central America
1930	Enters the Junior Seminary, in San Miguel
1937	Continues his studies at the Gregorian University, Rome
4th April 1942	Priestly ordination in Rome
December 1943	Arrival in the diocese of San Miguel
1967-1974	Secretary to the Episcopal Conference of El Salvador
1967	Transferred to the Archdiocese of San Salvador
1968	Editor of <i>Orientación</i> , the weekly Archdiocesan newspaper
21st June 1970	Auxiliary Bishop of San Salvador
14th December 1974	Bishop of Santiago de María
21st June 1975	Massacre of Tres Calles
22nd February 1977	Investiture as Archbishop of San Salvador
12th March 1977	Assassination of Fr Rutilio Grande S.J. and of two rural workers
24th March 1980	Assassination of Archbishop Romero during the celebration of the Eucharist in the chapel of the Divine Providence cancer hospital in San Salvador
14th May 2015	Decree of beatification signed by Pope Francis
23rd May 2015	Beatification of Oscar Romero in San Salvador

CHAPTER ONE - OSCAR ROMERO, BELIEVER IN GOD

1.1 The person of Oscar Romero

1.1.1 The childhood of Oscar Romero

Oscar Arnulfo Romero Galdámez was born on the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary on 15 August 1917, in Ciudad Barrios, a mountainous region 48 kilometres from the town of San Miguel in El Salvador, Central America.

His father and mother were of mixed blood. Santos Romero worked in the mornings as the village's telegraph operator, and in the afternoons he looked after the crop of coffee on the small plot of land belonging to his wife, Guadalupe Galdámez de Romero, the mother of Oscar.

On that small farm the family kept a few cows which the young Oscar and his sister Zaida used to milk. In rural El Salvador, since they had their own land and having cattle, the Romero Galdámez family were not considered to belong to the bottom layer of rural society, but they were not well-off.

Being a telegraph operator, Don Santos had a lot of free time. He filled in part of it by teaching Oscar to play a bamboo flute, and to type. Since there was little paper, the father wrote words in the dust on the floor. Owing to the poverty of that rural area, the local school could only offer the children three years of schooling.

1.1.2 Seminarian and priest

Little Oscar always had a leaning towards solitude. His mother instilled in him a spirit of prayer and the practice of saying the rosary every day, a custom Oscar Romero maintained all his life.

He entered the San Miguel Junior Seminary at the age of 13, although his father had wanted him to be a carpenter.

Being among the brightest of the students academically, Oscar was sent to continue his studies at the Gregorian University in Rome. It was the Second World War, and the seminarians of the "Pio Latino" where he lived endured hardships and frequently went hungry. Although Oscar finished his priestly studies at the Gregorian, the chaos of the war and his own perfectionist spirit did not permit him to finish his doctoral dissertation. Eventually he was ordained priest on 4 April 1942.

Father Romero was to spend more than 20 years in pastoral work in the diocese of San Miguel, with various responsibilities. He was responsible for restoring the cathedral in San Miguel, became Rector of the Junior Seminary, and confessor to many religious congregations. He got on well with the laity, and showed a special love for the poor and beggars. However, on account of his stubborn, scrupulous, angry and somewhat impulsive temperament, he clashed head on with the clergy of the diocese. He took on an excessive work load and, as a consequence, had long periods of nervous strain.

1.1.3 The sheep and the wolves are just the same

On the occasion of his silver jubilee in the priesthood, the clergy of San Miguel used their influence to get Father Romero transferred to San Salvador as Secretary to the Episcopal Conference of El Salvador. This took place on 8 June 1967.

To commemorate his years of service in the diocese a party was organised for him in a local cinema. There was a huge turn out that evening. In the course of the evening a young lad went on to the

stage and presented Father Romero with a lamb. He took it in his arms. María Varona, an eye-witness, reflected on this:

“Father Romero? He was a friend of the poor and a friend of the rich. To the rich he would say: ‘Love the poor’. And to us poor, he would tell us to love God, and that God knew what he was doing by putting us last in line, and that afterwards we would be assured a place in heaven. He would preach to us about the heaven where rich people who gave alms would go and where poor people who didn’t cause too much trouble would go.

“Father Romero? He went around with sheep and with wolves, and his thinking was that the sheep and the wolves should eat from the same dish, because that’s what was pleasing to God... “I looked at him then, Father Romero, up there on the stage, cradling that little lamb in his arms. But what I really thought was that if they had given him a wolf cub, complete with fangs, he would have received it in just the same way.”¹

1.1.4 Secretary of the El Salvador Bishops’ Conference (CEDES)

Archbishop Romero moved to the seminary of San José de la Montaña, where he got to know the Jesuit priest Rutilio Grande.

As secretary of CEDES he introduced a tape recorder to the meetings in order that he could take an active part without the hassle of note-taking. He continued to overwork and the noise of his typing disturbed the students’ sleep in the silence of the night.

1.1.5 Editor of the weekly bulletin *Orientación*

In 1968 the director of *Orientación*, the archdiocesan weekly, was sacked from his post for publishing an article praising the decision of the Colombian priest Camilo Torres to join the guerrillas. Father Romero took over as acting editor and the paper’s line changed drastically. It published articles with titles like “The Pope has spoken”, “Is Hans Küng infallible?” and “Chastity is not a utopia”.

José Simán, President of the Archdiocesan Commission for Justice and Peace, wanted to widen and secularise the focus of *Orientación* in order to increase its sales. Romero refused to accept this proposal and Simán had to resign. This was a bad omen, especially in administrative and economic matters. When the Holy See appointed Romero (now auxiliary in San Salvador) Bishop of Santiago de Maria, in 1974, he left behind an enormous debt and deficit. But, for him, that was of no importance, because, as he wrote in the editorial of the last issue he edited, “We have kept the faith”.

1.1.6 Auxiliary Bishop of San Salvador

On 21 June 1970 Romero was ordained auxiliary bishop to Archbishop Chávez in San Salvador. If an idea came from Rome, from the Pope, from the Holy See, Bishop Romero implemented it immediately. As auxiliary, it was his practice to refer everything to the Papal Nuncio and not to Archbishop Chávez. Besides this, throughout his four years in office in San Salvador he was almost always absent from the clergy meetings. As auxiliary bishop, Oscar Romero did not join in the pastoral work of the Archdiocese of San Salvador.

1.1.7 The expulsion of the Jesuit teachers from the seminary

Throughout his four years as auxiliary bishop, Romero had unpleasant conflicts with the Jesuit priests of the UCA (Central American University). Taking up the role of fanatical defender of the faith, he had

¹ M. López Vágil, *Monseñor Romero, Memories in Mosaic*, Maryknoll NY, 2013, p. 16

insulted them. As editor of *Orientación* he wounded them in a number of statements. He also denounced the Jesuits in homilies he gave in the Cathedral. Through his influence, on 3 August 1972, the bishops decided to strip the Jesuits of responsibility for the formation of future priests in El Salvador.

1.1.8 Bishop of Santiago de Maria

As bishop of Santiago de Maria, Romero showed himself to be energetic in pastoral work and the celebration of the sacraments, as well as a talented preacher of the word of God. He visited the sick in hospitals, and made a habit of visiting the rural people in their ramshackle huts. Nonetheless, it was said that, at times, when he visited remote areas, he was careless, perhaps relying on his episcopal power, by baptizing and officiating at church weddings without even noting the names of the baptised or leaving marriage certificates in the various parish archives.

1.1.9 The argument about the Los Naranjos Centre

In those days there was a particularly difficult problem for Bishop Romero in the Diocese of Santiago de Maria. The rural pastoral training centre in Los Naranjos was an experiment inspired by Medellín, the 1968 conference of Latin American bishops. The priests who ran the centre's programmes were attempting to develop the social awareness of the poor and encourage them to work for social reform.

Unfortunately, the Maltese apostolic nuncio, Emanuele Gerada, and the government had complained about the centre and wanted it closed. So, at the end of a period of debate and discernment, Romero ended the experiment and asked the director, Juan Macho, to take charge of all pastoral work in the diocese. The closure pleased the apostolic nuncio but, after a brief spell, the centre reopened under the strict supervision of Bishop Romero. Apparently, this experience of conflict was a catalyst that broadened Romero's mind and led him to make a serious study of that key document of the Medellín conference.

1.1.10 The Tres Calles massacre

On 21 June 1975 National Guard troops carried out a massacre, in the village of Tres Calles, situated in the parish of San Augustin, about four kilometres from the road that leads to the sea. In his biography of Romero, Jesus Delgado tells an unsubstantiated and erroneous version of this massacre of six peasant farmers. Neither does he understand how crucial this event was in the process of Bishop Romero's conversion. Delgado states:

“In a place called Tres Calles the National Guard intercepted a group of rural people returning from a church service with their bibles under their arms. The guards immediately opened fire with their machine guns on the group of defenceless people, killing even innocent children. The reason they gave afterwards was that these farmers were carrying subversive weapons. But later investigations showed that they were only carrying under their arms the bibles they had used in the celebration.”²

The Passionist priests Zacarías Diez and Juan Macho give a more accurate account of this bloody incident because they had access to the report left by their fellow Passionist, Fr. Pedro Ferradas. Ferradas carried out an on-the-spot investigation on the day of the incident. His findings are preserved in the Santiago de Maria diocesan archives.

According to Ferradas, on Saturday 21 June 1975, at one o'clock in the morning, some forty National Guard soldiers burst into the village of Tres Calles, accompanied by two unidentified civilians,

² J. Delgado, *Oscar A. Romero, Biografía*, San Salvador 1990, pp 50ff.

aboard several vehicles. They entered the house of José Alberto Ostorga (58). They opened fire on two of his sons, José Alfredo (23) and Hector David (17), killing them instantly. Then they dragged José Alberto Ostorga and his son, also called José Alberto (28), from their house. From a neighbouring house the National Guard dragged out Santos Morales (38). They machine-gunned the three of them and cut their corpses to pieces with machetes. That deadly night they also shot dead Francisco Morales, with a bullet through his right temple.

In all six rural workers were murdered. The soldiers also beat up Juan Ostorga (13) and stole food and money (50 colones), a watch and clothing from the house of Adela Gámez, a widow.³

Bishop Romero visited the scene. This act of pastoral presence plunged him into the cruel reality of the victims and their families. He was profoundly moved. As well as visiting the grieving families, he went to seek an explanation from the local commander on two occasions, having been unable to locate him on the first occasion. But despite his own grief, Bishop Romero refused to make a public protest and decided to write a private letter of respectful protest to his friend, the President of the Republic, Colonel Armando Molina. Here is an extract from that letter:

“I went there to console the families... It broke my heart to hear the bitter tears of the widowed mothers and the orphaned children. . . This was a violation of the dignity and life to which every human being has a right, even criminals, until they have been brought before a court of law.”⁴

Bishop Romero was very worried about the material sustenance of these women living in the remote countryside, who had lost their bread-winners. And he demanded of Molina that he “make some sort of restitution to the families for the loss of those who gave them sustenance”.⁵

1.1.11 Archbishop of San Salvador

The situation in El Salvador was getting to be ‘the colour of an ant’, as the rural people say. Colonel Molina intended to purge the country of what he interpreted as the danger of communism – and included in the purge were the “Medellín priests”. And so it was a tremendous disappointment for the clergy of San Salvador when, on 3 February 1977, contrary to all predictions, the close friend of Colonel Molina, the bishop of Santiago de Maria, was appointed as the new Archbishop of San Salvador. There was little enthusiasm from the clergy of the Archdiocese for this unexpected nomination.

On 22 February 1977, at ten o’clock in the morning, in the San José de la Montaña seminary Bishop Romero was installed as Archbishop of San Salvador.

The Government had expelled several priests from the country and threatened others. Surprisingly, on 17 March 1977, the new Archbishop sent out a message promising to defend his priests and to continue the pastoral work based on the teachings of Medellín. It was a sign of hope which went a long way to encourage the threatened priests of the Archdiocese of San Salvador.

1.1.12 The murder of Rutilio Grande

Another decisive point in the process of Archbishop Romero’s development came on 12 March 1977. In El Paisnal, near Aguilares, the National Guard assassinated his friend, Rutilio Grande, together with an old man and a youth who were travelling with him in his car. They were going to celebrate a feast-day Mass. Moments after the crime was committed, President Molina telephoned Archbishop Romero with a cynical message of condolence.

³ Z. Diez y J. Macho, Mons. Romero (1975-1976). *“En Santiago de María me topé con la miseria”*. Costa Rica, 1995, p.60

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Thirteen years later, Archbishop Rivera, Romero's successor in San Salvador, told of the consequences of this assassination:

“One martyr gave his life and produced another martyr. Before the dead body of Father Rutilio Grande, Archbishop Romero, on his twentieth day as Archbishop, felt the call of Christ to conquer his natural shyness and was filled with apostolic courage. From that moment Archbishop Romero left behind the pagan lands of Tyre and Sidon and headed willingly towards Jerusalem”.⁶

1.1.13 A single Sunday Mass in the Archdiocese

On the day following the wake, Archbishop Romero consulted the clergy of the Archdiocese and, together, they decided to celebrate a single memorial Mass on Sunday 20 March with all archdiocesan priests in attendance. Throughout the Archdiocese no community was to celebrate a mass; all parish priests and all Catholics were invited to join in the service as a symbol of unity in prayer, rejecting the cowardly assassination of defenceless persons.

During the discussions that preceded the decision about the single Sunday Mass, Archbishop Romero had his doubts about the prudence of this action: “If the Eucharist is an act of giving glory to God, would it not be to God's greater glory that we had our normal many Sunday Masses?”⁷

This comment made theologian Jon Sobrino think that the Archbishop's theology was a bit outdated, but that his sincerity and faith were immense. César Jérez, the provincial of the Jesuits at that time, asked to speak, and said: “I believe that Archbishop Romero is correct in saying that we ought to be concerned about the glory of God. But if I'm not mistaken, the Fathers of the Church said: ‘Gloria Dei vivens homo (The glory of God is the human being fully alive)’⁸. After some thought, Archbishop Romero seemed convinced. Throughout his three remaining years as bishop, he deepened and reformulated this theological concept of “The glory of God is the human being fully alive”, and applied it to the situation of El Salvador until he came up with a new formulation: *Gloria Dei vivens pauper*, “The glory of God is the poor person fully alive”⁹. He continued to add to his spirituality new descriptions of God: the God of life, the God of the kingdom, the God of the poor, the God of the crucified. The controversial decision to have a single Sunday Mass provoked protests from the wealthy Catholics living in the luxurious houses in the capital, San Salvador. Nuncio Gerada was annoyed, and spent that Sunday, 20 March 1977, in Guatemala. But Romero flatly refused to change the decision reached by the clergy of the Archdiocese. “They don't understand,” he remarked laconically to Jon Sobrino about the nunciature.

During the homily of the single Mass, in front of almost a hundred thousand people gathered in the square outside the cathedral, Archbishop Romero proclaimed: “Whoever touches one of my priests, touches me”¹⁰. And the people applauded their good shepherd.

1.2 Archbishop Romero, Believer in God

As noted previously, when a child is born in the countryside of El Salvador, it is the custom to bury the umbilical cord and the placenta in the family's cornfield. It is a way for the rural people to return to their roots. The roots of Romero were in the countryside of Ciudad Barrios, in rural San Miguel. And so his

⁶ J. Delgado, *Monseñor Romero*, San Salvador, 1989, pp 24ff.

⁷ J. Sobrino, *Monseñor Romero*, San Salvador, 1989, pp 24ff

⁸ St Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adv. Haereses* IV, 202, 7 (PG 7, 1037).

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Homilies, 20th March 1977, vol. I-II, 8.

character was marked with two traits of the countryside: shyness and a spirit of prayer and natural belief in the certainty of God's existence. These were innate in his psychological make-up.

Oscar Romero was painfully shy until he stood before a microphone. Then his timidity turned to daring, and he spoke with the authority of a prophet.

Also, Oscar Romero was a believer. Country people in El Salvador do not doubt God's existence. God is the fundamental, unquestionable reality. God exists because their cornfields and their beans exist as gift of God.

The divine presence of God incarnate and near was a living reality in the life of Oscar Romero; even in suffering and the prospect of assassination his God stayed close. He never reduced his God to a series of external rites, nor to money, nor to authoritarian power. Monsignor Urioste, his vicar general, and others who knew him testify how Archbishop Romero would leave his daily tasks to immerse himself in private prayer. He believed in the one true God without abstractions and caricatures.

PART ONE - THE THEOLOGICAL THOUGHT OF ARCHBISHOP ROMERO

CHAPTER TWO - CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GOD INCARNATE IN EL SALVADOR

Romero spoke of three caricatures of God: the mechanical, philosophical God, the pie in the sky spiritualist God, and the God of the Pharisees. In opposition he cites the true God, who is near, incarnate, and absolutely unique.

2.1 The God ever near

For Romero, the God of the philosophers is a distant God, remote from the world of human beings. He firmly rejects this God: “The god revealed there does not seem to us to be intimate, and for a lot of people that metaphysic, that philosophy, dries up the heart and mind, and even leads them to materialism.”¹¹

This distorted notion of God that presents him as being a remote being, impersonal, restricted to text books, without anything to do with life lived out in the real world, is a false image. In contrast, Archbishop Romero presents the image of the living God who inhabits the most intimate depths of the human being: “Every person has in the most intimate part of their being their consciousness, like a secret room where God comes down and speaks to her or him, where the human person decides their own destiny.”¹²

This God waits for an invitation from the human being. In simple terms this intimate and relational God can be described as “God who accompanies us”¹³, as a “dynamic God (. . .) a “God who journeys with his people, a God who acts and inspires human beings in their efforts to achieve freedom, a God who is not indifferent to the cry of those who suffer, who as in Egypt hears the cries of those enslaved, beaten, excluded and humiliated”¹⁴. He is present in the suffering of his people, close to them, listening to “the deafening cry¹⁵ of the poor who journey in search of their freedom”. He is the pilgrim God of the Exodus.

A characteristic of this personal God is happiness. God is free and happy, spreading happiness in the world: “God wants humanity to be happy on Earth, with the happiness of existence, the happiness of loving, of sharing, of being festive. God is not a sad God. God is the God of feasting and celebration, the God of happiness¹⁶. The warm and joyful God is not the impersonal, rationalized, cold and impostor God of the philosophy books. The true God inspires those afflicted from very close by: “No people ought to be pessimistic, even in the middle of crises that seem to have no solution, as our own seems to be (. . .) God is near, a spring of happiness¹⁷.

¹¹ Homilies, 14th May 1978, vol. IV, 250

¹² Homilies, 6th January 1980, vol. VIII, 121

¹³ Homilies, 20th January 1980, vol. VIII, 160

¹⁴ Homilies, 16th December 1979, vol. VIII, 37

¹⁵ CELAM, Medellin, *Poverty of the Church*, 2

¹⁶ Homilies, 20th January 1980, vol. VIII, 163

¹⁷ Homilies, 16th December 1979, vol. VIII, 38

Another characteristic is gentleness. The God of loving tenderness does not want, let alone cause, human suffering, which is an intrinsic part of the imperfection of our planet as it evolves, but “God has not created us for suffering!”¹⁸ God is the God of loving relationships, lovingly open to his creatures because he is, in his essence, a Trinity of relationships:

“It has been said beautifully and profoundly that our God in his most intimate mystery is not solitude, but a family, since he carries within himself fatherhood, sonship, and the essence of family which is love. This love is the divine family; it is the Holy Spirit.”¹⁹

In these words Archbishop Romero is repeating word for word an extract from Pope John Paul II’s opening homily at the bishops’ meeting in Puebla, Mexico. And he wants to emphasize that the divine love is indescribably warmer than human love, because “God loves us more than any mother could”.²⁰

2.2 The Incarnate God

Romero rejects the image of a spiritualized god, remote and outside the ordinary human world. He also rejects making prayer an absolute in the sense of a selfish act of self-adoration, with no reference at all to the situation of human suffering. This spiritualized god is opposed to the incarnate God who stands in solidarity and takes on himself the suffering of the oppressed and invites his creatures to do the same. The spiritualized God is that of the priest, and Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan, the two clergy who “passed by on the other side when they saw the poor man lying injured”.²¹ They hurried by “to the temple to pray and had no time to deal with the material needs of our world”.²² Paradoxically, Archbishop Romero points out that the man considered to be the non-believer, the Samaritan, “tended the wounded man, without knowing who he was”.²³ It was the Samaritan, in religious terms an atheist, who showed the human love which is a sign of divine love. God has taken on poor and suffering flesh. The true God “is a God who lives in history (. . .), a God whom the people feel to be near in the ups and downs of history”.²⁴ He is not a God disincarnate from my hunger, my life, my creation. He is a God concerned about my body, my well-being”.²⁵ Archbishop Romero offers an all-embracing theology. Salvation has to be whole, dealing with the whole human being and his or her doings, and dealing especially with society’s oppressed victims.

This immanent God is secularised in time, living and reigning throughout the ages.

“Secularization maintains that the things of this world are autonomous, but at the same time recognises the sovereignty of God. But secularism also proclaims the autonomy of things, but is closed off from God”.²⁶ Archbishop Romero declares himself in favour of secularisation and against secularism. “Secularisation is this, when a human being works as if everything truly depended on God”²⁷, when a person strives to love his or her neighbour, whom they meet along the road of life, at the same time respecting the reality of the loving God, mysteriously present, and not outside the world.

¹⁸ Homilies, 3rd September 1978, vol. V, 163

¹⁹ Homilies, 30th December 1979, vol. VIII, 91 (Quoting Pope John Paul II, in Puebla, Mexico, 28th January 1979)

²⁰ Homilies, 1st October 1978, vol. V, 219

²¹ Homilies, 14th May 1978, vol. IV, 250-152

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Homilies, 14th May 1978, vol. IV, 254

²⁵ Homilies, 16th July 1978, vol. V, 69

²⁶ Homilies, 26th August 1979, vol. VIII, 194

²⁷ Ibid., 196; it is based on Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 55; CELAM *Puebla*, 83 and 434.

2.3 The One and Only God

Pharisees turn what is relative into an absolute. They make life material, ignoring human depth and the inviolability of human conscience. Archbishop Romero describes the Pharisaism of Salvadorean life as “a religion that is superficial, legalistic and utilitarian (. . .) How many façades of piety! (. . .), how many prayer formulas, how many religious practices that are merely external, ritualistic, legalistic (. . .) Often we have turned our worship into a business transaction”.²⁸ Pharisees may pray a lot, but they distort the true meaning of religion, because “they despise the other”.²⁹ Worship in religion should never be made an absolute because love of our neighbour is infinitely better than any ritual form which is empty and ahistorical. Love of neighbour should be the spring from which all our praying flows. The means of approaching God should not replace God, because only God is absolute, and is hidden in our neighbour.

Although Archbishop Romero loved the Church deeply, he criticised it in order to purify it. Worship ought to be a means for deepening love of God and our neighbour. It is not an end in itself, or a practice of individualistic self-adoration.

“There is only one God.³⁰ The only one who is absolute, who is transcendent, God, the Great Good (. . .) Love God alone as an absolute.”³¹

“There is only one God who admits no idols.”³²

“Let us not make an absolute out of riches, or the political struggle, or the party or the organization. Nothing has an absolute value in this world; everything is relative compared with the one and only Absolute.”³³

“Neither ought we to turn fellow human beings into an absolute, because “no one is the owner of truth. Only God is truth”.³⁴

In short, the God whom Archbishop Romero preaches is “The God of Jesus Christ”.³⁵ God is the only absolute in history, and therefore his Christ is the only absolute in history:

“This is Christianity’s only true absolute: God and his Christ. Christ is the absolute richness of humanity”.³⁶

“Christ is Lord. I must adore no other. I bend my knee before Him alone. And even if I should die, I will die kneeling before Christ. Never will you see me kneeling before human beings.”³⁷

Archbishop Romero declares himself publicly to be the unbribable servant of Jesus Christ and of none other. He continues to criticise the substitution of passing things like wealth, violence and politics for God. He sticks stubbornly to his Master, come what may. “Mihi vivere Christus est” (“For me, to live is Christ”). Could there be a more beautiful expression?³⁸

²⁸ Homilies, 14th May 1978, vol. IV, 251

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid, 253

³¹ Homilies, 11th November 1979, vol. VII, 422

³² Homilies, 23rd December 1979, vol. VII, 79

³³ Homilies, 24th December 1979, vol. VIII, 85

³⁴ Homilies, 20th August 1978, vol. V, 131

³⁵ Homilies, 14th May 1978, vol. IV, 255

³⁶ Homilies, 18th September 1977, vol. I-II, 224

³⁷ Homilies, 24th February 1980, vol. VIII, 268

³⁸ Homilies, 24th September 1978, vol. V, 210

CHAPTER THREE - CHARACTERISTICS OF CHRIST INCARNATE IN THE SALVADOREAN PEOPLE

3.1 Christ incarnate in the Church

Those who are baptised are and ought to be the extension of the incarnation of Christ in history: “If Christ lives, it is because we are his flesh and blood (. . .) Christ will continue to become incarnate in this Church”.³⁹ “Christ is you, sisters and brothers”.⁴⁰ Christ identifies himself with each and every baptised person who tries to live according to their faith; the Lord is present symbolically in his disciples, especially in the disciple who is cast aside.

“If Christ had become incarnate in our time, 1978, he would be a thirty-year old man, a farm-worker from Nazareth, here in this cathedral, like any other farm-worker from our rural communities. He would be the Son of God enfleshed and we would not recognise him: in everything he is just like us.”⁴¹

In any person from the rural communities Christ is living and walking around anonymously.

Each baptised person in El Salvador ought to become incarnate in the life of the Salvadorean people, from the perspective of their Christian faith. This historical commitment implies a specific incarnation in the political parties and in the people’s organizations that favour the cause of the poor. A member of the Church makes this choice in his or her role and duty as a citizen. In other words, Archbishop Romero does not place the institutional Church in an imaginary neutral centre, avoiding human conflict. On the contrary, the true Church has to become involved wherever there is the greatest possibility for the integral liberation of the mass of ordinary people,- that is the poor. The Church puts its support where there is more truth, more justice and more possibilities of achieving lasting peace.⁴² This means that Christians in the Church have the duty and right, like any citizen, to participate in the political life of the nation. But they should choose to join the political party which is most involved with the socio-economic liberation of the poor.

3.2 Christ incarnate in his people

Archbishop Romero dismissed the false image of Christ spiritualized within an individual piety. Christ is the Great Living One incarnate in the depths of his people: “Nothing human is foreign to Jesus Christ”⁴³ “Christ, a pilgrim accompanying us throughout history”.⁴⁴

In order to reinforce this reality, Archbishop Romero appeals to the patriotism of the Salvadorean people:

“Trying to build a country, a future, a better world, with your back to Christ is trying to build on sand.”⁴⁵

“Christ is Salvadorean for the Salvadoreans. Christ rose again here in El Salvador for us, in order to find, in the power of the Spirit, our own characteristics, our own history, our own freedom, our own dignity as the Salvadorean people.”⁴⁶

³⁹ Homilies, 29th September 1979, vol. I-II, 249

⁴⁰ Homilies, 26th November 1977, vol. I-II, 337

⁴¹ Homilies, 17th December 1978, vol. VI, 44

⁴² C. Jérez, *The Church in Central America*, London 1980, p. 13: “Monseñor Romero did not place the Church in any imaginary ‘centre’, equally and symmetrically distant, both from left and right. He placed the Church where he saw more truth, more justice, more possibilities for lasting peace”.

⁴³ Homilies, 17th December 1978, vol. VI, 44

⁴⁴ Homilies, 18th March 1979, vol. VI, 206

⁴⁵ Homilies, 22nd July 1979, vol. VII, 133

⁴⁶ Homilies, 24th February 1980, vol. VIII, 266

The Salvadorean people has been turned into Christ. “God wants to save in history (. . .) Christ is Salvadorean; he is the history of our people”.⁴⁷ If Christ is there as the spiritual guide who enlightens the organization that puts forward the people’s demands, there is no danger of getting lost in the violent alienations of capitalism and Marxism: “Let’s try, brothers and sisters, to put Christ in the midst of our popular process. Let’s not allow Christ to be kept out of our history”.⁴⁸ The Christian who participates in party-political activity ought to do so in accordance with Gospel values.

3.3 Christ incarnate in his poor, tortured, murdered people

On the first anniversary of Rutilio Grande’s assassination, Archbishop Romero reflected on the life of his Jesuit friend. “What ought I to do for Christ? . . . Go to the people’s primitive houses and feel myself a brother among the poor”.⁴⁹ The impoverished are looked down on by the upper classes of El Salvador. On account of this Archbishop Romero recommends the rich to practise an active and affective solidarity with the dispossessed. Let the rich get close to the poor to get to know the reality of their poverty. Christ is with his people weighed down by suffering. “Here where Christ is suffering flesh (. . .); here is Christ with the cross on his shoulders (. . .), living among the people”.⁵⁰ “Christ is now in the depths of his people”.⁵¹

In Aguilares, at a Mass in reparation for the sacrilege committed by the soldiers who broke open the tabernacle and trampled on the Blessed Sacrament, Archbishop Romero denounced this sacrilege against the Body of Christ. He directs his words to the poor: “You are the image of Christ pierced by the lance (. . .) Christ nailed on the cross and pierced by the lance (. . .)”⁵² Christ is the victim arrested by the members of the National Guard or by the paramilitaries of ORDEN.⁵³ They share the same fate as the man from Nazareth. The Messiah “accepted humiliation to the point of being born a human being, and later led that humble and poor life to the point of the most frightening of humiliations, executed (. . .), crucified.”⁵⁴

“Christ is a man of flesh and blood, of nerves and muscles, like us. A man who feels what anyone feels when the Civil Guard arrests him and takes him to the place of torture.”⁵⁵ Christ also was tortured; Christ also was executed unjustly.⁵⁶

“How is Christ not going to break down in tears faced with the mother who weeps for the disappearance of her son? How is Christ not going to suffer with the poor person who died after torture? How will Christ not reproach the crime of the Guards and ORDEN who make a comedy out of taking prisoner a son and leaving a family without support? Obviously these crimes will not go unpunished! For that reason Christ invokes eternal justice.”⁵⁷

⁴⁷ Homilies, 9th December 1979, vol. VIII, 21

⁴⁸ Homilies, 2nd March 1980, vol. VIII, 291

⁴⁹ Homilies, 5th March 1978, vol. IV, 70

⁵⁰ Ibid., 71

⁵¹ Homilies, 3rd December 1978, vol. VI, 14

⁵² Homilies, 19th June 1977, vol. I-II, 98

⁵³ Literally ‘order’, the acronym of the paramilitaries who formed the death squads.

⁵⁴ Homilies, 24th December 1978, vol. VI, 75

⁵⁵ Homilies, 1st April 1979, vol. VI, 24

⁵⁶ Homilies, 17th June 1979, vol. VI, 410

⁵⁷ Homilies, 29th July 1979, vol. VII, 126

CHAPTER FOUR - CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CHURCH INCARNATE IN THE LIFE OF EL SALVADOR

4.1 Think with the mind of the Church

4.1.1 Faithfulness to the magisterium

Monsignor Ricardo Urioste, the vicar general of the Archdiocese of San Salvador, defined his murdered Archbishop as “a martyr of the Church’s magisterium”.⁵⁸

Archbishop Rivera Damas, successor of Romero, repeats this correct intuition, stating that the cause of Archbishop Romero’s assassination is the cause of the Church. “Archbishop Romero died not as some hero of the revolution, though he was revolutionary in Christian love; he died a faithful and prudent servant of the Church”.⁵⁹

Archbishop Romero was often slandered and portrayed as the leader of a Marxist church, out of communion with the true Church of Rome. For instance an anonymous bulletin which went around the streets of San Salvador declared:

“Romero, who used to be a Catholic priest, but now acts as professional agitator, cuddling up to the Marxist organizations, puts forward from his battle pulpit arguments so distorted, one-sided and weird that they bring tears of pain to the statues of Mary and Jesus”.⁶⁰

Repeatedly, Archbishop Romero defended himself against such calumny. His life motto was on his episcopal arms: “Think with the mind of the Church”, and after his assassination these were written on his tomb. Although his enemies did not pay attention, he consistently insisted that the foundation of his preaching was the magisterium of the universal Church:

“We don’t present a spectacle of two Churches, because there is only one Church, that of Christ’s Gospel”.⁶¹

“Let’s not give the impression of being two Churches, because we are only one Church, in line with the magisterium of that Church, especially for our time with the Second Vatican Council and the Medellín documents”.⁶²

“The truth only exists in communion with the Church’s magisterium”.⁶³

“Always be faithful to the Church’s magisterium and don’t be deceived”.⁶⁴

“The day a priest or a community or a catechist, a pastoral worker, prefers the whim of the public instead of the Church’s magisterium, then it’s not the Church; they have started preaching something very earthly, very human.”⁶⁵

He asks people not to deviate from “the straight line of Vatican II and the documents of Medellín”.⁶⁶

“This position is not a whim or brain-washing.”⁶⁷ “Let us not doubt the documents of the Second Vatican Council or those of Medellín; they are documents of the Church.”⁶⁸ “Let’s study them. You find a lot of people criticising the Second Vatican Council and Medellín without having read them”.⁶⁹

⁵⁸ Mgr Urioste gave a talk on Archbishop Romero in the church of San Francisco, Mejicanos, San Salvador, on 22 March 1986. In this conference he described Archbishop Romero as “a martyr of the Church’s magisterium”.

⁵⁹ J. Delgado, *Oscar A. Romero*, Biografía, San Salvador 1990, 3

⁶⁰ Words which appear in an anonymous pamphlet of July 1977, quoted in *The Church in El Salvador*, Commission of Human Rights, Salamanca, 1980, p. 40.

⁶¹ Homilies, 23rd October 1977, vol. I-II, 286

⁶² Homilies, 2nd October 1977, vol. I-II, 254

⁶³ Homilies, 19th December 1977, vol. I-II, 83

⁶⁴ Homilies, 19th June 1977, vol. I-II, 100

⁶⁵ Homilies, 6th January 1980, vol. VIII, 124

⁶⁶ Homilies, 9th October 1977, vol. I-II, 264

⁶⁷ Homilies, 21st August 1977, vol. I-II, 183

⁶⁸ Homilies, 15th May 1977, vol. I-II, 51

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 54

Archbishop Romero encourages Catholics to “study the true social teaching of the Church. Now is not the time to be confusing the documents of Medellín with Marxism”.⁷⁰ And “Let’s not be afraid of making that doctrine our life blood, our truth, our history”.⁷¹ Archbishop Romero appealed for the documents of the Council, Medellín and, later, Puebla, once studied, to be made real in the daily practice of the faith:

“Make an effort to ensure that all the suggestions we have been given by the Second Vatican Council and the Medellín and Puebla meetings to carry out are not just left on paper, a theory we study, but that we put it into practice and live it out in this reality of conflict.”⁷²

“Puebla is only a step forward from Medellín. Those who have not yet taken the step towards Medellín, thinking that Medellín is going to be overturned, have got to move first to Medellín and then on to Puebla, because there is no other route to discover the identity, and the concerns of the pilgrim Church here in Latin America”.⁷³

4.1.2 Personal adherence to the Pope

Archbishop Romero left no room for doubt about his unreserved loyalty to the Church, its magisterium and its pope. “The Pope has always been for me a guiding light, and I intend to die faithful to him”.⁷⁴ “The Archbishop of San Salvador takes pride in being in communion with the Holy Father; he respects and loves the successor of Peter . . . I would prefer to die a thousand times rather than be a schismatic bishop”.⁷⁵

And when the scrupulously faithful churchman Romero went to Rome he asked if errors had been found in his faith. “They told me clearly, ‘No, you can be sure that there is no question of errors in matters of faith’”.⁷⁶ In his excitement at his forthcoming journey to Puebla, in Mexico, he stressed his desire to be in touch with the Pope in order to “shake his hand and tell him ‘Holy Father, I am with you, in unbreakable solidarity with the Holy See.’”⁷⁷ With vehemence he pledged: “Never will I betray the Pope, never!”⁷⁸ He sought “communion with him”,⁷⁹ and the happiness of “feeling that we shall always be followers of his magisterium”.⁸⁰

It ought to be emphasized that Archbishop Romero held Paul VI in especially high esteem and always kept his photo beside his typewriter. After visiting him in Rome Archbishop Romero exclaimed enthusiastically:

“That man of God is a saint! He is a saint! He is a saint in his fragility, at the age of 81, tormented by arthritis, almost dragging himself along, but with a clear mind! Above all he is a volcano of love for humanity! He is a saint! He is a true disciple of Christ!”⁸¹

⁷⁰ Homilies, 15th May 1977, vol. I-II, 60

⁷¹ Homilies, 2nd July 1978, vol. V, 42

⁷² Homilies, 23rd March 1980, vol. VIII, 359

⁷³ Homilies, 25th March 1979, vol. VI, 232

⁷⁴ Homilies, 9th April 1978, vol. IV, 145

⁷⁵ Homilies 26th August 1979, vol. VII, 207

⁷⁶ Homilies, 2nd July 1978, vol. V, 45

⁷⁷ Homilies, 31st December 1978, vol. VI, 90

⁷⁸ Homilies, 29th July 1979, vol. V, 128

⁷⁹ Homilies, 16th September 1979, vol. VII, 254

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Homilies, 2nd July 1978, vol. V, 43

4.2 The Church incarnate in the world

4.2.1 Church for humanity

Those representing the repressive apparatus of the Salvadorean state sought to silence the Church's condemnation of human rights violations. But Archbishop Romero regarded himself as "the voice of the voiceless",⁸² and he continued to denounce the wretched living standards of the people and criticize the arbitrary arrests, torture and murders inflicted on the people by the oligarchy and their military apparatus. "As an institution, the Church in this social system has a mission to criticize wrong and to bring freedom".⁸³ Faith, according to the Archbishop, is not a private act expressed in a kind of resignation, focussed totally on an individual's salvation in the "next life", without social repercussions. The proper sphere of the Church's action is not the sacristy, but human society. The Church does not exist to look after itself, but to serve suffering humanity.

"The Church cannot possibly understand itself simply from itself alone. It can only truly understand its and its meaning, its roles and its functions, in relation to others.... The Church's first word is not 'Church' but 'Christ'."⁸⁴

"The Church is involved with socio-economic, political and cultural realities; it defines itself through its historical relationships. What makes it Church are these relationships, which are not static and go beyond its own structures. For its witness to be all-embracing, it has to include all areas of society. It ought to be, and ought constantly to try to be, a Church open to the world, in perpetual dialogue with humanity. The salvation of God, borne within the Church, needs to permeate all dimensions of life. If the Church refuses to take part in temporal realities it denies God's creation and the incarnation of his Christ and, consequently, denies its own *missio Dei*. "Keep a careful eye on all those who say that the Church ought to keep to the sacristy and not start proclaiming the duties of justice and insisting on humanity's human rights. Christians who, under the pretext that here we have no permanent abode, say we should look to the future, those who consider that they can ignore temporal tasks, without realising that faith itself is a force that obliges them to carry out those tasks as well as possible in accordance with each person's calling".⁸⁵

4.2.2 The State should exist for its people

Being God's image on earth, each person has a dignity, freedom and responsibility that is prior to any society and any political system. Human rights are therefore not dependent on the sovereignty of the State. They are inalienable. The State exists for every citizen, male and female, rich and poor. The State belongs to its citizens, and is at their service, and not the reverse. All human institutions exist for the benefit of human beings. The healthy State has its role as protector of its people, promoting the fundamental economic rights of its citizens, especially the rights of those most abused. So politicians, members of government, the National Guard, and the security forces are bound, along with every citizen, to a Constitution that guarantees fundamental rights and they commit themselves to uphold and promote them in society. And when this does not happen, the Church calls them to conversion: "The particular manifestations of political rule must... be orientated towards mankind and its rights, its freedom and its

⁸² Homilies, 1st January 1978, vol. III, 17; 29th July 1979, vol. VII, 118; 20th May 1979, vol. VI, 357

⁸³ Cf J.B. Metz, *Theology of the World*, New York, NY, 1973.

⁸⁴ J. Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, London 1977, p. 19.

⁸⁵ Homilies, 12th November 1978, vol. V, 296

fellowship.”⁸⁶ Those in positions of power in society have a duty to serve the people without abusing their authority, to serve the people, not make the people their servants, not abuse them.

Those in government and the security forces are subject to the laws of El Salvador, obliged to show proper respect for human rights:

“Faced with the danger of modern day Thessalonians (and there are a lot of them). ‘Ah, if earthly things are worthless, let’s dedicate ourselves to celestial things, and live a disincarnate piety’; and they are shocked when the archbishop preaches the duties of the earth. They call his preaching communism, because he is demanding of Christians social justice, and claim that he is now meddling in politics when he questions the politician, the Governor, the National Guard, and the security forces.”⁸⁷

4.2.3 The Church crucified in our world

The Church strives to reflect the incarnation of Christ in what it does. According to Saint Ambrose, the Church is like the moon, which has no light of its own and can do no more than reflect the light it receives from the sun. “If it is the true Church, the light that is reflected on its face is the light of Christ.”⁸⁸ The Church must bear witness to the presence of Christ:

“If a lot of people have left the Church, it’s precisely because the Church has alienated itself a little from humanity. But a Church which knows how to feel as its own the whole of humanity and wants to incarnate the pain, the hope, the anguish of all those who suffer and rejoice, that Church will be Christ loved and hoped for, Christ present; and that depends on us.”⁸⁹

The incarnation of the Church in our world has a price to be paid. Unavoidably the Church of El Salvador came to be a Church persecuted by the powerful of this world, and this persecution had among its victims Salvadorean priests: “It would be sad if in a country where there are so many atrocious killings, there should not also be priests counted among the victims. They are testimony to a Church incarnate in the problems of its people”.⁹⁰

4.3 The Church is a mother

4.3.1 Mary united with the persecuted Church

“You cannot separate Mary from the Church”,⁹¹ declares Archbishop Romero. She is “Mother of the Church,”⁹² as Pope Paul VI proclaims: “She is mother of the Church because she is the Mother of Christ, Head of the Mystical Body.”⁹³ And so Mary is our mother”.⁹⁴

“Whenever little children have a mishap, to whom do they run? They look for their mother. They know that they will be safe with her, and she will not let anything happen to them”.⁹⁵

Mary is the protector who defends the Salvadorean Church in a time of affliction and death.

“With her maternal love she takes care of the children of her Son, who are still on their pilgrim way”.⁹⁶ Mary manifests “the maternal characteristics of God”.⁹⁷ When God’s weak people are being persecuted, she takes the side of the people and pleads with God to save them.

⁸⁶ J. Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, p. 181.

⁸⁷ Homilies, 19th November 1978, vol. V, 308

⁸⁸ J. Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, p. 19.

⁸⁹ Homilies, 3rd December 1978, vol. VI, 16

⁹⁰ Homilies, 30th June 1979, vol. VIII, 37

⁹¹ Homilies, 15th August 1977, Vol. I-II, 179

⁹² CELAM, *Puebla*, 286

⁹³ *Ibid.* 287

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* 288

⁹⁵ Homilies, 5th May 1977, vol. I-II, 45

⁹⁶ Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 62

“That useless woman is the Church; it’s Mary. But that uselessness, that weakness, that littleness, that humility, turns into the strength of a God who protects her and saves her from the power of the dragon, and takes her to the triumph as described in the book of the Apocalypse: now the victory of the Lord has come. In him is our hope”.⁹⁸

4.3.2 Mary, Mother of the abandoned

With her intuition Mary is in solidarity with the suffering Church and consoles it. “The Virgin who always suffers with those who suffer, dries away their tears, consoling humanity in its sorrows”,⁹⁹ She is the Mother of the abandoned, the Virgin of Guadalupe who “from the hill-top of Tepeyac says to Juan Diego, the indigenous, the representative of all our races: ‘Am I not here, I, your mother?’”¹⁰⁰ Mary appears in the Bible as an expression of poverty, of humility, of the one who needs everything from God and, when she comes to Latin America, here dialogue is intimate, heartfelt, maternal towards a son, an indigenous, abandoned and poor”.¹⁰¹ The identification of Mary with the abandoned and oppressed people of El Salvador is so close that “Mary becomes Salvadorean”.¹⁰² This bond shows itself in that “she is a strong woman who knew poverty and suffering, flight and exile (. . .) and whose maternal function expanded and on Calvary took on universal dimensions.”¹⁰³ She is the prototype of the suffering Salvadorean mother:

“Mary endured fleeing her home, being exiled and excluded, reduced to poverty. Mary, the daughter of a people dominated by the Roman Empire, who saw her son die unjustly on a cross, a prisoner badly tortured. Mary raises her cry of holy rebellion in order to tell God to send away empty the proud and arrogant, and, if necessary, cast the all-powerful from their throne. And, in exchange, give his grace to the humble, to those who confide in the mercy of the Lord”.¹⁰⁴

4.3.3 The cry of holy rebellion and active non-violence

Mary is the mother who “raises her cry of holy rebellion”¹⁰⁵ against the powerful who persecute the poor. And “if need be,” states Archbishop Romero, “she will “depose the mighty from their thrones”. With this conditional clause, the archbishop is making a subtle reference to the words of Pope John Paul II in Mexico, when he addressed “those who do not passively accept the adverse circumstances of personal and social life”.¹⁰⁶ In this homily the Pope points out that those who are humble, who do not give in to a passive fatalism, proclaim with Mary that God “if need be”, ‘deposes the mighty from their thrones’”.¹⁰⁷ In the social and political circumstances of Latin America the possibility of a legitimate popular insurrection against the oppressors of the people can never be ruled out absolutely. But this last resort of violent revolution must not contravene God’s will and his loving plan. Mary “hears the Word of God and puts it into practice. This is Mary’s greatness”.¹⁰⁸ She gave her consent to this loving plan (. . .) She was faithful to this word to the moment of the martyrdom on Golgotha”.¹⁰⁹ Out of love, Mary accepts

⁹⁷ CELAM, *Puebla*, 291

⁹⁸ Homilies, 15th May 1977, vol. I-II, 45

⁹⁹ Homilies, 24th September 1977, vol. I-II, 228

¹⁰⁰ Homilies, 16th October 1977, vol. I-II, 276

¹⁰¹ Homilies, 12th December 1977, vol. I-II, 61

¹⁰² Homilies, 24th December 1978, vol. VI, 64

¹⁰³ CELAM, *Puebla*, 302

¹⁰⁴ Homilies, 24th December 1979, vol. VIII, 84

¹⁰⁵ CELAM, *Puebla*, 297 (John Paul II, Zapopan 4: AAS 71 230)

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Homilies, 16th July 1978, vol. V, 78

¹⁰⁹ CELAM. *Puebla*, 292

with active non-violence the torture and assassination of her son. Archbishop Romero defines this attitude as “violence done to oneself”.¹¹⁰ The Brazilian Archbishop Helder Câmara appears to be expressing the same Gospel idea as Archbishop Romero on the subject of violence:

“It’s very easy (and many of our so-called revolutions prove the point) to turn the oppressed into oppressors. It gets much more difficult when it comes to denouncing and combating injustices without oneself falling into hatred and preaching hate”.¹¹¹

4.4 The Church of love

4.4.1 The strength of the Church is love

“Love must be the characteristic feature of our Church’s identity”,¹¹² asserts Archbishop Romero. Love is and ought ever to be the dynamic essence of the Body of Christ which is the Church. “It is love and not brute force that will heal our broken world”.¹¹³ Violence wounds, destroys, and kills human beings, whereas love makes them whole, heals them, and brings them to life. The episcopal magisterium of Archbishop Romero rejected violence as a human and Christian means to end the nation’s crisis:

“Justice is not enough; we need love. We have always preached this, sisters and brothers, I’m pleased to be able to state that those who have followed my line of thought in this period of the Church’s history have never heard any word of violence from my lips. The strength of Christianity is love, as we have said before. And we repeat it once more: The strength of the Church is love”.¹¹⁴

Distributive justice directed towards society as a whole is insufficient: “Without love justice is merely a sword”.¹¹⁵ Social justice has to be personalized in a compassionate attitude that leads to human and Christian practice of love towards every individual person with whom we share life. And, above all, love implies a specific preference for every person excluded and in need. Justice is worthless without compassionate love.

And, conversely, love without justice is worthless. “It is a caricature of love when we try to use charitable giving to meet what is a debt of justice, when we make a show of charity while failing to practise social justice”.¹¹⁶ In other words, social justice and personal love ought to form a unity throughout our lives. No justice without love and no love without justice.

“In the evening of life you will be asked to give an account of how much you loved, says a beautiful piece of poetry from Saint John of the Cross. Let’s not forget it. In the eventide of life, when your life goes into decline, like the dying sun, this is what the Lord will ask of you. Not regarding the many things you have done, not external works – which often have a propensity towards vanity – but the loving you put into each thing you did. This is the message of our time, sisters and brothers. But we have always been repeating it: ‘Violence is against the Gospel and against Christianity.’¹¹⁷ The strength of the Church is love.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁰ Cf. below, 7.3

¹¹¹ H. Câmara, *Las Conversiones de un Obispo*, Santander 1978, p. 115. English edition: Helder Câmara. *The conversions of a Bishop. Conversations with José de Broucker*, London 1975.

¹¹² Homilies, 10th September 1978, vol. V, 181

¹¹³ Homilies, 12th April 1979, vol. VI, 276

¹¹⁴ Homilies, 3rd July, vol. I-II, 118

¹¹⁵ Homilies, 10th September 1978, vol. V, 181

¹¹⁶ Homilies, 12th April 1979, vol. VI, 276

¹¹⁷ CELAM, *Medellín*, “Peace”, 15

¹¹⁸ Homilies, 10th July 1977, vol. I-II, 128

4.4.2 The strength to forgive enemies

Instead of hating its enemies, the Church forgives them. If it does not do this, then it will not be the true Church of Jesus Christ. “The Church bears no hate. Like Stephen the martyr, while he was dying under the hail of stones, he lifted up his voice, the voice of the Church: ‘Don’t take this sin into account; forgive them Lord, they don’t know what they are doing!’”¹¹⁹

True love is heroic. It means being vulnerable and showing the courage to be able to suffer violence done to oneself instead of doing violence to someone else. It means not allowing your enemy to undermine your moral position. Archbishop Romero preaches the divine power within human vulnerability: “Love means surrendering yourself. Love means not keeping anything for yourself. Love means giving yourself over to death, should that be necessary. Love is remaining nailed on a cross, telling your enemies that you forgive them. Love means not knowing what it is to hate, it means knowing how to forgive, like Christ on the cross”.¹²⁰

The death of Archbishop Romero, servant of God, testifies to his enormous love. In word and behaviour he showed himself always superior to his enemies whom, in their lack of morality, had to resort to violence and gave him a martyr’s death. He was a prophet of non-violence:

“And I’m happy, my sisters and brothers, to be your bishop in this historic time, in which the Church journeys defining herself authentically, in which the Church defines herself without resorting to hatred, or resentment, forgiving the very ones who speak calumny against her and kill her members, but being the Church of love which leans on her God for support it is far superior to all those lashings of the waves which they raise against us”.¹²¹

If it is certain that violence produces violence, it seems certain too that non-violence produces non-violence.

4.5 The Church Catholic and open

4.5.1 The salvation of Christ goes beyond the Church

Archbishop Romero accepts the Council’s teaching that “the Church, a pilgrim now on earth, is necessary for salvation”,¹²² and that those who know the saving truth of the Catholic Church and reject it culpably, with contempt, will not be saved. Nonetheless, he opts for emphasizing the aspect of openness to non-believers who lead decent and honourable lives. “Whatever good or truth is found amongst them is considered by the Church to be a preparation for the Gospel”.¹²³

Repeatedly, Archbishop Romero emphasizes God’s mercy as extending further than the limits of the Church:

“Salvation is not exclusive to the Bible or to the Church”.¹²⁴

“Let’s bear this ever in mind: Outside the Church there are many roads to salvation”.¹²⁵

“Christ overflows the Church; that is to say, the Church cannot claim to possess the whole of Christ without sharing”.¹²⁶

“Christ overflows the Catholic Church and makes himself the presence of salvation in the Protestant, in the Muslim, in the Jew who are of good conscience. It’s Christ who is bringing universal salvation”.¹²⁷

¹¹⁹ Homilies, 31st December 1977, vol. III, 113

¹²⁰ Homilies, 12th April 1979, vol. VI, 274

¹²¹ Homilies, 15th May 1977, vol. I-II, 55

¹²² Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 14

¹²³ *Lumen Gentium*, 16.

¹²⁴ Homilies, 8th July 1979, vol. VIII, 58

¹²⁵ Homilies, 19th August 1979, vol. VIII, 179

¹²⁶ Homilies, 13th August 1978, vol. V, 83

Archbishop Romero wants to widen a too narrow view of Christ maintained by many, universalising it in the way Teilhard de Chardin did. He wants us to pay homage to the cosmic Christ whose presence expands in the goodness and truth of the entire universe:

“Outside the limits of the Catholic Church, among the Protestant denominations, among the Muslims, among the Jews, the whole world over, there are many elements of truth and of grace which belong to the one and only Redeemer of humanity: Christ Jesus. We do not mean that only in the Catholic Church is the whole of Christ; that would be to belittle Christ. We have to say that Christ has come to save the whole of humanity, even those who have not known Christian baptism, but that, with good will, are fulfilling their religious duties, understood according to conscience”.¹²⁸

He gives us an example of such goodness and truth in to be found in non-Christian faith in the figure of Mahatma Gandhi, teacher of peaceful resistance:

“Pius XI received that philosopher and humanist, Mahatma Gandhi, enveloped in a sheet and with a small goat passing through the streets of Rome. And Pius XI in a speech used this expression: ‘We have met a pagan saint.’ What a beautiful expression. There are saints within paganism. Perhaps more saints than in our Catholic Church”.¹²⁹

4.5.2 It is love that saves

Let us be big-hearted and say with the Second Vatican Council:

“Outside the Church there are many elements of truth and grace which belong to Christ the Redeemer. Those that live outside the Church, who have good will, because they have not known the truth of our Church, will be saved. And, who knows if they will be saved with more merits than us who possess the fullness of means”.¹³⁰

This glorification of a good life lived in love as the foundation of all religion is a frequent theme in Archbishop Romero’s preaching. If a person is a part of the Church he or she ought to strive to love their neighbour, in “active charity”.¹³¹

“How many people are there in the Catholic Church who are no longer Catholics! ‘They belong to the body of the Church’, says the Council, ‘but do not belong to its heart.’”¹³²

“Everyone who loves possesses the Spirit of Christ: The Holy Spirit beats its wings in the heart of the atheist”.¹³³

“It seems to me that that phrase of Christ, ‘Love one another,’ is a point of contact between those who believe and those who do not believe. Because even without faith, yes, a person is able to love sisters and brothers and to be a peace-builder”.¹³⁴

4.6 The Church is free

4.6.1 The Church journeys with the poor and weak

As always, the teaching of Archbishop Romero reflects that the Church cannot be bought with bribes and must reflect the Church’s magisterium. The Council maintains that the Church does not rely, “on any privileges accorded to it by civil authority; indeed, it will give up the exercise of certain legitimate rights

¹²⁷ Homilies, 5th June 1977, vol. I-II, 124

¹²⁸ Homilies, 30th September 1979, vol. VII, 301

¹²⁹ Homilies, 30th July 1978, vol. V, 101

¹³⁰ Homilies, 14th April 1979, vol. VI, 296

¹³¹ Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 10

¹³² Homilies, 14th April 1979, vol. VI, 296

¹³³ Homilies, 18th November 1979, vol. VIII, 446

¹³⁴ Homilies, 3rd July 1977, vol. I-II, 119

whenever it becomes clear that their use will compromise the sincerity of its witness or whenever new circumstances call for a revised approach”.¹³⁵

At no time during his three years and thirty days as Archbishop of San Salvador did Archbishop Romero negotiate with the State to assure a social status of privilege for the Church. “Now the Church does not lean towards any power, any money. Today the Church is poor. Today the Church knows that the powerful reject it, but they love it those who place their trust in God”.¹³⁶ The Church makes an option for the poor. In practical terms, being an exceptionally upright man, he turned down the annual grant of 200,000 dollars a year offered to the Church by the government to help in the reconstruction of the fragile shell of San Salvador’s cathedral. The cathedral had never been completed and was then damaged by a fire in 1958 and owing to the dire poverty of the Salvadorean people, it proved impossible to raise the necessary funds to complete the reconstruction. Faced with this poverty, the Archbishop stubbornly insisted: “This is not the time for great show and large, useless buildings and pomp in the Church. Perhaps at another time all of this had a function and now we must give all of this a function of evangelization and service. Now more than ever before the Church wants to present herself as poor among the poor and poor among the rich in order to evangelize both poor and rich.”¹³⁷

If the rich exploiters and the powerful tyrants do not provide the Church’s economic support, then the Church feels free to condemn their sin and call them to conversion in love.

A new sign of the times is that the theological place of the Church ought to be alongside the poor. Before, the State was the Church’s privileged partner in dialogue. From now onwards, on account of the repression meted out to the people by agents of the State, only the people is worthy of this dialogue with the Church. When the State clashes with the people, the Church’s place is with the people, in order to serve them and be people with them. “This is the Church that I desire, a Church that does not rely on privileges or the value of material goods, and a Church that is more and more detached from earthly and human goods. In this way the Church, from the perspective of the Gospel and her poverty, can more freely judge society.”¹³⁸

4.6.2 The Church does not side with the arrogant State

“This expression reveals the condition that Jesus places on those who want to follow: I offer you no earthly comforts, not even a nest like the birds of the sky nor a den like the foxes. The Son of Man has detached himself from all these things. The Church that I have founded has no need to support itself (an elaboration of Luke 9:58).”¹³⁹

Speaking in the name of Christ, Archbishop Romero argued that the Church has to be unhampered and free so as not to compromise its Gospel message by close links with the oppressors of the people. He made this quite clear: “The poverty of the Church will be more authentic and effective when it does not depend upon or look for the help of the powerful, the protection of the powerful. Evangelization does not consist in having power but in being gospel-minded and holy.”¹⁴⁰ “It is a challenge to present ourselves to the world, like Saint Paul, boldly free and yet this is the meaning of autonomy from the idols

¹³⁵ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 76 (A. Flannery (ed.), *Vatican Council II. The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Wilmington DE, 1975).

¹³⁶ Homilies, 28th August 1979, vol. I-II, 200

¹³⁷ Homilies, 15th July 1979, vol. VII, 79

¹³⁸ Homilies, 28th August 1977, vol. I-II, 200

¹³⁹ Homilies, 29th June 1977, vol. I-II, 108

¹⁴⁰ Homilies, 1 July 1979, vol. VII, 50

of money and power.”¹⁴¹ “Let us be careful, my sisters and brothers! Let us not sell ourselves to anyone! We have been bought by Christ and his love ought to govern our lives.”¹⁴²

From the time of the assassination of Rutilio Grande, Archbishop Romero refused to take part in any act of worship in which members of the government or the Salvadorean military took an official part. He made this symbolic gesture of rejection to make the oppressors of the people take seriously their human and Christian duty of conversion:

“... my sisters and brothers, it is not prestigious for the Church to be with the powerful, rather the prestige of the Church is the following: to experience the poor as her own, to know that the Church has a mission here on earth, namely, to call all people to conversion, and this includes those who are rich. The rich are called to change and be saved in the same way as those who are poor because the poor are the only ones who are called blessed.”¹⁴³

“We do not want to be toys that are played with, and this is said in regard to the Protestant and Catholic Churches. ...we do not want to be toys that are played with by the powers of the earth”.¹⁴⁴

This position of confrontation with the oligarchy and the military provoked direct persecution for the Church. But this was no surprise for Archbishop Romero:

“Christianity spends the whole of its life, the whole of its history, journeying towards the cross and towards the resurrection. Therefore, sisters and brothers, it ought not to strike us as abnormal that a particular Church should have more than its share of the cross, because if this were not so it would not have more than its share of the resurrection. A Church that seeks accommodation and prestige without the pain of the cross is not the authentic Church of Jesus Christ. A pampered Church, a Church out for glory without the pain of the cross, is not the authentic Church of Jesus Christ”.¹⁴⁵

4.7 The Church is not the whole of the Kingdom of God

4.7.1 The Church is the servant of the Kingdom of God

“We can say that the Church is not the whole kingdom of God, but at the service of the kingdom of God and of the entire world (. . .) The Church is not an end in itself.”¹⁴⁶ It does not wish to set itself up itself as the Kingdom of God in the world; it tries to avoid a false, triumphalist vision of its historical structures. Its mission is “to announce and establish the kingdom of Christ”.¹⁴⁷ It is “the seed and the beginning” of the kingdom,¹⁴⁸ pressing for this kingdom of love, justice and peace to bear its fruits. That is why the Church exists. The Church wants to work towards “the historic, liberating, sovereignty of God” on earth,¹⁴⁹ but it realizes that the Kingdom of God transcends its own ecclesial limits of time and place. “It is one-sided if we merely see the lordship of God in his perfect kingdom, just as it is open to misunderstanding if we equate the kingdom of God with the actuality of his rule.”¹⁵⁰ It belongs to the world while at the same time it transcends the world.

¹⁴¹ Homilies, 15 October 1978, vol. V, 249.

¹⁴² Homilies, 23 April 1978, vol. IV, 189-90.

¹⁴³ Homilies, 17th February 1980, vol. VII, 50

¹⁴⁴ Homilies, 27th November 1977, vol. V 249

¹⁴⁵ Homilies, 19 February 1978, vol. IV, 36.

¹⁴⁶ Homilies, 22 October 1978, vol. V, 254

¹⁴⁷ CELAM, Puebla, 227.

¹⁴⁸ Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 5.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ J. Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, p.190.

The Church works to be the seed and beginning of the Kingdom of God in the world, but it does not include the whole reality of the kingdom. The action of God “is also present in the hearts of human beings who live outside the perceptible sphere of the Church. But that definitely does not mean that membership of the Church is a matter of indifference”.¹⁵¹ The Church collaborates with any vital impulse that tries to make the world more human, especially in giving dignity to the abandoned.

4.7.2 The Kingdom of God is bigger than the Church

“Outside the Church, too, every human being who struggles for the sake of justice, everyone that seeks just claims in an unjust atmosphere is working for the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is outside the Church’s frontiers and, so, the Church appreciates all that synchronizes with its struggle to implant the Kingdom of God. A Church that tries only to keep itself pure and uncontaminated, that would not be a Church that serves its God and humanity”.¹⁵²

The Church is incarnate in the world and, being so, it is contaminated with imperfection and sin. It is imperfect and sinful, but always recognizes that its mission is to strive to implant the “kingdom of truth and life, of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love and peace”.¹⁵³ And, in this never-ending task, it gladly collaborates with women and men of goodwill who have the same aim for the world, a society transformed for the better. “The Church sees in these voices well-springs of the Holy Spirit that also speak in the profane world.”¹⁵⁴ The history of salvation and the history of revelation are one history.

4.8 The Church is not the whole people

4.8.1 The people of the country and the People of God

Paradoxically the Church, which defines itself as the people of God, does not separate itself from the people; it includes itself in the people as a whole. Nonetheless, the people of God and the people of the country are not equivalent:

“My dear sisters and brothers, I continue to insist on a distinction that is important to clarify at this time: there is a difference when we speak about the people and the People of God. What is the difference? The people are composed of all those individuals who live in a particular country. Thus all the persons living in this country, including those who do not believe and those who are indifferent, are the people of El Salvador. When we speak about the People of God we are talking about the Christian community, those people in El Salvador who have received the message of Jesus Christ, repented and as a sign of their repentance have been baptized”.¹⁵⁵

“Wherever there are Christians, there is the People of God who cannot be easily distinguished from people in general, but within these people there are realities and hopes that are not present in non-believers or in those who have been baptized but live their commitment in such a lifeless, deadening and tepid manner that it would appear that they are nothing but baptized pagans.”¹⁵⁶

Archbishop Romero notes the fact that there are nominal Catholics who do not live out the faith of their Church in the heart of the people, and leaves open the theoretical question if they belong to the People of God or only to the people of the country. On the other hand, those who come to Mass ought not to pride themselves on their following of Christ, of being nourished by the spiritual food of the word and

¹⁵¹ CELAM, Puebla, 226

¹⁵² Homilies, 9 December 1979, vol. VIII

¹⁵³ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 39 (quoting the Preface for the feast of Christ the King).

¹⁵⁴ Homilies, 9th September 1979, vol. VII, 243

¹⁵⁵ Homilies, 9th December 1979, vol. VIII, 19

¹⁵⁶ Homilies, 13th January 1980, vol. VIII, 149

the sacraments. There is always room for deepening still more the living of the Christian life in our situation.

“Even though they have been baptized and come to Mass, if they are not united in solidarity with the demanding teaching of the Gospel, and with the concrete application of the Gospel as outlined in our pastoral lines of action, then my sisters and brothers, we know how to distinguish these people and thus avoid playing games with such a sacred name: the people. We call the People of God this remnant of Salvadorians who believe in Christ and who want to follow him faithfully. They are nourished by his life, his sacraments and by his pastors.¹⁵⁷

In reality Christians, who are members of the People of God, ought to commit themselves to seek the freedom and well-being of the whole people, and in a special way, the liberation and well-being of the oppressed.

4.8.2 The people is broader than any human group

No group, whether social or political, possesses the monopoly of being the people in their totality. No group can really identify itself as representative of the whole people:

“Let’s not confuse the people with the People of God. And so, just as political popular organizations ought not to say: ‘We are the people,’ but ‘We are a part of the people,’ the Church also cannot confuse itself with all the people, because there are a lot of unbelievers who do not believe in this communion of the Spirit.”¹⁵⁸

4.8.3 The Church united with the people

Archbishop Romero indicates that the Church is a microcosm of the people, trying to be a sort of leaven of love in the mass of humanity:

“Don’t delude yourselves by believing the Church to be the totality of the people. Often it may be a very small part of the people. And Christ said so to his apostles. ‘Don’t fear, little flock’ (. . .) Let’s not try to be the shining light of huge crowds, but yet, be solid with the solidity of love and of a life that comes to us from God”.¹⁵⁹

In a concise phrase Archbishop Romero sums up the whole reason for the Church’s existence: “The service of the people is the only reason for which the Church and the government exist in the world”.¹⁶⁰

And when the people of the country demand justice, the People of God ought to be abreast of them, supporting these just claims in the ordinary circumstances of daily life. “The Church of Vatican II, of Medellin and Puebla is very clear in asking pastors to stand with their people when they cry out to have their just demands heard.”¹⁶¹ And when the people of the country come into conflict with the government, the People of God does not stay neutral and disincarnate, but supports truth and justice:

“The Church feels that this is her ministry: To defend the image of God in every human being. Notice that the conflict is not between the Church and the Government; it’s between the Government and the people. The Church is with the people, and the people is with the Church, thanks be to God!”¹⁶²

“The political crisis is based on a confrontation between the people and the government. We have said the same thing on many occasions. When we have been asked about the conflicts with

¹⁵⁷ Homilies, 23rd March 1980, vol. VIII, 365

¹⁵⁸ Homilies, 3rd June 1979, vol. VI, 377

¹⁵⁹ Homilies, 29 October 1978, vol. V, 262

¹⁶⁰ Homilies, 30th December 1979, vol. VIII, 107

¹⁶¹ Homilies, 27th May 1979, vol. VI, 367

¹⁶² Homilies, 21st January 1979, vol. VI, 137

the Church we have said: The Church is not against the government, but rather the government is against the people. The Church desires to be with the people and because of this, the Church is persecuted.”¹⁶³

4.9 Division within the Church

In Archbishop Romero’s day Salvadorean society was polarized by a social, political, and economic crisis. The Church, laity, clergy, religious and hierarchy, reflected this conflict, inevitably, since a Church incarnate in the real world becomes contaminated by human sinfulness. “The Church in El Salvador is now involved in a crisis. There are divisions in our Church and we cannot deny that fact. There are those who reject the pastoral guidelines of the Archbishop. There are many people who criticize the doctrine that we are proclaiming and feel that all of this is perverse”.¹⁶⁴

4.9.1 Two simultaneous pastoral letters with contradictory emphases

“At the same time that our Pastoral Letter was published, the four other bishops of El Salvador published a statement on the same theme, but with a ‘different emphasis’”.¹⁶⁵ Archbishop Romero’s third pastoral letter, written jointly with Bishop Rivera Damas, the bishop of Santiago de Maria, consists in their reflections, from the perspective of the Gospel and of the Church’s teaching, on the situation of the country and the popular organizations. Do the poor have the right to free association in order to promote their political and socio-economic interests? This is the theme of this pastoral letter.

The letter begins by providing a firm defence of the natural right of all citizens to political organization, based on article 160 of the Constitution of El Salvador, John XXIII’s encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, 23, the Second Vatican Council (*Gaudium et Spes*, 68, Pope Paul VI’s *Octogesima Adveniens*, 22, the Medellín document (“Justice”, 11-12, “Peace”, 27).

The letter states that “faith and politics ought to be united in a Christian who has a political vocation..., but the task of the faith and a particular political task cannot be identified”.¹⁶⁶ In the third part of the pastoral letter Romero and Rivera offer a study of violence used ‘to obtain social, political and economic aims’, starting from the teaching of the Church.¹⁶⁷ They recommend “wisdom and serenity” in the midst of a flagrant situation of structural injustice¹⁶⁸, and advise: “All peaceful measures must be first exhausted” before violence is considered.¹⁶⁹ Above all, the letter supports “the power of non-violence, ... which leaves the aggressor morally defeated and humiliated”.¹⁷⁰ Simultaneously with the publication of this letter the other four bishops of the Salvadorean hierarchy issued a Declaration from the Episcopate [sic] of El Salvador on some people’s political organizations. The title of their document presumes unanimity among the six bishops, although its content and spirit is in open opposition to the pastoral letter of the Archbishop of San Salvador and the bishop of Santiago de Maria.

Archbishop Romero confesses that disagreement among the bishops sets a bad example:

“I want to tell you that those of you who are so scandalized by the lack of unity among the bishops, please learn how to live in a way that is better than the human sins of the Church.

¹⁶³ Homilies, 14th October 1979, vol. VII, 351

¹⁶⁴ Homilies, 8th October 1978, vol. V, 235

¹⁶⁵ Homilies, 3rd September 1978, vol. V, 167

¹⁶⁶ Mgr Oscar Arnulfo Romero and Mgr Arturo Rivera Damas, *The Church, Political Organisation and Violence*, London, 1980, p. 14; See also *Archbishop Oscar Romero, Voice of the Voiceless (The Four Pastoral Letters and Other Statements)*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1985.

¹⁶⁷ Romero and Rivera Damas, *The Church, Political Organisation and Violence*, pp 18-21.

¹⁶⁸ Romero and Rivera Damas, p. 21.

¹⁶⁹ Romero and Rivera Damas, p. 21.

¹⁷⁰ Romero and Rivera Damas, p. 19.

Learn how to love the Church, not because of the good example of the priests but because you continue to mature in your knowledge. In the gospel when Jesus spoke about the priests of his time he encouraged the people with the following words: 'Do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do.'¹⁷¹

4.9.2 The case of Caritas and auxiliary bishop Revelo

Bishop Revelo, at the 1977 Rome synod, declared controversially that catechists in El Salvador were indoctrinating the people with Marxism. This irresponsible allegation endangered the lives of many defenceless people, by fuelling the prejudices of the military. Later, Revelo defended himself by accusing the press and radio of distorting his words.¹⁷²

Nevertheless Bishop Revelo, Archbishop Romero's new auxiliary bishop, entered the Archdiocese on 6th of March 1978, when the Archbishop introduced him to the clergy in the monthly meeting in San José de la Montaña. In the course of the following weeks the two bishops seemed to work well together. An example of their collaboration was seen when people from San Pedro Perulapán, after a massacre perpetrated by the security forces, found refuge in the cathedral. The National Guard surrounded the building. The two bishops secured guarantees that the people sheltering in the cathedral would not be harmed and succeeded in getting them all out safe and sound.

The heart of the question that provoked a final break between the Archbishop and his auxiliary concerned Caritas, a humanitarian relief organization. According to the statutes of Caritas, the retiring president should have resigned once his term of office had ended. And the appointment of a new president for Caritas El Salvador was the prerogative of the Archbishop of San Salvador. According to the statutes signed in 1961 by the government and the Archbishop, only the Archbishop had the authority to choose the president.

Around about this time, towards the end of October, 1978, Archbishop Romero fell ill with gastritis and had to be hospitalised. During this illness, some of the bishops, made changes to the Caritas statutes behind his back, making the bishop currently president of the Episcopal Conference responsible for appointing the president, and not the Archbishop of San Salvador. The ministry of the interior asked for Archbishop Romero's signature, and the bishops lied, claiming that the vicar general, auxiliary bishop Revelo, had the authority to make the change in the statutes. In fact, the vicar general is simply vicar general, and according to Canon Law he does not have this power. This was the last straw. When Bishop Revelo signed that document there was a complete break between him and Archbishop Romero. As a consequence, Archbishop Romero decided to remove Revelo from the post of vicar general. And when Revelo tried to manipulate the press in his favour, Archbishop Romero felt obliged to explain his decision publicly:

"At the same time, we point out with pain the division of the Hierarchy. We cannot hide it; and I, for my part, beg pardon of the Church, and say to you as an explanation which you may understand, perhaps, with the aim of receiving your assistance and figure out the causes and resolve them. Among us is occurring a reflection of what is happening in our society (. . .) The way forward that the Church points out for the resolution of the crisis is to be converted to Christ, there where he says: 'Whatever you do to one of these little ones, you do it to me'. The conversion to the poor will be the solution to our divisions within the Church'¹⁷³

¹⁷¹ *Homilies*, 16 July 1978, vol. 7, p.67

¹⁷² Cf J. Delgado, *Monseñor Romero. Biografía*, San Salvador 1990, pp 112ff.

¹⁷³ *Homilies*, 6th August 1979, vol. VII, 149

In his diary, Archbishop Romero describes his encounter in Rome with Cardinal Baggio, head of the Congregation for Bishops:

“He expressed his worries, particularly regard to the division within the bishops; and the situation of the auxiliary bishop. And he was very frank in recognizing the error of the auxiliary bishop in signing the permission to change the statutes of Caritas, which was the right of the Archbishop himself to sign. He, as vicar general, ought to have been in agreement with the Archbishop, and if he was not in agreement he did wrong in signing. But he also said that I had been very severe in taking the measure of dismissing him and leaving him hanging in the air.

“I tried to explain this whole situation because, besides, I pointed out that among the reasons that Bishop Revelo gave for his actions that Caritas had been politicised and was falling into the hands of guerrillas. Also, he claimed that I was sick in hospital. So I explained to the Cardinal that neither of these arguments was sufficient reason for acting as he did”.¹⁷⁴

Conversion means, in the last resort, turning towards the poor of society. Archbishop Romero’s reason for wanting to replace the president of Caritas was to stop the manipulation of relief aid and limit the power of the Government and the military within the agency. In other words, Archbishop Romero sought to turn Caritas towards the poor.

4.10 The sinful Church

Archbishop Romero does not treat any human phenomenon as absolute, not even the institutional Church, made up as it is of sinful members. Only God is holy and the Church owes its mark of holiness to God. “It is he who makes the acts of the Church into holy, though never autonomously holy, acts”.¹⁷⁵ The light of God penetrates us but, at the same time, we are darkness. ‘Simul iustus et peccator’.

4.10.1 The human Church in sinful humanity

“My sisters and brothers, the Church is not embarrassed by her sins for she understands that she is human and is composed of people like you and me, fragile and miserable people. When our enemies throw our sins in our faces, they do not realize that they are really praising us.”¹⁷⁶

The truth is that we:

“... are putrid fragile flesh (. . .) No one can say that he can throw the first stone when we are all sinners. Therefore we were saying that if the Church has the courage to denounce the sins of the world, it is not because she regards herself as being unpolluted, but because ‘He who denounces is also prepared to be denounced’ and is under obligation to turn to God”.¹⁷⁷

Archbishop Romero knows in his heart that the Church is holy but “clasping sinners to her bosom, at once holy and always in need of purification, follows constantly the path of penance and renewal”.¹⁷⁸ Every human being sins. We are all guilty before God and need to change our lives, directing them towards justice, love, and peace. The sinful Church “is by no means unaware that down through the centuries there have been among its members, both clerical and lay, some who were disloyal to the Spirit of God. Today as well, the Church is not blind to the discrepancy between the message it proclaims and the human weakness of those to whom the Gospel has been entrusted”.¹⁷⁹

With realism and with humility, Archbishop Romero recognizes that he is a sinner:

¹⁷⁴ O. Romero, *Su diario de 31 marzo 1978 al 20 marzo 1980*, San Salvador 1990, p.180.

¹⁷⁵ H. Küng, *The Church*, London, 1968, p.327.

¹⁷⁶ Homilies, 26th February 1978, vol. IV, 49

¹⁷⁷ Homilies, 17th December 1978, vol. VI, 40

¹⁷⁸ Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 8.

¹⁷⁹ Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 43.

“We should not be surprised that the prelates, the priests, married people, religious men and women, students in our Catholic schools, etc. do not always fulfil their obligations. We have our faults and defects. In all sincerity I can tell you that every night I have to ask the Lord’s forgiveness for my own faults and we all do the same.”¹⁸⁰

“Our depraved persecutors tell us nothing new about ourselves. They simply remind us of our need to beat our breasts... Those who set themselves up to point out the sins of the Church are like the Pharisees: O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity (Luke 18:11). But let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone (John 8:7). At this time of making amends, we all need to ask the Lord for forgiveness.”¹⁸¹

“No-one who is human is able to present themselves before the Lord without earthly stains.”¹⁸²

“If a Church wants to pride itself on having only holy members, it will not be the true Church.”¹⁸³

4.10.2 Sin against the rich – sin against the poor

Archbishop Romero does not care so much if his detractors are the rich and powerful of this world; it worries him more when the condemnation of the Church comes from the anguish of the poor, abandoned in their wretchedness. “And the poor are the constant cry that condemns not only social injustice, but also our own Church’s scant generosity.”¹⁸⁴

4.11 The Church and politics

4.11.1 The Church as an institution does not engage in politics

In treating this burning issue of the Church’s involvement in the field of politics, Archbishop Romero sticks to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and the Latin American bishops at Puebla. In his homilies he sets out the principles that govern the action of the institutional Church in the socio-political sphere, without exempting the laity, as citizens, from their right and duty to join in party politics. He clearly recognizes that “party politics is properly the realm of lay people”.¹⁸⁵ Archbishop Romero understands that it is they who have the task of seeking, through political parties, “options that are increasingly in line with the common good and the needs of the weakest”.¹⁸⁶ Nonetheless, as an institution,

“The Church does not pledge allegiance to any social system.”¹⁸⁷

“The Church does not identify herself with any political system.”¹⁸⁸

“When the Council speaks about the relationship between the Church and the political community we read the following: ‘The political community and the Church are autonomous and independent of each other in their own fields’ (Gaudium et Spes, 76).”¹⁸⁹

At a personal level, as a pastor of the Church, Archbishop Romero is conscious of his responsibility to divest himself of “every partisan political ideology”¹⁹⁰ in order to be able to “evangelize the political sphere as Christ did”.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁰ Homilies, 2nd April 1978, vol. IV, 141

¹⁸¹ Homilies, 12th June 1977, vol. I-II, 88

¹⁸² Homilies, 29th November 1978, vol. V, 88

¹⁸³ Homilies, 23rd July 1978, vol. V, 85

¹⁸⁴ Homilies, 17th February 1980, vol. VIII, 236

¹⁸⁵ CELAM, *Puebla*, 524; cf. Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 76

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 525

¹⁸⁷ Homilies, 14th January 1979, vol. VI, 116

¹⁸⁸ Homilies, 12th April 1979, vol. VI, 275

¹⁸⁹ Homilies, 28th October 1979, vol. VII, 87; Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 76

¹⁹⁰ CELAM, *Puebla*, 526

“Let these words be engraved in your hearts: Christian love goes beyond the categories of all regimes and systems... I have been committed only to my God.”¹⁹²

“I don’t care about politics. What I care about is that the pastor has to be where there is suffering.”¹⁹³

“We repeat once again that with regard to political systems and organization the Church does not identify herself with any specific political option but supports that which is just in all political options but also denounces those situations that are unjust.”¹⁹⁴

In this Archbishop Romero echoes the Church’s teaching and applies it solidly to the Salvadorean situation:

“The Church should have true freedom... to proclaim its teaching about society, to carry out its task among men without hindrance, and to pass moral judgments even in matters relating to politics, whenever the fundamental rights of man or the salvation of souls requires it.”¹⁹⁵

The Church is free and feels she has “a duty and a right to be present in this area of reality”.¹⁹⁶ No one who lives in this world can act outside the overall political framework.

4.11.2 The Church promotes the common good in accordance with the Gospel

The Church in its freedom is a pilgrim, and dynamic. It does not become settled or accommodate itself to ephemeral human structures. It cannot be sedentary in this contingent world. It aspires to treat the things of this world as relative and only the Kingdom of God as absolute:

“The People of God in history is not attached to any one social system, to any political organization, to any party. The Church does not identify herself with any of those forces because she is the eternal pilgrim of history.”¹⁹⁷

“No matter how perfect a political system might be, the Church does not identify with any one system. The Church critiques every system to make it better”.¹⁹⁸

Supporting what is just and denouncing what is unjust – whatever its origin - that is the autonomous function of the Church incarnate in human reality:

“This political system that has been won with so much bloodshed is definitive. No, the Church cannot undertake to define here on earth the Kingdom of God. The Church continues to encourage liberators, continues to encourage the search for better government, continues to encourage the search for better political systems, but the Church herself is not political.”¹⁹⁹

“The Church... cannot be wedded to any regime but ought to collaborate with those regimes that truly are concerned about the common good, with those that attempt to achieve difficult just objectives and to make respect for human rights a reality.”²⁰⁰

The Church and the civil authority, “each one, in its own field, has to collaborate with the other in working together for the common good. The common good is the politics of the Church. Because of her moral role in the world, she has a right to denounce political abuses and thus, tell the powerful that they are not God”.²⁰¹

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Homilies, 20th May 1979, vol. VI, 352

¹⁹³ Homilies, 30th October 1977, vol. I-II, 296

¹⁹⁴ Homilies, 20th May 1979, vol. VI, 357

¹⁹⁵ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 76

¹⁹⁶ CELAM, *Puebla*, 515

¹⁹⁷ Homilies, 23rd March 1980, vol. VIII, 366

¹⁹⁸ Homilies, 11th November 1979, vol. VII, 450

¹⁹⁹ Homilies, 18th November 1979, vol. VII, 450

²⁰⁰ Homilies, 28th October 1979, vol. VII, 390

²⁰¹ Homilies, 6th August 1977, vol. I-II, 157

The Church exercises her moral judgement freely” in the defence of freedom and the dignity and the rights of the human person”.²⁰² “Therefore, when the Church defends these causes, she is clearly defending what God wants her to defend”.²⁰³

When the Salvadorean association of the Mothers of the Disappeared asked for Archbishop Romero’s help, he had no hesitation because, morally, they had the right to know the whereabouts of their sons and daughters who had been disappeared, tortured, imprisoned or murdered, and he quoted a phrase of Pope Pius XI’s to emphasise the sacredness of human life created in the image of God: “The Church is not involved in politics, but when politics touches the altar, the Church defends the altar.’ The rights of the human person are of great interest to the Church. Indeed, when life is endangered, Mother Church is interested. At this moment, the Church is very mindful of mothers who are suffering”.²⁰⁴ Promoting the common good implies defending those who have no-one to protect them.

The Church makes the effort to enlighten people about “what God desires and what God does not desire”.²⁰⁵ God does not want arbitrary arrests, or imprisonment without trial, or torture, or assassinations:

“I am pleased to listen to this priest and Congressman speak in defence of the rights, equality and the freedom of people for as you can see this is not simply a matter of the political arena. Yes, it is a political matter but it is rooted in the Gospel. The Gospel defends and proclaims all of the great, fundamental rights of the human person... The Gospel will never fail us”.²⁰⁶

4.11.3 Divine authority is superior to human authority

Archbishop Romero respected the autonomy of civil authority in its sphere separate from the autonomy of the Church, but he adds another element to which the magisterium does not perhaps give so much emphasis: the Church’s divine authority is superior to all human authority. Put simply, “Politics is under God’s dominion.”²⁰⁷ “We have no reason to beg before politicians because we have a light that illuminates all political systems. Let us not take sides with any one sector. Let us maintain the autonomy of Jesus who even though he was shackled was able to say in front of Pilate: “There is no reason to fear my kingdom because it is superior to you’.”²⁰⁸

4.12 The Church and capitalism

4.12.1 Hoarding possessions does not bring happiness

The accumulation of material goods does not bring happiness. The pigs’ acorn pods “do not bring us happiness.”²⁰⁹ The pig is a greedy animal which eats whatever is edible and does not share. Rural people are well aware that a pig is never satisfied even when its belly is bursting. It always searches for more and more. The rich person is like that because they are individualist and materialistic. And this egoistic conduct goes against the will of God. “But it is not God’s will for some to have everything and others to have nothing. That cannot be of God. God’s will is that all his children should be happy.”²¹⁰ In these words Archbishop Romero echoes much of the advice that the wise Socrates gave to Glaucon: “Our

²⁰² Homilies, 9th October 1977, vol. I-II, 28

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Homilies, 8th May 1977, vol. I-II, 28

²⁰⁵ Homilies, 21st January 1979, vol. VI, 133

²⁰⁶ Homilies, 8th January 1978, vol. III, 142

²⁰⁷ Homilies, 9th March 1980, vol. VIII, 315

²⁰⁸ Homilies, 25th November 1979, vol. VII, 473

²⁰⁹ Cf Homilies, 11th September 1977. Romero is referring to the parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15.11-32)

²¹⁰ Homilies, 10th September 1978, vol. V, 181

purpose in founding the State was not to promote the happiness of a single class, but, so far as possible, of the whole community”.²¹¹

Archbishop Romero urges the rich to do the will of God and share their riches and power with the dispossessed. “The destiny of humankind is not to obtain a large amount of money or power or prestige but to fulfil the will of God”.²¹² Archbishop Romero exhorts the rich to make sacrifices and shared their riches with the needy of Salvadorean society. This personal sacrifice on the part of each rich person is necessary for their happiness and salvation, because the way towards the happiness of the resurrection is through the dispossession of the cross:

“There can be no deep happiness without a cross of austerity.”²¹³

“There is nothing wrong with having money but to place one’s trust in money is to make money an idol when in fact we should place our trust only in the one true God. Money is lost and gives security to no one. Experience tells us that those who place their trust in the things of this earth are never happy.”²¹⁴

4.12.2 Love brings happiness

Love, a just redistribution of a country’s wealth, is what brings deep and lasting happiness for the rich. This is “the long and difficult struggle of sharing among all the people of El Salvador the wealth of our nation and the wealth of all men and women.”²¹⁵ The situation of the country is that of “disproportionate injustice”,²¹⁶ “the concentration of wealth in the hands of just a few people”.²¹⁷ “Some have taken possession of all the bread on earth”.²¹⁸ This insatiable greed causes personal sin and also an “institutionalized injustice”,²¹⁹ or “social sinfulness”.²²⁰ “There is no more diabolical sin than to take away bread from those who are hungry.”²²¹ Pope Paul VI warns the rich, “Let your ears and hearts be attentive to the voices of those that ask for bread, concern, justice”.²²² “Feed the man dying of hunger, because if you do not feed him, you are killing him”.²²³

4.12.3 Only God is the owner of things

The reality that has to be faced is that in El Salvador there is “a social, economic and political problem”,²²⁴ and to solve this problem “life must be transformed so that the gifts that God has given, sufficient to nourish the people of San Salvador, should not remain in the hands of just a few people while so many others are dying of hunger. The children’s bread must be distributed as God wishes to all those invited to [the banquet of] life.”²²⁵

“In El Salvador we could say that there is an ever increasing distance between the many who have nothing and the few who have everything.”²²⁶ This situation of greed not only dehumanises the

²¹¹ Plato, *The Republic*, Harmondsworth, 1995, No 420 (p.164).

²¹² Homilies, 6th November 1977, vol. I-II, 307

²¹³ Homilies, 16th December 1979, vol. VIII, 54

²¹⁴ Homilies, 14th October 1979, vol. VIII, 344

²¹⁵ Homilies, 2nd April 1978, vol. IV, 132

²¹⁶ Homilies, 16th July 1978, vol. V, 73

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Homilies, 5th August 1979, vol. VII, 138

²¹⁹ CELAM, *Puebla*, 495

²²⁰ Ibid., 28

²²¹ Homilies, 24th February 1980, vol. VIII, 262

²²² CELAM, *Medellín*, Peace, 5

²²³ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 69; cf Gratian, Decretum, c.21 dist. LXXXI

²²⁴ Homilies, 24th June 1979, vol. VII, 22

²²⁵ Ibid

²²⁶ Homilies 18th February 1979, vol. VI, 152

person who is deprived and destitute, but it dehumanises rich people too, making them lose their human sensibility: they are incapable of resisting the idol of consumerism, and enslave themselves with their possessions. “We want to live in luxury. We want to consume what everyone else consumes, and we are making ourselves victims, slaves.”²²⁷ Sadly, the rich do not want to free themselves from their blind anxiety to have more and more; they go on wanting to pay homage to earthly things. “They are very comfortable in their gold cages”.²²⁸ To these idolaters, Archbishop Romero insists: “Everything that the world produces belongs to God. He is the owner of everything”.²²⁹ This thought is not original. Archbishop Romero is drawing on the patristic tradition of more than sixteen centuries. For instance, Saint Ambrose of Milan (+ 397) in his exegetical commentary on Chapter 21 of the first book of Kings, *De Nabuthae historia*, asserts the universal destiny of economic assets.²³⁰

Paul VI in his encyclical *Populorum Progressio* (33), quotes Ambrose as an authority on this question. The Greek Father Saint Basil the Great (+ 379), in a homily, is cutting in his irony when he describes the dehumanised human beings who lacks the common sense of the beasts of the field: “Flocks of sheep graze on the same mountainous slopes, horses graze on the same ground, but we hide in our breasts the possessions which ought to be available to all”.²³¹ Also, the words of Archbishop Romero find an echo in another Greek Father, Saint John Chrysostom (+ 407): “Things or riches, wherever we get them from, belong to the Lord and if we distribute them among the needy we will achieve great abundance”.²³²

4.12.4 Greed dehumanizes human beings

Idols demand the sacrifice of human victims. Liberal capitalism, that is “the idolatrous worship of wealth in individual terms”,²³³ crushes and kills those who oppose its egoistic ambition:

“Gold continues to be an idol that many adore. Because they adore this golden calf (their wealth)...they are against a Church that does no more than repeat the prophet’s condemnation: Woe to you idolaters! You who make gold your god, but a god that has no life within it. As you lay prostrate before this metal your heart has become hardened (cf. Habakkuk 2:18-20).”²³⁴

Love of money makes human beings insensitive, turning them into calves with metal hearts. They are the rich in the oligarchy, consumed by power and wealth and obsessed with preserving their material privileges: they are the people who organize death squads to silence the opposition. Archbishop Romero raised his voice in protest: “The unjust and disordered structures from which terrorist violence springs forth must be changed.”²³⁵ “We are living the imprisonment and torture of the capitalist system.”²³⁶

Moved by the extreme poverty and the hunger endured by the vast majority of his people, Archbishop Romero strives to describe the reality of suffering, trying to provoke a positive response from the wealthy. The Salvadorean people:

²²⁷ Homilies, 4th March 1979, vol. VI, 183

²²⁸ Homilies, 4th December 1977, vol. III, 23

²²⁹ Homilies, 8th January 1979, vol. III, 140

²³⁰ PL 14, 765: *Quod enim commune est in omnium usum datum, tu solus usurpas, Omnium est terra, terra non divitum.* (“What is common is given for the use of all; you are appropriating it for yourself. The earth belongs to all; the earth does not belong to the rich.”)

²³¹ PG 31, 325, quoted in I. Siepierski, “Poverty and Spirituality: Saint Basil and Liberation Theology”, *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 3 (1988), No 33, 324.

²³² PG 48, 984

²³³ CELAM, *Pnebla*, 452

²³⁴ Homilies, 2nd October 1977, vol. I-II, 257

²³⁵ Homilies, 16th July 1978, vol. V, 73

²³⁶ Homilies, 29th October 19978, vol. V, 268

“are people who are becoming poorer and unable to support the consequences of the unequal distribution of wealth and the brutal repression ... people who demand justice. On the other side, a few economically powerful people who see their personal interests in danger and so they attack and threaten and demand the withdrawal of any measure to correct the injustice. It is necessary for the government take a stand, a stand in favour of the great mass of the people.”²³⁷

Archbishop Romero could see on the horizon the possibility of a civil war, and he realized that the only way to avoid this bloody tragedy would be by bringing about a transformation of unjust social-economic structures and replace them with new socio-economic structures grounded in love for the impoverished, in social justice, and in a deep sense of humanity: “Let us restructure our nation in time! Let us organize the material goods that God has given us, so that all the people of El Salvador can be happy!”²³⁸ “Let us know how to give out of love and justice what later on we may lose through violence”.²³⁹ The dehumanising effect of poverty may unleash the dehumanising result of violence. Let dehumanising poverty be cured at the root.

4.12.5 The greedy rich are not Christian or part of the Church

Archbishop Romero, quoting the Latin American bishops at Puebla, describes the “materialistic praxis”²⁴⁰ of liberal capitalism as “practical atheism”.²⁴¹ He declares that “capitalism is also a form of atheism”.²⁴² It suits the members of the oligarchy to brand communism an atheistic threat, but the Archbishop unmasks the intention of their hearts. “The anti-communism that many use to defend their private property is not inspired by love of God, but inspired by love of their wealth.”²⁴³ And Archbishop Romero continues to unmask the rich by telling them that as long as they do not have a change of heart and abandon their selfish conduct, they remain atheists and idolaters that form no part of the people of God. “There is only one Church... Those who call themselves Catholic and idolize wealth and have no desire to detach themselves from their wealth - such people are not Christian. They have not understood the Lord’s call and this is not the Church.”²⁴⁴ The message of the Gospel is that the rich be converted to the only true Church of the poor. “When we speak of the Church of the poor, we are simply inviting the wealthy to turn their eyes toward this Church and make concern for the poor a personal matter.”²⁴⁵

This call to conversion to the poor and their cause is not exclusively for the rich. It is also a call to everyone, without the slightest exception, in order that we reorient ourselves towards the world of the poor and live out the social mortgage on private property. “At this time when I am asking all the people of El Salvador to participate in the process of a more just distribution of our wealth and resources, it seems important to me that priests and religious women and men...should also review how we should redistribute our income and resources so as to serve the people in a better way.”²⁴⁶

²³⁷ Homilies, 7th October 1979, vol. VII, 332

²³⁸ Homilies, 25th September 1977, vol. I-II, 242

²³⁹ Homilies, 28th October 1979, vol. VIII, 390

²⁴⁰ CELAM, Puebla, 312

²⁴¹ Puebla, 546

²⁴² Homilies, 5th November 1978, vol. V, 274

²⁴³ Homilies, 25th September 1977, vol. I-II, 242

²⁴⁴ Homilies, 11th November 1979, vol. VII, 426

²⁴⁵ Homilies, 4th March 1979, vol. VI, 183

²⁴⁶ Homilies, 16th December 1979, vol. VIII, 60

4.13 The Church and private property

4.13.1 Private property is mortgaged to society as a whole

“Don’t forget that there is a social mortgage on all private property”.²⁴⁷ Archbishop Romero latches on to the phrase of Pope John Paul II, quoted twice in the Puebla document: “There is a social mortgage on all private property”.²⁴⁸ This means that private property is never an absolute value and can be taken if the common good demands it. Archbishop Romero repeats this several times in the course of his homilies because he recognizes the vital importance of translating into practice in El Salvador this human and Christian concept. The vocation of rural people is to cultivate the land, but they are disinherited from their surroundings because of the greed of absentee landowners who keep vast areas of land idle. In desperation, driven by hunger, many rural workers organised, and took over land belonging to others in the rural regions of El Salvador. The oligarchy, using their state military apparatus, reacted by unleashing a cruel persecution against the rural communities. This was part of the beginnings of El Salvador’s civil war.

The Second Vatican Council sees this as a world problem: “The majority of the population have no land or possess only very small holdings,”²⁴⁹ while there “exist large and sometimes extensive rural estates which are only slightly cultivated or not cultivated at all for the sake of profit”.²⁵⁰ In addition, “those who are hired as labourers or who till a portion of the land as tenants...are exploited by middlemen”,²⁵¹ subjected to a sort of slave labour. “Reforms are called for in these different situations”,²⁵² even to the point of dividing up “estates insufficiently cultivated” and giving them “to those who will be able to make them productive”.²⁵³

On numerous occasions Archbishop Romero argued for a genuine agrarian reform:

“There is a social mortgage on all private property.”²⁵⁴

“It must not be forgotten that there is a social mortgage on all private property.”²⁵⁵

“The Church’s teaching... says there is a social mortgage on all private property.”²⁵⁶

“Private property is not an absolute right, but a relative one.”²⁵⁷

“There is a social mortgage on all private property... What a precious piece of imagery: no one can have any property without it being for the benefit of the common good”.²⁵⁸

“There is a social mortgage on all private property... The other day someone told me that they did not understand this phrase and so if someone needs an explanation let me offer one here. If someone has a house that is mortgaged, the house does not completely belong to them; if they do not pay the debt, it is taken away from them ... Christians cannot view private property as an absolute.”²⁵⁹

When the time came to deliver on the promises to introduce an agrarian reform, the promises remained empty words and there was a massacre of organised rural workers. The UCA (The Jesuits’ Central American University) analysed the situation correctly and unmasked the ulterior motive of the military

²⁴⁷ Homilies, 18th February 1979, vol. VI, 153

²⁴⁸ The Pope made the remark in his opening address on 28th January 1979 (Puebla, OAP,III,4) and the bishops quoted it twice in their document (CELAM, *Puebla*, 492 and 1224).

²⁴⁹ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*,71

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Homilies, 29th July 1979,vol. VII, 128

²⁵⁵ Homilies, 12th August 1979,vol. VII, 165

²⁵⁶ Homilies, 4th November 1979,vol. VII, 404

²⁵⁷ Homilies, 30th September 1979,vol. VII, 309

²⁵⁸ Homilies, 20th January 1980,vol. VIII, 175

²⁵⁹ Homilies, 30th September 1979,vol. VII, 310

takeover of the Salvadorean countryside. They explained that the pretext of designing an agrarian reform was the mechanism that made possible the militarization of the rural areas of El Salvador in order to eliminate systematically all traces of socio-political rebellion”.²⁶⁰

In this epoch, a macabre – but all too accurate - joke went around the rural communities: “The Government is going to give us a plot of land where we can be buried”.

4.13.2 The fruits of creation are for all

“God gives the fruit of the earth as a gift for everybody”.²⁶¹ We are contingent creatures who administer the goods of the Creator:

“What someone possesses is not for that person only. What one has is like a gift from God in order that they administer it in the service of the common good. It is not just that a few people have everything and they absolutize it in such a way that no one can touch it and the marginalised majority is dying of hunger.”²⁶²

“It is not evil to possess things. In fact it would be nice if we were all rich. Insensitivity, however, is evil.”²⁶³

The closed pagan law “to use and abuse private property” ought to be replaced by the open law of the “universal destiny of goods”.²⁶⁴ Now is the time to overcome “the old civilization of ‘You’re worth as much as you have’”,²⁶⁵ and treat as important the human beings who have nothing, but live in extreme poverty and destitution.

“All created things [should be] shared fairly by all mankind under the guidance of justice tempered by charity.”²⁶⁶

“The first sin of all is subverting the meaning of private property: *ius utendi et abutendi*, the right to use and abuse. If it’s mine, why can’t I do whatever I like with it? No. The right to property has its limits (. . .) it has, as our Constitution puts it very well, “a social function”.²⁶⁷

“By its nature private property has a social dimension, which is based on the law of the common destiny of earthly goods.”²⁶⁸

Matter is good and we ought not to scorn worldly things, but they must be shared more fairly. It is bad to harden our hearts and not respond positively to the vital needs of those who are pushed to the edges of society. This crass lack of social sensibility is to be condemned. The human person is more important than the accumulation of goods by an individual:

“Property is not an absolute right. Property carries a social mortgage. All property is mortgaged to the common good and at moments of crisis we have to accept a loss and dig into our own pockets. We have to do this, because more important than the profits of the factory or the firm are human beings: for the Church, they are the most sacred thing of all”.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁰ cf. “1980: Conflict, Agony and Hope”, *ECA*, 1980/12, no 386, 1126

²⁶¹ Homilies, 23rd October 1977, vol. I-II, 296

²⁶² Homilies, 12th August 1979, vol. VII, 162

²⁶³ Homilies, 25th September 1977, vol. I-II, 239

²⁶⁴ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 69; cf. CELAM, *Puebla*, 363

²⁶⁵ Homilies, 23rd October 1977, vol. I-II, 293

²⁶⁶ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 69

²⁶⁷ Homilies 25th September 1977, 238

²⁶⁸ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 71

²⁶⁹ Homilies, 26th August 1979, vol. VII, 208

4.13.3 Expropriation of private property

“When a person is in extreme necessity they have the right to supply themselves with what they need out of the riches of others”.²⁷⁰ This is not theft, but is exercising a just expropriation of the goods of creation.

“Yes, the Church defends the legitimate right of private property, but teaches with no less clarity that on all private property there is always a social mortgage, so that these goods may serve the general destiny God has given them. And the common good demands this; there can be no doubt about the legitimacy even of expropriation when carried out in due form”.²⁷¹

And Archbishop Romero quotes Vatican II on the possibility of compensating land-owners for property expropriated for the good of society. The State has the responsibility to protect the common good against the abuse of private property, but in real life, owing to the power of the wealthy, it is not easy to initiate practical measures to expropriate private goods by State action. “Whenever the common good demands expropriation, compensation must be fixed fairly, taking into account all the circumstances”.²⁷² The rich, set on defending their egoistic interests, will always question the desperate need of the poor and claim that they cause their own poverty by not working hard enough. And state officials normally support the powerful in these self-justifying arguments. And so, in practice the expropriation of private goods is not so easy.

4.13.4 Let us give out of love

The situation in El Salvador is serious and some, in desperation, may seek a solution through revolutionary violence. In order to resist “the temptation of violence”²⁷³ there is a need for a new spirit that puts into practice a generous social mortgage on the goods of the earth. Archbishop Romero appeals to the rich and powerful in terms of the supernatural, reminding them of the judgment of God: “And no one, no matter how luxurious their house, ought to think that that house is everlasting”.²⁷⁴

The Archbishop also had recourse to natural arguments for sharing. If we want to avoid a situation of insurgent violence – which is very close – there must be a radical change in the unjust order of Salvadorean society and the introduction of a new more human and more just order. Time is short: “Last Sunday, I couldn’t remember the author of that phrase I quoted in Italian, and when we were leaving, Italian Television, who had been with us, told me, ‘That phrase comes from Cardinal Montini, when he was bishop of Milan.’ He became Pope Paul VI. They say he called on all the business leaders in Milan and spoke that famous phrase: ‘Spogliatevi, se non, vi spoglieranno,’ which means: ‘Dispossess yourselves; if not you will be dispossessed.’”²⁷⁵

4.14 The persecuted Church

“The Church”, as the Council puts it, ‘presses on among the persecutions of the world and the consolations of God’.²⁷⁶ “A systematic persecution of the Church is taking place”.²⁷⁷ A few weeks before his own martyrdom by assassination, Archbishop Romero maintained that in less than three years, more than 50 priests had been attacked, threatened, or falsely accused. Six of them were brutally

²⁷⁰ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 69

²⁷¹ Homilies, 26th August 1979, vol. VIII, 54

²⁷² Homilies, 16th December 1979, vol. VIII, 53; Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 71

²⁷³ CELAM, *Medellin*, 16

²⁷⁴ Homilies, 25th September 1977, vol. I-II, 243

²⁷⁵ Homilies, 30th September 1979, vol. VIII, 309

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 307; Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 8. This is a quotation from St Augustine.

²⁷⁷ Homilies, 20th July 1979, vol. VII, 96

assassinated. Several had been tortured and expelled. Also, female religious had been the object of persecutions. Bombs had exploded in the radio station of the Archdiocese. Religious houses had been searched. But the worst of the persecution fell on the simple, anonymous people. Thousands of them were savagely murdered. It was the ordinary poor people who suffered most from the persecution carried out by the soldiers and security forces.

The author of *La fe de un pueblo* points out that the intention of this persecution by the military government is to keep intact a socio-economic and political system of exploitation. This aim was carried out without concern that it meant a genocide of the Salvadorean people:

“As the repression intensified in El Salvador, it became obvious to us that our country was victim of a plan which was really demonic. The objective was to exterminate the people, if necessary, in order to maintain the system. When we saw Archbishop Romero slain, we understood how diabolical the imperialist project for our country was. It would not be halted by anything or anyone. And the justification for everything was Communism. In the name of anti-communism everything was permitted, all deaths were justified”.²⁷⁸

4.14.1 The Church persecuted along with the poor

Those who organized the persecution considered themselves Catholics, so the pressure on the Church is not the result of a lack of religious freedom as regards worship. Neither was just any priest persecuted, or any religious institution attacked:

“They persecuted and attacked that part of the Church that placed itself on the side of the poor people and came to their defence”.²⁷⁹

“The Church suffers the fate of the poor: persecution. It is to the glory of our Church that it has mixed its blood, the blood of priests, catechists, and communities with the massacres of the people and having always borne the mark of persecution. It is precisely because it causes trouble that they slander it, and they don’t want to hear in it a voice protesting against injustice”.²⁸⁰

The true Church is persecuted because it is with people, and the people are persecuted by the military government and the oligarchy. “Persecution is a characteristic mark of the authenticity of the Church; if a Church does not suffer persecution, and is enjoying the privileges and the support of the things of the earth, be afraid! It is not the true Church of Jesus Christ!”²⁸¹

The true fear for the Church ought to be fear of betraying its following of Christ and its unity with the oppressed people. “Christ invites us to have no fear of persecution, because - believe this, sisters and brothers – those who commit themselves to the poor have to suffer the same fate as them: to be disappeared, to be tortured, arrested, to turn up as corpses . . .”²⁸²

Archbishop Romero laments the sad fate of the Church that is in solidarity with the people: “I have to go around picking up abuses, corpses, all the results of the persecution of the Church.”²⁸³

“Persecution is something that is necessary in the Church. Do you know why? Because truth is always persecuted”.²⁸⁴

“Whenever the Word of God is invoked to condemn all these abuses of the powers of this world, there are persecutions”.²⁸⁵

²⁷⁸ Anonymous, *La fe de un pueblo, Historia de una Comunidad Cristiana en El Salvador*, Córdoba, 1991, 98

²⁷⁹ Discourse of Doctorate ‘Honoris causa’ in the University of Louvain, 2nd February 1980.

²⁸⁰ Homilies, 17th February 1980, vol. VIII, 235

²⁸¹ Homilies, 11th March 1979, vol. VI, 190

²⁸² Homilies, 17th February, 1980, vol. VIII, 240

²⁸³ Homilies, 19th June 1977, vol. I-II, 97

²⁸⁴ Homilies, 29th May 1977, vol. I-II, 73

²⁸⁵ Homilies, 24th October 1978, vol. V, 264

Persecution befalls the Church when it attacks sin and defends the victims of repression. “Sin jumps up like a snake when you try to crush it”.²⁸⁶

4.14.2 The Church persecuted with Jesus Christ

The Church suffers the same persecution as the people. It also suffers the same persecution as Jesus of Nazareth. “The fury of persecution does not stop at humanity but ends up in the person of Jesus”.²⁸⁷ “He has not passed alone through the painful tunnel of torture and death. A whole people is going with him and we shall rise with him”.²⁸⁸ The Church identifies itself with the people suffering persecution, torture, murder. And through this identification it is identifying itself with the Crucified One, and patiently awaiting the new life of the resurrection.

4.14.3 The victims will triumph

They think that by humiliating a Christian by torture, by imprisonment, by gaols, they are triumphing. Saint Augustine said, with reference to martyrs: “Do you see the executioner holding his sword in triumph over the body of the martyr? Who has won? There can be no doubt that the victim has won!”²⁸⁹

Archbishop Romero’s thinking on martyrdom reflects the glory of the martyrs as triumphant. Saint Augustine (+ 430) praises them with the following words:

“The city of God regards them as all the more illustrious and honourable citizens for the strength of their battle against the sin of impiety, even to the point of shedding their blood. If the normal language of the Church allowed it, we would give them the much more elegant title of heroes.”²⁹⁰

Despite the shameless and bloody persecution Archbishop Romero remained optimistic. He used three metaphors which are almost poetic in order to illustrate his optimism that the Church will endure, solid as a rock, throughout this lengthy period of savagery. “The insane beast” will not be victorious:

“Let us not forget, sisters and brothers, faced with this wave of defamation of the Church, the Church is more beautiful. It is like those rocks that, the more the waves beat against them, they make them more beautiful with clusters of pearls”.²⁹¹ The Church will remain always until the end of time. You don’t hurt it with your calumnies, your persecutions. You do yourself harm, as Christ said to Paul: ‘How hard it is to kick against the goad. The stupid beast that kicks against a rock does no harm to the rock, it is only hurting itself. . . . The person who kills priests, the person who expels priests, the person who tortures catechists, is kicking against the goad. The Church does not move. . . . The Church will be a rock. The Church will remain for ever’.²⁹²

“If you spit at the sky it falls back on your face. All those who are spitting on the Church now are spitting on themselves”.²⁹³

4.15 The Church and Marxism

4.15.1 Social justice does not mean communism

The enemies of Archbishop Romero accused him of being a Marxist. He rejected such calumny. “When the Church talks about the interests of the government or capital they label it communist”.²⁹⁴ The true

²⁸⁶ Homilies, 25th November 1977, vol. I-II, 339

²⁸⁷ Homilies, 5th March 1978, vol. IV, 72

²⁸⁸ Homilies, 19th March 1978, vol. IV, 82

²⁸⁹ Homilies, 23rd September 1979, vol. VII, 279

²⁹⁰ Saint Augustine, *City of God*, Book X, Chapter 21.

²⁹¹ Homilies, 29th May 1977, vol. I-II, 77

²⁹² Homilies, 11th September 1977, vol. I-II, 214

²⁹³ Homilies, 17th December 1978, vol. VI, 45

²⁹⁴ Homilies, 17th December 1978, vol. VI, 50

Church cannot disincarnate itself from the reality of humanity, nor abstain from using its moral judgement and its voice to condemn social injustice. “Let it remain very clear, then, that when the Church preaches social justice, equality, and the dignity of humanity, when it defends those who suffer, who are abused, that is not subversion, not Marxism. It’s the authentic magisterium of the Church”.²⁹⁵

The Church tries to protect those who suffer and to support their just claims without supporting either vengeance or violence. The anti-communist crusade unleashed by the capitalist powers is, in many cases, a smokescreen to hide their selfish interests when they repress those who will not put up with socio-economic destitution.

“Repressive violence cannot be justified on the pretext of stemming the spread of communism. We can agree that communism is a reality, certainly, but it is a spectre used in many situations, a pretext for those who want to associate demands for justice with Marxism or communism. Yes, there is a lot of violence, and the Church cannot agree with this tactic of violence and hatred, but there is a lot that is just, and there the Church defends whatever is just in the demands of those who suffer”.²⁹⁶

Applying the Church’s magisterium to Salvadorean society “is not to sow the seeds of Marxism, but is simply to sow social justice”.²⁹⁷ “This is what we preach: No to vengeance, no to class struggle, no to violence. Only a blind person can fail to see that in these circumstances of violence and persecution we have been with those who are suffering, be they rich or poor (. . .) So we are not supporting one particular social class”.²⁹⁸ In fact, when the extreme left kidnapped some business leaders with the objective of holding them to ransom to get funds to foment an armed struggle against the repression, Archbishop Romero was firmly opposed to that tactic and sought their immediate release. He felt sorry for the sufferings of the family of the rich man who had been kidnapped, and he pleaded for them. Placing himself on the side of those who suffer was his only intention. Nevertheless, normally the rich and powerful are not the disadvantaged or the victims in Salvadorean society, but the arrogant oppressors who cause suffering and create victims. In this situation Archbishop Romero tried to humanize the hardened heart of the rich man and to promote the integral liberation of the poor by the grace of God.

“God descends on humanity in order to bring the Spirit of God into human affairs; so that the capitalist who really believes in the Church may transform, humanize, give a feeling of charity, justice, love, to their capital; so that the worker, the poor person, the person excluded, the worker, the day-labourer, may see in this Church something that turns their poverty into redemption and doesn’t let them be drawn into paths of resentment and class struggle. The Church does not offer the poor paradises on earth, but it wants to give them the breath of God in their situation”.²⁹⁹

4.15.2 Doing justice in the name of God

Archbishop Romero admitted frankly that, in the past, the Church deviated from its historic responsibility to the poor, failing to show sufficient interest in their liberation from inhuman poverty and in social promotion, whilst the communists placed themselves on the side of the proletarian masses. But nowadays, albeit with a different perspective from that of communism, the Church commits herself to

²⁹⁵ Homilies, 8th May 1977, vol. I-II, 29

²⁹⁶ Homilies, 22nd April, vol. VI, 321

²⁹⁷ Homilies, 16th September 1979, vol. VII, 270

²⁹⁸ Homilies, 18th May 1977, vol. I-II, 30

²⁹⁹ Homilies, 15th May 1977, vol. I-II, 50

the dispossessed in their search for justice, and does this in the name of the “God of love and justice, the only God worthy of adoration”.³⁰⁰

“Well, this is what the Church is for, sisters and brothers, teaching people to pray. But to teaching people to pray properly, not the sort of prayer that used to send people to sleep: ‘Accept your situation, live in poverty, at the hour of your death God will give you a heaven’. That is not Christianity, and for that reason they told us Christians that we were giving the people opium, and communism was right about that, because they worked while Christians only prayed and did nothing. But, in this way Christians have an advantage over communism, when they work like a communist and hope in God like a Christian. Do you see the difference, sisters and brothers? The Church has got to work on this double promotion of awakening people so that they develop their abilities and making them hope in God, the Transcendent One”.³⁰¹

The most appropriate way to defeat Marxism is to create a just society based on equality and the dignity of every human person. In this way the Marxists will be left without any reason to commit acts of violent protest. Christianity ought to try to eliminate Marxism by taking over their field of human promotion:

“The Pope has given us a very useful agenda when he says, “The most effective way of combating communism is by practising social justice, which creates the prerequisites for a more human and more secure life”.³⁰²

“The true struggle against Marxism consists of eliminating the causes which produce Marxism (...) We still perhaps have time to apply the medicine at the root: a more just society that will not be a favourable atmosphere for Marxism is the best antidote to Marxism.”³⁰³

By clinging greedily to their possessions and excessive wealth, without being willing to share with those in desperate poverty, the capitalists of the Salvadorean oligarchy are unconsciously encouraging Marxism.

“It is the anti-Marxists who are really playing the communists’ game.”³⁰⁴ The capitalists need greater sensitivity to other people’s suffering. Let them compete with the Marxists in promoting the well-being of the poor.

4.15.3 A change of structures is no use without a change of heart

Those on the left too need a change of heart. Otherwise the political situation will produce a change of tyrants, and nothing else:

“As Medellín says: ‘It is no use changing structures if we don’t have new human beings to manage these structures.’ People with the same vices, the same selfishness . . . If the structures are changed, if there is agrarian reform and all the other reforms, but we inhabit them with the same selfish minds as before, what we will have is a new set of rich people, new situations of abuse, new violations. It isn’t enough to change structures. This is Christianity and I have insisted on this. Please understand me: the change that the Church preaches is change that starts from the human heart – people renewed who are able to be the leaven of a new society.”³⁰⁵

Integral liberation comes from within each and every person. Unless every individual is transformed, external structural change is worthless. This would mean piling up “partial freedoms, often mutilated by sin”.³⁰⁶ Without the conversion of the individual, social change is spurious:

³⁰⁰ CELAM, *Puebla*, 543

³⁰¹ Homilies, 24th July 1977, vol. I-II, 143-144

³⁰² Homilies, 22nd April 1979, vol. VI, 321

³⁰³ Homilies, 10th September 1978, vol. V, 184

³⁰⁴ Homilies, 29th October 1978, vol. V, 267

³⁰⁵ Homilies, 3rd December 1978, vol. VI, 16; cf CELAM, *Medellín*, “Justicia”, 3

³⁰⁶ Homilies, 1st July 1979, vol. VII, 48

“It creates a vicious circle in which the oppressed becomes the oppressor. Tomorrow new structures will come into existence, but they too will be violent towards the poor; there will be new rich and nothing more”.³⁰⁷

“Don’t work only for demands that are valid for today for today and tomorrow can be simply reversed; and those that suffer repression today, can be persecutors tomorrow. If they do not change their hearts and minds they can be the oppressors and repressors of the future”.³⁰⁸

In a phrase: “Don’t you become repressive too”.³⁰⁹

4.15.4 A possible alliance between Christians and Marxists

There are several documents of the magisterium that seek to encourage dialogue and collaboration between the Church and other “constructors of temporal society”.³¹⁰ John XXIII recommends contacts of a practical order between Marxists and Christians, and these may be helpful. Nevertheless he places the condition that “The Church reserves the right and duty to teach the principles of faith and morality in these contacts and to apply them to concrete cases”.³¹¹

Paul VI in *Ecclesiam Suam* laments that Marxism promotes “social goals that they treat as divine, and substitutes for the Absolute”.³¹² Nevertheless, in *Octagesima Adveniens*, he admits that between the Christian and the Marxist there may be “a specific link according to circumstances”,³¹³ and that Christians are to measure “the degree of commitment which is allowed in each case”.³¹⁴ Archbishop Romero restates this position of the magisterium. “We have to evaluate many things”. Puebla itself distinguishes between an ideology that can influence someone’s conduct and collaboration in which someone who has a Christian ideology can perhaps collaborate with persons of other ideologies”.³¹⁵ Karl Rahner, in an interview given a few months before his death, says: “When the poor are being exploited, of course the Marxist and the Christian ought to join to fight against exploitation”.³¹⁶

At times, in fact, atheist revolutionaries show bravery and daring in sacrificing themselves, though perhaps in a negative way, with violent anger, to create a more human society. It is pity that we Christians don’t behave with the same level of historical commitment in the positive cause of Christ, which is the Kingdom of God: “It’s a pity that our atheists, revolutionaries without God, should be more capable of sacrificing themselves for their causes than we are for the great positive cause of Christ”.³¹⁷

Nevertheless, there is another side to the coin. Archbishop Romero does not fall into the trap of a Marxist view that the Kingdom of God proceeds from the socio-economic or political structure.³¹⁸ Nor does he fall into the trap of ideologization: he does not politicise Christian existence, or dissolve the language of faith into that of social sciences.³¹⁹ And he recognizes Marxism as “a sort of collectivist idolatry”.³²⁰

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ Homilies, 5th August 1979, vol. VII, 139

³⁰⁹ Homilies, 28th October 1979, vol. VII, 394

³¹⁰ CELAM, *Puebla*, 1226

³¹¹ John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, 1963, 160

³¹² Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, 1964, 97

³¹³ Paul VI, *Octagesima Adveniens*, 1971, 31

³¹⁴ Ibid.

³¹⁵ Homilies, 6th August 1979, vol. VII, 152

³¹⁶ K. Rahner, *I remember*, London 1985, 80.

³¹⁷ Homilies, 14th October 1979, vol. VII, 346

³¹⁸ Cf. CELAM, *Puebla*, 561

³¹⁹ Cf. Ibid. 545

³²⁰ Ibid. 543

4.16 The eschatological Church

4.16.1 Two materialisms

Archbishop Romero refutes those who accuse him of having become a communist: “We cannot be communists, because communism has amputated that hope of the world to come”.³²¹ Classical communism is atheistic and the Church believes in God. It would be an intrinsic contradiction to the being and task of the Church if it were materialistic, restricted only to this world. “The Church, just as it rejects communism, also rejects capitalism”.³²²

“The Church can be neither communist nor capitalist, because both are materialisms.”³²³

“Both are materialisms, therefore neither of them is in agreement with the Church, because the Church believes in the spiritual, it is being raised up to God; it is transcendence.”³²⁴

The Church is incarnate in this world, but “it has a salvific and eschatological purpose which cannot be fully attained except in the other life”.³²⁵

4.16.2 Yearning for God

The Church yearns to unite itself totally with Christ, beyond the transitory world of time and space. Archbishop Romero explains this pining for total communion by means of the symbolism of the ‘Spiritual Canticle’ of Saint John of the Cross: “This Church is like the wife whose husband is far away and sighs for his presence”.³²⁶

“Eschatology is a characteristic of this Church which through her hope is able to see new heavens and a new earth, where justice, love and peace will reign. The Christian knows that however much we work at the well-being of this earth, it will always be provisional, pilgrim, missionary, passing, but we have to work for it. But we must not expect the consummation on this earth, but in eternity, where the Kingdom of God is perfect”.³²⁷

The doctrine of the pilgrim Church which is imperfect and provisional is applicable to each of its members. We are imperfect and limited pilgrims. “Christianity looks on this world with a perspective of the next life, the life that does not end in graves where we place our flowers. We put flowers on them because they are bedrooms awaiting a resurrection and an All Saints Day.”³²⁸ Poetically, Archbishop Romero expresses his certain hope in the new life of the resurrection and offers consolation and encouragement to those old people who wait faithfully on the threshold of eternity:

“Blessed are those old folk who, like Simeon, live in hope and when they hold in their arms Jesus, our redeemer, they sing like the swan, ready for death: ‘Now you can send your servant away in peace, because I have always lived hoping this hope.’”³²⁹

Over El Salvador’s pine-clad mountains, when the night draws to its close, there appears on the far horizon the yellowish red light of dawn, giving the sure promise of the sun’s arrival and the new day. We still journey in the dawn, “the dawn that is not yet the sun, but already a reflection of the sun that is coming”.³³⁰

³²¹ Homilies, 12th May 1977, vol. I-II, 41

³²² Homilies, 22nd May 1977, vol. I-II, 41

³²³ Ibid. 59

³²⁴ Homilies, 29th May 1977, vol. I-II, 77

³²⁵ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 40

³²⁶ Homilies, 13th November 1977, vol. I-II, 321

³²⁷ Homilies, 21st August 1977, vol. I-II, 187-88.

³²⁸ Homilies, 30th October 1977, vol. I-II, 298.

³²⁹ Homilies, 19th November 1978, vol. V, 308

³³⁰ Ibid.

PART TWO - THE PASTORAL THOUGHT OF ARCHBISHOP ROMERO

CHAPTER FIVE - EVANGELIZATION

5.1 The Gospel

5.1.1 The Gospel in a particular time and a particular place

“Be assured, sisters and brothers: the Gospel line that the Archdiocese has undertaken is authentic”.³³¹ Archbishop Romero knows with certainty that his preaching is “clear, direct, adapted to time and place, profoundly rooted in the Gospel teachings, and faithful to the magisterium of the Church,”³³² and that the slanders are directed at him and his archdiocese because he is “applying the perennial truth of the Gospel to the concrete circumstances of life”.³³³ “I work for the Gospel”,³³⁴ proclaims Archbishop Romero. He works for the true Gospel of Jesus Christ without any mutilation that would “reduce the mission to the dimensions of a purely temporal project”.³³⁵ But neither does the Church “accept a limitation of her mission merely to the religious sphere, neglecting the temporal problems of humanity”.³³⁶ And so the Gospel of Jesus Christ admits no restrictions in its relationship with human affairs. “Evangelization, which is the natural task of the Church, cannot separate itself from human promotion, for anthropological reasons”.³³⁷ The message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ “cannot remain something abstract and disincarnate”.³³⁸ “Any gospel that is not concerned with the life we human beings live on earth is not the true Gospel of Christ”.³³⁹

5.1.2 The Gospel condemns sin and creates conflicts

The true Gospel of Jesus Christ drives the people of God to be aware of the sinful occurrences around them and enables them to struggle effectively against that sin:

“The Church firmly believes that the promotion of human rights is a demand of the Gospel.”³⁴⁰

“To try and preach without referring to the history within which one is preaching is not preaching the Gospel (. . .) A preaching that does not denounce the sinful realities in which we reflect on the Gospel is not the Gospel.”³⁴¹

In the parish of Aguilares, on the occasion of the second anniversary of the murder of Fr Rutilio Grande, S.J., Archbishop Romero talked about “a Gospel which truly has to create conflicts; it’s a question of raising awareness”.³⁴² This means that the Gospel is a carrot as well as a stick. “Let’s see who is right, either those who clamour against the injustices and abuses of the world or those that preach such a

³³¹ Homilies, 20th March 1977, vol. I-II, 8

³³² Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975, 43

³³³ Vatican II, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 5

³³⁴ Homilies, 16th February 1979, vol. IV, 141

³³⁵ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 32

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, 34

³³⁷ Homilies, 29th July 1979, vol. VII, 128

³³⁸ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 23

³³⁹ Homilies, 9th December 1979, vol. VIII, 28

³⁴⁰ Paul VI, ‘Appeal for human rights’ at the Third Synod of Bishops, 23rd October 1974, http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/it/speeches/1974/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19741023_appello-diritti-uomo.html

³⁴¹ Homilies, 18th February 1979, vol. VI, 147

³⁴² Homilies, 11th March 1979, vol. VI, 190

honeyed teaching with no bite and no demands, so that it is charming to follow and easy to take up those religions with a ‘gospel’ that doesn’t protest about anything.”³⁴³ A disincarnate Church that does not identify with the historical situation of its time and place tries to put the people to sleep, drugging them with opium. Such a Church cannot be the true Church of Jesus Christ, and its “gospel” is not the true Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In the El Salvador of 1979 there exist “very concrete situations of injustice, which have to be fought and where justice has to be restored”.³⁴⁴ Within these situations “the essential mission of the Church”³⁴⁵ is to evangelise everyone, and especially to denounce and call to conversion the torturers and murderers of the people who have no protector: “The rotting corpses, tortured, with the skin hanging off, that we keep finding in all the roads, valleys, mountains of our country are a sign that in El Salvador we have forgotten that word of Christ”.³⁴⁶

5.1.3 The duty to evangelise in the present situation

Archbishop Romero did not claim to be an expert in politics, economics, or sociology. He simply states: “I am only a preacher of the Word of God”.³⁴⁷ At the same time he knows that it is his duty to assimilate the message of the Gospel in his own person. “I will be faithful to my conscience in the light of the Gospel, which is what I try to preach, nothing more, and nothing less”.³⁴⁸ “To transmit the Gospel with complete faithfulness”³⁴⁹, recognizing that each evangelizer has a responsibility to Christ, and that neither he nor the Church are “absolute masters and owners”³⁵⁰ with the right to deal with the Gospel as the fancy takes them. “It is God who orders us to preach, it’s the Gospel word which we have to speak”.³⁵¹ This duty comes from God. As St. Paul says: “If I proclaim the Gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid upon me and woe is me if I do not proclaim the Gospel” (1 Cor 9.16). “This is my duty: to preach Christ”³⁵², repeats Archbishop Romero. “I am trying to be faithful to the Word which the Lord has commanded me to preach”.³⁵³

“That eternal word is applied to today’s circumstances”.³⁵⁴ The reading and the study of the Bible are not an end in themselves. Personal insight has to be shared in community and celebrated in order to soak through into daily life.

“So let them not say that we don’t read the Bible. Not only do we read it but we analyse it; we celebrate it, we want to make it our life”.³⁵⁵ “That is what the homily is: to say that the Word of God is not a text from times past, but a living Word, Spirit, that is being fulfilled here. That is why we have to try to apply God’s eternal message to the concrete circumstances of the people”.³⁵⁶

Every morning, in the villages and hamlets of rural El Salvador, the women go to the public fountain to fill their containers from the tap. With the containers on their heads, they go back home so that the water can be shared among the members of the family. Coming from a rural family, Archbishop

³⁴³ Homilies, 24th June 1979, vol. VII, 25

³⁴⁴ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 31

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 14

³⁴⁶ Homilies, 9th December 1979, vol. VII, 28

³⁴⁷ Homilies, 3rd December 1978, vol. VI, 11

³⁴⁸ Homilies, 20th August 1978, vol. V, 135

³⁴⁹ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 15

³⁵⁰ Ibid.

³⁵¹ Homilies, 19th February 1978, vol. IV, 37

³⁵² Homilies, 7th May 1978, vol. IV, 214

³⁵³ Homilies, 3rd June 1979, vol. VI, 379

³⁵⁴ Homilies, 3rd December 1978, vol. VI, 10

³⁵⁵ Homilies, 11th November 1979, vol. VII, 42

³⁵⁶ Homilies, 27th January 1980, vol. VIII, 184

Romero invented a metaphor based on this rural custom in order to illustrate the act of sharing the Word of God:

“The Bible is like a fountain where that revelation, that Word of God is kept. But what use is a fountain, however clean it may be, if we do not go to fetch water in our containers and take it back for the needs of our households (. . .) There is no other fountain for the Church than Holy Scripture, the Word of God; that’s one thing. But it is not a Word of God written centuries ago that remains ethereal, disincarnate, theoretical, which the preacher has to make incarnate in the here and now”.³⁵⁷

“This is both a divine and human Word because it comes from God but also has human roots and is applicable to the concrete realities of the world. If we strip the Word of its humanness and forget the realities of the world, then we do not proclaim the Word of God.”³⁵⁸

“Evangelization carries with it an explicit message, adapted to different situations and constantly updated, about the rights and duties of each person (. . .), an especially strict message in our days about liberation”.³⁵⁹ The Word of God must guide every Christian in his conscience so that he or she may act correctly in matters of human rights and duties.

And when the Basic Ecclesial Communities of El Salvador applied the incarnation of the Spirit and of the values of the Gospel to their political, economic and social situation, they were threatened and openly persecuted by the Government. Archbishop Romero defends them from his episcopal pulpit:

“It’s words of God that are inspiring these communities and I want to make it clear to the Government that I want them to be respected. The Government should know that they are being nourished with the Word of God, which, naturally, is not a half-asleep awareness, it’s a critical consciousness, but with criticism based on the Gospel”.³⁶⁰

5.1.4 The Word of God clashes with sin

The problem arises when those who live a life of lies and darkness are confronted by the truth and light of God. The truth and the light of God are explosive when they clash with the lie of sin:

“If it is truly the Word of God it carries within it something explosive, and not many want to accept it. If it were spent dynamite then nobody would fear it”.³⁶¹

“The preacher of the Gospel will always be someone who (. . .) always seeks the truth which they have to transmit to others (. . .) He or she does not sell nor hide the truth out of a desire to please humans beings”.³⁶²

“The Word of God provokes conflict”.³⁶³

Archbishop Romero sadly admitted this link between the Word of God and conflict during the funeral Mass of one of his murdered priests: “If Alfonso Navarro had not spoken he would not be dead”.³⁶⁴

Lies and the darkness of sin are powerful forces. Sometimes it seems that the Word of God has no impact and does not succeed in “converting both the individual and the collective conscience”.³⁶⁵

³⁵⁷ Homilies, 4th December 1977, vol. III, 19

³⁵⁸ Homilies, 7th April 1977, vol. I-II, 14

³⁵⁹ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 29

³⁶⁰ Homilies, 25th February 1979, vol. VI, 171

³⁶¹ Homilies, 9th September 1979, vol. VIII, 247

³⁶² Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 78

³⁶³ Homilies, 14th May 1978, vol. IV, 240

³⁶⁴ Homilies, 11th May 1978, vol. IV, 225

³⁶⁵ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 18

Like a disillusioned prophet, the Archbishop laments, “Our preaching, against the tide of events, feels like ploughing in the sea”.³⁶⁶

Nevertheless, in a time of disillusionment, “the Word remains, and this is the great consolation of the preacher: my voice will disappear, but my Word, which is Christ, will remain in the hearts of those who were willing to receive him”.³⁶⁷

5.2 The Prophetic Word

5.2.1 Speaking in the name of God

“The purpose of the prophets is to announce goodness, and to denounce and condemn evil”.³⁶⁸ The prophet observes reality and interprets what happens in society according to the will of God. With human words he judges between the morality or immorality of events in individual lives and in society from God’s point of view. The prophet speaks on behalf of God. “I feel it to be an immense honour that my poor words, though many scorn it and laugh at it, create a vehicle for salvation”.³⁶⁹ The judgement of those who poke fun at him does not bother Archbishop Romero, because he knows in his own conscience that what he is proclaiming is sealed with the authority of God:

“The truth is that I who am speaking to you now am the voice of God”.³⁷⁰

“Those who listen to me, are not listening to me; they are listening to God(. . .) It is the voice of God in my clumsy human words”.³⁷¹

“The truth is that I am only the humble echo of God among this people”.³⁷²

“And we, preaching in our pulpits, with our limitations and inadequacies, are only the little echoes of the great Prophet who is Christ, our Lord. Our concern is to be a faithful echo of that voice, the only One who ought to speak to the people and their consciences”.³⁷³

“The preacher in this pulpit does no more than become a humble echo of that divine, guiding voice of Christ, the Teacher.”³⁷⁴

“I have no doubt, sisters and brothers, that I am merely the humble instrument of the Lord.”³⁷⁵

“I don’t think of myself as that important. What I think is that these words, which are no more than the humble echo of the Word of God, do penetrate your hearts, not because they are my words, but because they come from God.”³⁷⁶

Archbishop Romero, following the prophets of the Old Testament, feels himself to be filled with the Spirit of God and knows that he is the vehicle and spokesperson for God’s will in Salvadorean society.

5.2.2 Speaking for the people

The prophet speaks on behalf of the people, in their defence:

“We have tried to be the voice of those who have no voice, and to bear witness to the Lord’s special love for the poor.”³⁷⁷

³⁶⁶ Homilies, 19th November 1978, vol. V, 310

³⁶⁷ Homilies, 17th December 1978, vol. VI, 41

³⁶⁸ Homilies, 7th April 1977, vol. I-II, 12

³⁶⁹ Homilies, 24th December 1978, vol. VI, 63

³⁷⁰ Homilies, 25th September 1978, vol. I-II 240

³⁷¹ Homilies, 16th October 1977, vol. I-II, 281

³⁷² Homilies, 2nd October 1977, vol. I-II, 261

³⁷³ Homilies, 14th January 1979, vol. VI, 118

³⁷⁴ Homilies, 19th February 1978, vol. IV, 28

³⁷⁵ Homilies, 4th December 1977, vol. I-II, 23

³⁷⁶ Homilies, 29th October 1978, vol. V, 266

³⁷⁷ CELAM, *Puebla*, 268

“We want to be the voice of those who have no voice to shout against so much abuse of human rights.”³⁷⁸

“With this people it’s not difficult to be a good shepherd. They are a people who push us into serving them, if we have been called to defend their rights and to be their voice.”³⁷⁹

And when the equipment of the Church’s radio station was bombed:

“Each and every one of you has to become a live microphone, a newspaper that spreads information. The voice of every Christian ought not to fear, but to speak out.”³⁸⁰

“Each one of you has to become a microphone for God”.³⁸¹

“I’m sorry that I’m no more than the humble channel, like the microphone that is transmitting, amplifying my voice. I’m God’s microphone, nothing more, bringing to your ears the message God commands us to give you”.³⁸²

“On Monday this radio station’s generator was destroyed (. . .) because [the Archdiocese] is trying to be the voice of those who don’t have a voice”.³⁸³

The entire people is called to proclaim the truth of the Gospel by word and action.

5.2.3 Touching the septic wound

Delivering God’s judgement in a structurally unjust society means touching an open, septic wound; it causes pain and discomfort:

“Nobody likes it when a wound is touched”.³⁸⁴

“The voice of the Church has always been the voice of the Gospel; it can be no other. If that Gospel often touches an open wound, it’s natural that it’s going to hurt, but that is the voice of the Gospel”.³⁸⁵

“I told you one day the simple metaphor of a rural dweller. He said to me: ‘Archbishop, when someone puts his hand into a pot of salted water, if the hand is sound, nothing will happen to it, but if it has a little cut, ouch, then it hurts.’ The Church is the salt of the earth and, naturally, where there are sores that salt is going to sting”.³⁸⁶

5.2.4 Waking the sleepers

The Church remains on the alert, awakening people so that they become conscious of what is happening in Salvadorean society and don’t fall into a slumber of sinful acceptance of the unjust:

“It’s obvious that the Church cannot stay silent in the face of these injustices of the economic, political and social order. If the Church were to keep silent, it would be an accomplice with those who stand aside and sleep in an unhealthy, sinful complacency or with those who take advantage of this slumber of the people in order to abuse and overwhelm the mass of the people economically and politically, and keep them on the sidelines”.³⁸⁷

The Church also strives to awaken the rich and powerful:

³⁷⁸ Homilies, 28th August 1977, vol. I-II, 192

³⁷⁹ Homilies, 18th November 1979, vol. VII, 445

³⁸⁰ Homilies, 14th April 1979, vol. VI, 300

³⁸¹ Homilies, 8th July 1979, vol. VII, 62

³⁸² Homilies, 25th November 1977, vol. I-II, 344

³⁸³ Homilies, 24th February 1980, vol. VIII, 256

³⁸⁴ Homilies, 15th January 1978, vol. III, 154

³⁸⁵ Homilies, 20th November 1977, vol. I-II, 329

³⁸⁶ Homilies, 29th May 1977, vol. I-II, 74

³⁸⁷ Homilies, 24th June 1977, vol. I-II, 142

“The Church cannot speak in any other way, and it has to upset those that want to sleep soundly on their wealthy goods, on their triumphs, on their power”.³⁸⁸

5.2.5 The trumpet and the watchman’s dog

The prophetic Church tries to keep alert, like the night-watchman who blasts his trumpet and shouts on spotting approaching danger. The prophet warns the people, awakening those who are asleep:

“The prophet is a lookout, a watchman, and when God says: ‘Evil ones, change your way of life,’ the prophet has to be God’s trumpet and say, ‘Evil ones, change your lives’. ‘But’, says God, ‘I will also call the prophet to account because he did not raise the alarm, and wasn’t a trumpet or a watchman.’”³⁸⁹

To reinforce this need for vigilance and sounding the alarm in a situation that threatens society, Archbishop Romero filled this role of the peasant’s dog who barks and wakes his master up, if a thief or a murderer approaches in the dark:

“The Church would not fulfil her mission in society if it were, as the prophet said: ‘a silent dog that doesn’t look after its master’s inheritance.’”³⁹⁰ Silent dogs! What use is a silent dog that doesn’t look after the property?”³⁹¹

Waking someone up can be harsh. We always feel some resentment against a person who wakes us up:

“Preaching that does not condemn sin is not the preaching of the Gospel . . . When someone turns on a light where someone is sleeping, naturally the person will be annoyed because they’ve been woken up.”³⁹²

5.2.6 All God’s people are prophets

“The holy people of God shares in Christ’s prophetic office.”³⁹³ “We all share in the prophetic mission of the Church”.³⁹⁴ Archbishop Romero makes his own this teaching of this magisterium: “The Church cannot keep silent (. . .) We have all to be a prophetic people”.³⁹⁵ Through the sacrament of baptism each Christian is anointed by the Spirit of Christ, the great Prophet. We Christians have to make the grace of our baptism a reality in the everyday events of human life. This is a task for all members of the Church:

“Christ the great Prophet (. . .) carries out his prophetic mission (. . .) not only through the hierarchy but also through the people, the laity; in other words, he has made them witnesses and prepared them with an understanding of the faith and the grace of his Word so that the force of the Gospel will shine out in the everyday lives of families and society.”³⁹⁶

“You and I”, declares Archbishop Romero, “are prophets, we are a prophetic people”.³⁹⁷ Archbishop Romero eliminates the class division between clergy and laity. The whole Church has the duty to evangelize and prophesy.

The agents of government repression have tried to stifle the people’s prophetic voice by murdering their representatives, but to no avail:

³⁸⁸ Homilies, 31st July 1977, vol. I-II, 151

³⁸⁹ Homilies, 10th September 1978, vol. V, 178, cf. Ez 3, 18 ss

³⁹⁰ Homilies, 24th September 1978, vol. V, 213, cf. Is. 56,10

³⁹¹ Homilies, 8th July 1979, vol. VII, 65

³⁹² Homilies, 22nd January 1978, vol. VIII, 164

³⁹³ Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 12

³⁹⁴ CELAM, *Pnebla*, 377

³⁹⁵ Homilies, 10th September 1978, vol. V, 179

³⁹⁶ See Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 34

³⁹⁷ Homilies, 8th July 1979, vol. VII, 61

“... the Word of God has not been quenched. The fact is that when they tried to stifle the voice of Father Grande so that the priests would be frightened and stop speaking out, they awakened the sense of prophecy in our Church”.³⁹⁸

Prophecy, above all, is a gift that belongs to the people of God and, as a consequence, belongs to the Christian individual as a member of this Church:

“It’s not that I think I’m prophet. You and I are a prophetic people. The fact is that every baptized person has received a share in the prophetic mission of Christ”.³⁹⁹

“I feel that the people are my prophet; they are teaching me with the anointing that the Spirit gave them at their baptism and which makes them incapable of accepting a false or erroneous doctrine; you as a people would reject it in the same way that our organism rejects those foreign bodies that sometimes attack it”.⁴⁰⁰

The People of God, in communion with the Pope and bishops, have the gift of infallibility in matters of faith and morals.⁴⁰¹ The people are infallible by virtue of the gift of prophecy received through the Holy Spirit in the sacrament of baptism:

“I have never considered myself to be a prophet in the sense of being the only one among the people, because I know that you and I, the People of God, make up the prophetic people, and my role is only to awaken in that people its sense of prophecy that I cannot give, but which the Spirit has given”.⁴⁰²

“The mission to prophesy, then, is an obligation for God’s people. So when, in a sort of mocking tone, people tell me that I think I’m a prophet, I tell them, Blessed be God! You too have to be one, because every Christian, the whole people of God, every family, has to develop a sense of its prophetic mission”.⁴⁰³

5.2.7 The prophet’s grief

It grieves the prophet that he has to unmask and condemn the sin of his own people:

“My sisters and brothers, it hurts no one as much as it hurts me, having to talk about the wickednesses of one’s own people, but I have the pastoral duty to point out (by mandate of the Gospel of Jesus Christ who takes away the sins of the world) what is sin and what ought not to prevail; which direction to take”.⁴⁰⁴

“Dear sisters and brothers, to carry within a capacity for truth is to suffer the inner anguish that the prophets suffer”.⁴⁰⁵

“Sisters and brothers, it hurts to present this image of our poor country, but the blame for the bad portrait lies not in the photograph, but in the subject”.⁴⁰⁶

The task of the prophet is not an easy one. Frequently, the hardened human heart does not listen to God’s voice: “The prophet’s mission is a terrible one: he has to speak out although he knows that people will take no notice”.⁴⁰⁷

³⁹⁸ Homilies, 9th October 1977, vol. I-II, 272

³⁹⁹ Homilies, 8th July 1979, vol. VII, 60

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid. 61

⁴⁰¹ Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 25

⁴⁰² Homilies, 8th July 1979, vol. VII, 62

⁴⁰³ Homilies, 10th September 1978, vol. V, 177

⁴⁰⁴ Homilies, 11th June 1978, vol. V, 35

⁴⁰⁵ Homilies, 22nd April 1979, vol. VI, 313

⁴⁰⁶ Homilies, 15th January 1978, vol. III, 148

⁴⁰⁷ Homilies, 8th July 1979, vol. VII, 65

5.2.8 The prophet's fate

The prophet runs the same risk as his Master, Jesus Christ:

“This is the sad fate of someone who preaches the Word of God, to be like Christ, a sign of contradiction”.⁴⁰⁸

“This is the fate of the prophets. Because they have to point out the most painful and burning wounds, they have to run the risk that people won't listen”.⁴⁰⁹ And the clash between lies and truth, darkness and light, results in persecution, slander, imprisonment, torture and assassination. “How sad it is when a prophet has his bloody destiny pointed out to him in advance.”⁴¹⁰

5.3 Speaking out against idols

5.3.1 The Kingdom and the anti-Kingdom

“The Church has got to face up to the great giant of all times: “the idols that human beings adore”.⁴¹¹

Archbishop Romero recognizes the challenge which the Church has of condemning the idols of the anti-Kingdom in order to affirm the absoluteness of the one and only God:

“The other side of proclaiming the Kingdom of God is criticising idolatry in its various forms. I mean the values built up into idols or those values that a culture treats as absolute when they are not. “The Church's mission is to bear witness to the “true God and one Lord”.⁴¹²

This action by the Church is nothing new because “condemnation has always been the mission of the prophets and of the Church”.⁴¹³ This condemnation is not optional for the true Church. Archbishop Romero emphasizes:

“...the need to denounce absolute claims, idolaters”.⁴¹⁴

“Nothing is divine or to be adored except God. Human beings fall into slavery when they treat wealth, power, the state, sex, or pleasure as divine or absolutes.”⁴¹⁵

“And how unhappy is life when, instead of finding the true God we go about adoring a false god: the god money, the god power, the god pride, the god pleasure: all these are false gods!”⁴¹⁶

“Now it is no longer the god Baal, but there are other great idols of our time: the god money, the god power, the god luxury, the god lust.”⁴¹⁷

“Idols, Baals of our time: idolatry of money, idolatry of luxury, idolatry of sex”.⁴¹⁸

This permanent tension between the true God and false idols can be summed up as follows:

“History contains the true God (of life), God's mediation (the Kingdom) and its mediator (Jesus) as well as the idols (of death), its mediation (the anti-Kingdom) and its mediators (oppressors)”.⁴¹⁹

5.3.2 The god money excludes people

Exclusion is a process that brings death. It brings premature death, from the hunger or illness that assaults the poor. And the people's protest against hunger and disease can bring violent death at the

⁴⁰⁸ Homilies, 5th November 1978, vol. V, 287

⁴⁰⁹ Homilies, 1st October 1978, vol. V, 224

⁴¹⁰ Homilies, 12th November 1978, vol. V, 289

⁴¹¹ Homilies, 25th September 1978, vol. V, 205

⁴¹² CELAM, *Puebla*, 405.

⁴¹³ Homilies, 11th June 1978, vol. VIII, 389

⁴¹⁴ Homilies, 28th October 1979, vol. VIII, 389

⁴¹⁵ CELAM, *Puebla*, 491

⁴¹⁶ Homilies, 10th February 1980, vol. VIII, 214

⁴¹⁷ Homilies, 11th June 1978, vol. V, 30

⁴¹⁸ Homilies, 25th February 1979, vol. VI, 164

⁴¹⁹ J. Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, Maryknoll, NY, 1993 and London, 1994, p. 162.

hands of the oppressors. The death squads kill in El Salvador to defend the interests of the oligarchy. The rich pay them to shed the blood of people who organize politically. “Killing pays, sin pays and people sell themselves; everything is for sale. Anything is allowed when money appears”.⁴²⁰

The rich are prepared to take whatever violent and blood-thirsty measure in order to protect their luxurious living against the protests of the hungry and needy.

In the 16th century, Friar Bartolomé de las Casas, bishop and prophetic defender of the indigenous people, neatly captured the psychology of the rich. He argued that greed can never be satisfied because “the void or vacuum of a wealthy person’s appetite to be wealthy can never be filled in this life, since the proposition of acquiring wealth is always endless”.⁴²¹ The prophet’s mission is to try and relativize the values that human beings adore as absolutes. “In the sight of God all the values of history and of the world are relative values (. . .) Anything that surrounds money with a sense of idolatry is turning it into an absolute.”⁴²²

Riches are no use on the day of judgement (cf. Lk.12.20). They are not eternal: “And riches: if we remember that the golden calf is only an idol which is going to disappear, that when we die we leave this world with hands empty of all temporal things”.⁴²³

It is a call is to the rich to become human and turn their hearts towards the misery of the poor: “So do you mean that we rich people don’t have souls? Of course you do. And we love you deeply and want you to be saved, not to perish, imprisoned in your own idolatry. We ask you to become spiritual, to get poor souls, to feel the needs and the anguish of the poor”.⁴²⁴

Archbishop Romero, out of love for the rich, wants to free them from their sin of greed. He wants to break their chains of slavery. “Sisters and brothers, nobody is so free as someone who is not enslaved to the god money”.⁴²⁵

The rich must overcome their greed and share their excessive quantities of goods and riches. May they come to realize that the goods of creation have a universal destination, and that it is the will of the Creator that they should be really available for the use and benefit of all.”⁴²⁶ And should they refuse to act justly and share, there is a conflict between them and the Church. “The Church comes into conflict with the idolaters of power, the idolaters of money, with those who create idols”.⁴²⁷

5.3.3 The “god” power creates victims

“Today the idols are different: they are called political interests, national security. These idolatries trying to steal God’s altar.” Government power is trying to make itself a god and put itself in the absolute place which belongs only to God”.⁴²⁸

“Woe betide that moment, dear sisters and brothers, when power, the government, tries to turn itself into God”.⁴²⁹ And the idols produce victims:

“In the name of national security, hundreds of lives are sacrificed, civil rights are violated. And it’s ridiculous, in the name of security they make the people insecure.”⁴³⁰

⁴²⁰ Homilies, 11th September 1977, vol. I-II, 325

⁴²¹ Quoted in G. Gutiérrez, *Las Casas. In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ*, Maryknoll, NY, 1993, p. 438

⁴²² Homilies, 18th September 1977, vol. I-II, 224

⁴²³ Homilies, 6th November 1977, vol. I-II, 311

⁴²⁴ Homilies, 15th October 1978, vol. V, 250

⁴²⁵ Homilies, 15th July 1979, vol. VIII, 77

⁴²⁶ CELAM, *Puebla*, 492

⁴²⁷ Homilies, 19th June 1979, vol. I-II, 91

⁴²⁸ Homilies, 7th January 1979, vol. VI, 101

⁴²⁹ Homilies, 29th September 1977, vol. I-II, 24

⁴³⁰ Homilies, 6th August 1979, vol. VII, 151

“[‘National Security’] is the idol of power (. . .) guardian of the interests of the oligarchy (. . .) National Security sarcastically turns into insecurity.”⁴³¹

“The armed forces are based on exaggerated idolatry of the institution itself. You have got to bear in mind, dear members of the armed forces, that every institution, including the military, is at the service of the people.”⁴³²

“Woe betide the powerful when they take no account of the power of God, the only one with power! Woe betide them when it comes to murdering, massacring, to subject human beings to power. What terrifying idolatry of the ‘god’ power, of the ‘god’ money! So many victims, so much blood for which God, the true God, the author of human life, will demand an account from these idolaters of power...”⁴³³

These words vibrate with the prophetic anger of Archbishop Romero when he warns the murderous agents of state power that they cannot escape the judgement of the one God. Desperately Romero tries to dissuade them from massacring the people organized in trade unions and rural co-operatives, but he is unable to stop this current of violence which inundates the nation. Reality reveals that the “institutionalized violence” of the state kills citizens who organize politically and creates victims, and those that suffer this direct violence of state repression in their turn take reprisals, and kill the state agents.⁴³⁴ The result is a vicious circle of death that is very difficult to break. “All [those murdered] perform a macabre dance of vengeance, institutionalised violence, since some die as direct victims of the repression and others precisely because they are in the service of that repression”.⁴³⁵ The reality is frightening, “a horrifying idolatry of gods who demand human lives. These are servants of the god Moloch.”⁴³⁶

The prophetic Church attempts to humanize this diabolical situation, which makes an idol out of money and produces a multitude of excluded people. It tries fiercely to oppose the god-power, which tortures and murders its victims on the altar of idolatry. The Church stands alongside the marginalised and the victims and, by doing so, confronts the rich and powerful. “The Church has no concern with political or economic interests, except insofar as they concern human beings and can make them more human and stop them from becoming idolaters of money and power”.⁴³⁷

5.3.4 The one God

Dismissing the idols, Archbishop Romero declares the truth of monotheism: “There is only one God”.⁴³⁸ The State is not God.

“In totalitarian dictatorships, a person is forced into accepting the decisions of the State (. . .) The State turns itself into something absolute which does not allow anyone to think differently from the way it thinks; it is implanting a social injustice which we have frequently condemned on the basis of the official documents of the Church (. . .) At least you should know that there is a God who is not in agreement with those abuses, that there is a Church which defends the people and is on the side of those who suffer injustice.”⁴³⁹

⁴³¹ Homilies 4th November 1979, vol. VII, 405

⁴³² Homilies, 6th January 1980, vol. VIII, 132

⁴³³ Homilies, 24th February 1980, vol. VIII, 263

⁴³⁴ CELAM, *Medellin*, Paz, 16

⁴³⁵ Homilies, 1st July 1979, vol. VII, 42

⁴³⁶ Homilies, 12th August 1979, vol. VIII, 166

⁴³⁷ Homilies, 17th July 1977, vol. V, 14

⁴³⁸ Homilies, 23rd July 1978, vol. V, 81

⁴³⁹ Homilies, 8th July 1979, vol. VII, 70

“Christ teaches us that the only absolute value is God.”⁴⁴⁰

“Blessed are those who kneel before the only One before whom one should kneel!”⁴⁴¹

“Look and see how beautiful are these three names: ‘There has been born to you a Saviour, the Messiah, the Lord’. To say ‘Lord’ when that text was written was to send a challenge to the idols of the earth.”⁴⁴²

“Dear sisters and brothers, O for a prophet’s eloquence so that I could shake the complacency of those who seem to be kneeling in adoration before the goods of the earth? Those who would like gold, money, property estates, power, and politics to be their gods that would never end. All this is going to end! We have to learn from the divine will to treat earthly things as the relative and passing things that they are. Don’t treat them as absolutes! There is only one absolute, the One who is waiting for us in the heavens which will never pass away”.⁴⁴³

A person who is attached to a life of selfishness and arrogance betrays Christ by making idols out of material things:

“One cannot be a Christian who has promised faithfulness to Christ and then go about betraying that Christ by worshipping the idol riches, the idol power, the idol sex, the idol pride, the idol selfishness, and so many other forms of idolatry”.⁴⁴⁴

Archbishop Romero points out the contradiction in the behaviour of Catholics who betray Christ by idolizing what is relative and receive the eucharist: “There are many who receive communion and are idolaters”.⁴⁴⁵ Christianity and the selfish life are incompatible.

5.4 The message of liberation

5.4.1 Freedom here and in the world to come

The first requisite for freeing oneself is to be able to feel the chains of slavery. The oppressed have to open their eyes and minds in order to meditate on the injustice they have to endure every day and organize themselves politically to be able to change this sinful situation in which they live. Simply put, “No-one can long for freedom if they do not realise that they are enslaved”.⁴⁴⁶ We need an active movement if we are to leave behind inhuman conditions and move towards a new humanity of equality and dignity:

“The Church promotes the dignity of the people who are humiliated in our country’s present situation, as though they were not human beings. It’s true: among our sisters and brothers there are people living subhuman lives. The Church preaches the liberation of these people.”⁴⁴⁷

Those who occupy the upper levels of Salvadorean society refuse to listen to the desperate cry of people who have fallen into poverty. They don’t care that workers’ rights are being violated. The result is that, “in this suffering country, people even have to go begging for their freedom”.⁴⁴⁸ But the Church listens to the cry of the poor and joins its voice to theirs:

⁴⁴⁰ Homilies, 14th October 1979, vol. VII, 339

⁴⁴¹ Homilies, 6th January 1980, vol. VIII, 125

⁴⁴² Homilies, 24th December 1977, vol. I-II, 89

⁴⁴³ Homilies, 10th December 1978, vol. VI, 308

⁴⁴⁴ Homilies, 15th April 1979, vol. VI, 308

⁴⁴⁵ Homilies, 28th May 1978, vol. IV, 269

⁴⁴⁶ Homilies, 17th December 1978, vol. VI, 39

⁴⁴⁷ Homilies, 19th June 1977, vol. I-II, 93

⁴⁴⁸ Homilies, 14th October 1979, vol. VII, 354

“Along with you I want to hear that sound rising from the depths of our country, our continent, which is like a sign that our people’s time is coming. It is a universal cry of ‘Liberation!’ The Church cannot be deaf to this cry”.⁴⁴⁹

The Church follows very closely these processes of earthly liberation, although it never identifies itself fully with them. “The Church is very close to all these liberation movements on our continent, but has a position of its own”.⁴⁵⁰ At the same time, “the Church can never ignore this earthly liberation”.⁴⁵¹

“The Church ‘does not look with indifference’ at all the struggles for freedom involving the workers, the organizations, any people who form groups to defend a human right, a liberation. But that does not mean that it identifies with them”.⁴⁵² “The Church links human liberation and salvation in Jesus Christ, but she never identifies them”.⁴⁵³

Although the Church makes its own the people’s fight, it is a fight in which God is involved.

“There can be no battle for a better world if it is not based on a divine justice, on a God rewarded by the efforts of human beings. A battle without God makes no sense.”⁴⁵⁴

Archbishop Romero makes a clear distinction between a Christian attitude and a human attitude with no Christian imprint.

“Christian liberation is not measured in terms of earthly liberation. Not that it wants nothing to do with it, but it wants to bring all these endeavours for earthly liberation into the great Christian liberation (. . .) The two forms of liberation do not coincide, but neither are they divorced from each other”.⁴⁵⁵

The Church’s attitude to these human liberation movements is that it seeks to incorporate them into the great Christian liberation”.⁴⁵⁶

“The Church attempts to understand all this work of human demands.... It incorporates this liberation of temporal things, liberation from earthly enslavements, into the great liberation of heaven.”

Christians are invited to take part in the people’s demands, but always bringing with them “the inspiration of faith, the motivation of fraternal love, a social teaching which true Christians cannot ignore and which they must make the foundation of their wisdom”.⁴⁵⁷

“Every struggle for freedom also corresponds to the designs of God (. . .) and everyone ought to work for those just demands of our people, but from the perspectives of God’s life, which gives a solid firmness to our ideals and what we are trying to achieve”.⁴⁵⁸

“Earthly liberations are part of liberation”,⁴⁵⁹ although the fact that they are incomplete does not mean that the Church underestimates them. These “temporal liberations form part of total liberation; the Church does not ignore this, but it is only a part”.⁴⁶⁰ The Church adopts the human struggle for liberation and praises it by virtue of the Creator-Love and by virtue of the new humanity embodied by Jesus Christ. But truly human values reject all aggressive violence from the State.

⁴⁴⁹ Homilies, 22nd June 1977, vol. I-II, 103

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid.105

⁴⁵¹ Homilies, 2nd April 1978, vol. IV, 137

⁴⁵² Ibid.

⁴⁵³ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 35

⁴⁵⁴ Homilies, 23rd September 1979, vol. VII, 299

⁴⁵⁵ Homilies, 24th September 1978, vol. V, 204

⁴⁵⁶ Homilies, 4th June 1978, vol. V, 24

⁴⁵⁷ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 38

⁴⁵⁸ Homilies 10th June 1979, vol. VI, 396

⁴⁵⁹ Homilies, 9th December 1979, vol. VIII, 21

⁴⁶⁰ Homilies, 18th November 1979, vol. VII, 451

At the same time Archbishop Romero opposed the violence of the insurgency, teaching that liberation movements that reject dialogue as a means of solving socio-political problems and resort to fostering animosities which end up in violent acts of vengeance are false and dangerous. Archbishop Romero advises, “Let us not allow ourselves to be seduced by false visions of liberation”.⁴⁶¹

“All liberation that does not have God’s plan in its deepest core is a false liberation.”⁴⁶²

“Try to find God and you will see that his plan is one of integral salvation and that all political programmes on earth are limited and that none of them gives us the whole dimension of salvation that God wants for all nations and every human being”.⁴⁶³

Forms of liberation based on demands are limited; and because of this it is impossible for them to achieve their goal of an absolute liberation in this world:

“Although the Church too speaks about a just demand for a more just social order, it does not place its hope in an earthly paradise. The Church wants a better world, but knows that perfection can never be achieved in human history”.⁴⁶⁴

Freedom is a never-ending process, always imperfect. This is true of the eventual transformation of unjust socio-political structures they turn into more just socio-political structures. But there is also a need to push forward the unfinished process of the liberation of the individual person, because individual liberation is the solid and indispensable foundation of all socio-political change.

Every November, the rural people of El Salvador travel to the hills to cut coffee on the large estates to earn a little money – and what they earn is truly little. On their return to their villages and hamlets, they usually celebrate the feast of the parish’s patron saint, since they have money in their pockets to pay the priest for the mass, and to pay for the fireworks and other activities organised by the masters of ceremonies, who are frequently corrupt. Unfortunately, the rural people, the men in particular, overdo the celebrations and end up as “keepers of pigs, adorers of false idols”.⁴⁶⁵ Archbishop Romero called these rural communities to conversion. He wanted them to have an eschatological vision and not confuse licentiousness with true freedom:

“The Church always keeps her gaze raised high, to see the goal to which this liberation is leading. What use is it if the coffee-pickers earn a lot of money if it ends up in the bars, the brothels, as sadly happens? What use is it to preach human development if human beings only develop to have more money? What good does it do to go to university, get a degree, be a professional, if one’s only aim is to earn more and more, ‘the frenzy of having more’. This is why a lot of people work, to make money. They have lost the eschatological vision”.⁴⁶⁶

Archbishop Romero is opposed to this selfish waste of material resources:

“The exclusive pursuit of material possessions prevents growth as a human being and stands in opposition to true human greatness”.⁴⁶⁷

“Sisters and brothers, how treacherous the stomach is! There is the bread of instantaneous liberation. It’s not enough, though of course it’s necessary”.⁴⁶⁸

Archbishop Romero wants Catholics to emphasise the transcendental dimension of existence and encourages “all those who belong to the Church to proclaim very clearly this transcendence without

⁴⁶¹ Homilies, 23rd December 1979, vol. VIII, 64

⁴⁶² Ibid.,32

⁴⁶³ Homilies, 10th February 1980, vol. VIII, 216

⁴⁶⁴ Homilies, 16th July 1977, vol. I-II, 131

⁴⁶⁵ Homilies, 20th March 1977, vol. I-II, 59

⁴⁶⁶ Homilies, 13th November 1977, vol. I-II, 319

⁴⁶⁷ Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, 19

⁴⁶⁸ Homilies, 5th August 1979, vol. VII, 137

which the liberation the Church promotes will lose its force among temporal liberations.”⁴⁶⁹ In plain terms, complete liberation will be beyond death: “It is a liberation without any reductions or ambiguities: it is not reduced to the dimensions of a mere temporal programme (. . .), to political or social initiatives”.⁴⁷⁰ Nevertheless, in the same breath, Archbishop Romero describes the eschatology of the future as having a historical commitment to the present: “Complete freedom will be after death, but it has to begin to take shape on this earth”.⁴⁷¹ The hope that propels us towards the future beyond time and space is the same hope that propels us towards the historical future, within the limits of time and space.

“We are a community of hope (. . .) Let us hope for the hour of freedom: It will come! (. . .) Don’t you realise that it’s the voice of the Church, here in El Salvador, crying aloud, ‘Amnesty, freedom!’ shouting aloud, ‘No more torture!’ ‘No more pain!’ It’s God’s voice that wants to sow good times, goodness on earth. And this land will flourish. The Lord has promised and he will not fail. When? We don’t know. Let us wait in hope like the farmer who does not get impatient, because he knows that his plot will turn green again in due time”.⁴⁷²

5.4.2 Liberation through a heart converted into love

“Without hope in God earthly liberations are severely limited. Without hope of eternity, liberations only turn into a change of masters within the same situation”.⁴⁷³ First and foremost, what is needed is a change of heart, inner change. Only then can we attempt to forge a new society with more human and more just socio-political structures:

“What use is it to change structures, change forms of government, change forms of political organization, if those who are going to manage these structures always have the same rottenness in their hearts?”⁴⁷⁴

“The Church considers it to be undoubtedly important to build up structures which are more human, more just, more respectful of the rights of the person . . ., but she is conscious that the best structures . . . soon become inhuman if the inhuman inclinations of the human heart are not made wholesome, if those who live in these structures or who rule them do not undergo a conversion of heart and of outlook.”⁴⁷⁵

“What use is it to manage new structures with a selfish heart?”⁴⁷⁶

5.4.3 Complete liberation comes from God the transcendent

Archbishop Romero insists on associating the Church with the socio-economic liberations of political life without identifying herself with them:

“My dear sister and brother atheists, those of you who don’t believe in Christ, nor in the Church: noble is your struggle, but it is not complete (. . .) Embed your passion for justice in those projects which do not end on earth”.⁴⁷⁷

“Immediate solutions can be plasters for the sore, but not real solutions”.⁴⁷⁸

⁴⁶⁹ Homilies, 26th August 1979, vol. VIII, 204

⁴⁷⁰ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 32

⁴⁷¹ Homilies, 16th April 1978, vol. IV, 173

⁴⁷² Homilies, 17th December 1978, vol. VI, 46

⁴⁷³ Homilies, 18th November 1979, vol. VII, 451

⁴⁷⁴ Homilies, 7th January 1978, vol. VI, 99

⁴⁷⁵ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 36

⁴⁷⁶ Homilies, 24th September 1978, vol. V, 209

⁴⁷⁷ Homilies, 9th March 1980, vol. VIII, 316

⁴⁷⁸ Homilies, 23rd March 1980, vol. VIII, 367

Archbishop Romero gently corrects the atheistic liberator. As the saying goes, *Bene curris, sed extra viam*, “You run a good race, but off the track”. The divine dimension is essential, “the transcendence of the struggle”.⁴⁷⁹ True liberation “embraces the entire person, in all dimensions, including openness to the Absolute, who is God”.⁴⁸⁰ It has to “include the prophetic proclamation of a hereafter, man's profound and definitive calling”.⁴⁸¹ The Church attempts to bring about “a development which does not consist just in having more, especially economically, but which develops the whole human being, all his or her faculties, and especially the divine vocation”.⁴⁸² Being is more important than having, and our being originates in God, and is directed towards God. All freedom of the human being has its point of departure in God and is directed towards Him. And so, all liberation of the human being must start from God's being, Creator-Love, to whom we owe our existence.

5.4.4 Liberation from sin

Christian liberation includes liberation from sin:

“A liberation that does not take into account liberation from sin would not be God's liberation.”⁴⁸³

“Let's not fight the struggles just for earthly liberations. These are earthly liberations..., partial freedoms (. . .) The liberation Christ is offering us is, above all, the liberation from sin”.⁴⁸⁴

“The liberation that comes from liberating us from sin also includes liberation from human selfishness, from repressions and oppressions, etc”.⁴⁸⁵

The sin of idolatry leads to death, and Christ wants to free us from the deadly idols. “Blessed are those that work for earthly political liberations but do not forget the redemption achieved by him who saves from sin and saves from death”.⁴⁸⁶

“Christ, by his incarnation and resurrection, has injected into earth the last opportunity that God is giving to humanity to be saved. It is a salvation that has already begun here on earth, a salvation which means freedom, true freedom from sin, from selfishness, from illiteracy, from hunger, earthly freedoms that prepare us for the great freedom of the kingdom of heaven”.⁴⁸⁷

Sin is a concrete reality that is born from egoism and greed which do not respect the humanity and dignity of human beings. The sin of a collectivity of rich and powerful individuals shows itself in the scourge of hunger, illiteracy and other sins committed against the poor.

It is necessary and urgent that there should be a radical break with this past so deeply marked by sin. This will open the way to a new era of true liberation:

“The first liberation a political group ought to bring about, if it really wants the liberation of the people, is to free itself from its own sinfulness. And while it remains enslaved to sin, selfishness, violence, cruelty, hate, it is not fit to lead the people to freedom”.⁴⁸⁸

5.4.5 Liberation centred on Christ the Redeemer

The freedom the Church offers is Christocentric:

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid.369

⁴⁸⁰ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 33

⁴⁸¹ Ibid.28

⁴⁸² Homilies, 6th January 1978, vol. III, 133

⁴⁸³ Homilies, 24th September 1978, vol. V, 209

⁴⁸⁴ Homilies, 19th August 1979 vol. VII, 380

⁴⁸⁵ Homilies, 28th October 1979, vol. VII, 241

⁴⁸⁶ Homilies, 27th November 1977, vol. III, 10

⁴⁸⁷ Homilies, 27th November 1977, vol. III, 10

⁴⁸⁸ Homilies, 2nd March 1980, vol. VIII, 292

“The Church has no need to resort to systems and ideologies (. . .) in the centre of its message is the inspiration of its Christian anthropology”.⁴⁸⁹

“Let us think as Christ thinks and let us seek the liberation of our people from that perspective.”⁴⁹⁰

“Christians, even when they work for liberation alongside other ideologies, must preserve their original liberation starting from Christ, inseparable from Christ”.⁴⁹¹

And the foundations of this redemption of Christ are laid in our world:

“The word which bothers a lot of people, ‘liberation’, is a reality of Christ’s redemption. Liberation means the redemption of humanity, not only after death, with people being told ‘Accept things as they are while you live.’ No. It is a liberation that starts now on this earth, a liberation with no exploitation of one human being by another. Liberation means redemption which wants to free human beings from so many enslavements. Illiteracy is enslavement; hunger is enslavement, when people have no money with which to buy food. Enslavement is having no roof over your head, not having a place to live. Slavery, extreme poverty, all that goes together”.⁴⁹²

Christian liberation involves human liberation, but it transcends it, because the social sin of the lack of decent housing, the lack of medical attention, the lack of education, the lack of love, is contrary to the will of God:

“How people try to misrepresent the Church on so many occasions, as though it had turned communist, revolutionary, as though redemption had no other horizons to offer than political, social and economic liberations! Of course the Church is also interested in these aspects, because Christ would not be the redeemer if he had not concerned himself with feeding the crowds who were hungry, if he had not opened the eyes of the blind man, if he had not felt anguish over the crowds that were marginalised, who had no one to love them and help them. Development, the political and social aspects, is also of concern to Christianity. Redemption would not be complete if these aspects of Christ were not taken into consideration. Christ chose precisely to be an example of an oppressed person under a powerful empire, under a ruling class who destroyed his good name and honour and left him to die on a cross”.⁴⁹³

Archbishop Romero presents Christ as the essential centre of all human liberation:

“Today we need Christians, and Christianity will make them the real liberators of humanity; if this doesn’t happen, what we’ll get will be political, violent, aggressive movements from extreme right and extreme left”.⁴⁹⁴

Christianity humanizes social and political life and makes it more sensitive:

“Don’t ever lose that political, social sensibility to earthly hatred, revenge and violence. Raise yourselves to a higher level. Lift up your hearts. Look to the things that are above (. . .) Christ the Risen One, Christ who this very morning sings the real victory song over the oppressions of the earth”.⁴⁹⁵

⁴⁸⁹ Homilies, 21st October 1979, vol. VII, 361

⁴⁹⁰ Homilies, 9th December 1979, vol. VIII, 21

⁴⁹¹ Homilies, 14th June 1977, vol. I-II, 100

⁴⁹² Homilies, 25th November 1977, vol. I-II, 342; CELAM, *Medellin*, “Justicia”, 3

⁴⁹³ Homilies, 26th March 1978, vol. IV, 118

⁴⁹⁴ Homilies, 23rd September 1979, vol. VII, 27

⁴⁹⁵ Homilies, 14th April 1979, vol. VI, 243

5.4.6 The liberation the Church offers⁴⁹⁶

In his Good Friday homily on the seven words of Christ crucified, Archbishop Romero summarises several aspects of Christian salvation or liberation:

1. “Father, forgive them” (Lk 23.34). Forgiving enemies is the backbone of the message of Christian liberation. Christ “does not want violence”. Liberation is brought about “through love”.
2. “Remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Lk 23.42b). “Paradise is not here on earth (. . .) Christian liberation is transcendental (. . .) Develop, improve yourselves, but with hope in a paradise that only exists beyond history (. . .), in more human, less oppressive, less humiliating, more equitable relationships”.
3. “Here is your mother” (Jn 19.27b). “Christ’s liberation is tenderness; it’s love. It’s the presence of a loving mother”.
4. “I am thirsty!” (Jn 19.28b) Christian liberation is not belief in a supernatural destiny for individuals, but “human development”. “The liberation Christ brings does not shun physical pain”.
5. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? (Mk 15.34) “When hope disappeared from view, he too felt anguish”.
6. “It is finished!” (Jn 19.30). How beautiful is human life when that person returns at the time of death to the house of his Father and can say to him: “All the details of my life have been a reflection of your divine will!”
7. “Into your hands I commend my spirit!” (Lk 23.46) “How sad it will be, sisters and brothers, to leave as one’s mark in this life victims of torture, ‘disappeared’, people murdered and terrorized, fires, crimes. What account will they have to give to God those who held whips in their blood-stained hands and kicked at their sisters and brothers!”

5.5 The Witness of Blood

5.5.1 Martyrdom is not sought

The German theologian Karl Rahner was asked in an interview if we need martyrs today. He answered:

“No one can wish for a period of martyrdom in which people are killed for their convictions.

But I certainly hope that there are people today who stand unconditionally by their convictions, even at the cost of their lives.”⁴⁹⁷

The Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez repeats this idea of rejecting martyrdom as a desirable objective. “Martyrdom”, he writes is “something that happens but is not sought.”⁴⁹⁸ And Luis Espinal, S.J. martyred in Bolivia in 1980, criticises this cult of death: “The people’s vocation is not to become a martyr (. . .) And should they have to give their lives one day, they will do it with the simplicity of someone that is just doing another job, and without melodramatic gestures”.⁴⁹⁹ Martyrdom always means tears, pain, and blood. It is nothing to be wished for.

⁴⁹⁶ Homilies, 21st March 1978, vol. IV, 104-107

⁴⁹⁷ Karl Rahner, *I remember*, London 1985, p. 40

⁴⁹⁸ Gustavo Gutierrez, *We Drink from our Own Wells*, London 1984, p. 117

⁴⁹⁹ L. Espinal, *El Grito de un Pueblo*, Lima 1981, p.107; quoted in V.Codina, *Luis Espinal, Gastar la vida por los demás*, Barcelona 1995, p. 22

5.5.2 Martyrs live on in the hearts of the people

The Church of El Salvador is “a Church of martyrs”.⁵⁰⁰ Archbishop Romero bears witness to this bloody reality. “Our land offers the Pope martyrs”.⁵⁰¹ At the same time martyrdom is recognised as the presence of God: “A Church so martyred! A Church so filled with the Holy Spirit!”⁵⁰² “Those that are dying today, victims of injustice and of calumny, are martyrs.”⁵⁰³ This means that if a believer dies murdered for love of the poor, searching for their liberation, he is an authentic martyr, although there is no formal, canonical proclamation from the Church to this effect. But this status is ratified “by the feeling of the people”.⁵⁰⁴

“Why do they kill them? They kill them because they are a nuisance”.⁵⁰⁵ Those who struggle for dignity, for liberation, justice for the oppressed, are a nuisance for the oppressors:

“These are the people whom I call truly just. And if they had their stains, who isn’t stained, my sisters and brothers? (. . .) But the fact that they let them take their lives and they did not run away, that they were not cowards, that they placed themselves in this situation of torture, suffering, murder, is for me as valuable as a baptism of blood, and they have been purified. We have to respect their memory”.⁵⁰⁶

These martyrs “are more present than before in this people’s process”.⁵⁰⁷ They have risen and continue to inspire the people in their just claims, in their brave efforts to change the sad destiny of the vast body of the poor, so that they may enjoy a more human life. The martyrs, through their commitment and bravery unto death, continue to live in the hearts of the people. They are the people’s memory. “We have martyrs, let’s not forget it!”⁵⁰⁸

5.5.3 Odium amoris

“Even those who sacrifice their lives without any explicit reference to the Gospel, if in fact they have offered this sacrifice with the sincere desire of giving true liberation and dignity to our people, are being integrated into the great sacrifice of Christ. But this is how it has to be; we have to accept the pain as the money that buys freedom”.⁵⁰⁹

Archbishop Romero includes in the order of martyrs those who give their lives as a testimony of love, those who confront the evil of the world. The person who opposes an existing situation of exploitation and murder of others, and is murdered while seeking liberation of the people, that person is an authentic martyr. Love is more important than faith (1 Cor 13.2), and people such as these live their lives in love to the point of death that is historical but not natural. They are martyrs of the Kingdom of God, but not of the Church”. Odium amoris, but not odium fidei, “for hatred of love”, but not “for hatred of the faith”. This perspective is that of Archbishop Romero, but perhaps the deceased atheist would not like this definition “post mortem” and would not wish to be either an anonymous Christian or an anonymous martyr.

⁵⁰⁰ C. Jérez, *The Church in Central America*, London 1980, 13: “If one thing is true of the Church in El Salvador it is that she is a martyred Church”.

⁵⁰¹ Homilies, 3rd December 1978, vol. VI, 90

⁵⁰² Homilies, 27th August 1978, vol. V, 154

⁵⁰³ Homilies, 28th August 1978, vol. VIII, 198

⁵⁰⁴ Homilies, 2nd March 1980, vol. VIII, 299

⁵⁰⁵ Homilies, 23rd September 1979, vol. VIII, 287

⁵⁰⁶ Homilies, 23rd September 1979, vol. VIII, 287

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁸ Homilies, 14th April 1979, vol. VI, 299

⁵⁰⁹ Homilies, 11th November 1979, vol. VII, 429

5.5.4 **Odium fidei and odium amoris**

Those who give their life with explicit reference to the Gospel form part of the liberating movement of the Christian churches. For their commitment to faith inextricably linked to justice, the oppressors of the people hate them, persecute, arrest and murder them. They die on account of hatred of their Christian praxis, in imitation of Christ incarnate. *Odium fidei and odium amoris*. They are martyrs of the Kingdom of God, although not canonically martyrs of the Church. Archbishop Romero sings the praises of these martyrs as martyrs of the Church: “That is what ‘martyr’ means: a person who has been murdered on account of their faith”.⁵¹⁰ “Blessed are those who have died on account of the persecution of the Kingdom of God, blessed are those who have been massacred out of hatred for the faith!”⁵¹¹

The commitment to work for social justice is an intrinsic requirement of faith in Christ. It’s necessary to be prepared to give one’s life for faith and for justice. “All of us must be prepared to die for our faith, even though the Lord does not give us that honour”.⁵¹² The hour of danger demands bravery. “How much do we need this bravery in this time of cowards, traitors, people who sell out the faith!”⁵¹³ The life of faith cannot endure the life of idolatry. There has to be a confrontation between faith in the true God and the adherence to idols. The Christian, “who rejects false idolatries must die in order to be faithful to his only God”.⁵¹⁴ Faithfulness to the Gospel may lead to the shedding of blood. “There can be no faithfulness without blood. God himself signed with blood the covenant of faithfulness with humanity”.⁵¹⁵

Nevertheless this Christian boldness is different from revolutionary boldness. Repeatedly, Archbishop Romero states that Christian commitment is not a force involving violence, or violence in support of demands or vengeance, “There is a force greater than all revolutions - love”.⁵¹⁶ The Christian martyr is witness to human love.

5.5.5 **Martyrdom is a transcendental act**

Martyrdom confirms the existence of immortality. It’s a transcendental act, indicating the existence of values beyond the mortality of the mere human being. “After our death there is immortality (. . .) The oppressed and the oppressors will not enjoy the same fate in immortality”.⁵¹⁷ The oppressors will reap the rotten fruits of their evil deeds. On the other hand, the prize of the martyrs is eternal happiness. Archbishop Romero illustrates this in a homily in which he names two people as representative of the “roll of the martyrs... of this present time”.⁵¹⁸ It is important always to take into account that the anonymous rural people martyred are human beings. They have names. They have a human history like us. They are people once flesh and blood as we are now. They are not abstract statistics or part of an unreal legend:

“It would be impossible to number them, but let us remember for instance, Filomena Puertas, Miguel Martínez, and so many other sisters and brothers who have worked and who have died, and who in the hour of their pain and agony, while their skin was torn off and they were tortured, gave up their lives. As they were machine-gunned, they ascended into heaven. And

⁵¹⁰ Homilies, 7th May 1978, vol. IV, 211

⁵¹¹ Homilies, 11th May 1978, vol. IV, 227

⁵¹² Homilies, 15th May 1977, vol. I-II, 44-45

⁵¹³ Homilies, 13th May 1978, vol. IV, 231

⁵¹⁴ Homilies, 15th April 1979, vol. VI, 299

⁵¹⁵ Homilies, 21st June 1979, vol. VII, 11

⁵¹⁶ Homilies, 19th August 1979, vol. VII, 84

⁵¹⁷ Homilies, 18th November 1979, vol. VIII, 450

⁵¹⁸ Homilies, 15th April 1979, vol. VI, 299

they are there victorious! Who has conquered? Death, where is your victory? Faith has won the victory. Those killed for justice' sake have emerged victorious.”⁵¹⁹

Paradoxically, with God weakness is greater than strength. The blood of the victims puts to shame the cowardly fury of the executioners. The crucified God is with the victims, and only with them.

⁵¹⁹ Homilies, 1st November 1977, vol. I-II, 301

CHAPTER SIX - THE SACRAMENTS

A “privileged form of evangelizing is the celebration of faith in the liturgy and the sacraments”.⁵²⁰ “The sacraments, like the Word, are the chain between God’s alliance and humanity”.⁵²¹ Therefore Archbishop Romero demands that they be taken seriously and that their administration be prepared for with an adequate catechesis. The sacraments are like the mask that veils the face of God. They are special efficacious signs of the divine transcendence in our life.

6.1 Baptism

6.1.1 No baptism without prior catechesis

Archbishop Romero stresses that “baptism should not be given without stimulating faith through an adequate catechesis”,⁵²² because “a practice of receiving sacraments without catechesis is “an empty ritualism”.⁵²³ What is required is “the preparation of those who are going to be responsible for educating in the faith the child about to be baptized, unaware of what is happening.”⁵²⁴ This pastoral rule of the Archdiocese reflects the teaching of Vatican II of undertaking a “continuing education of adults”.⁵²⁵

6.1.2 More than a social occasion

Archbishop Romero defends the sacrament against superficiality and trivialization: “Let us not turn baptism into a social occasion, just an opportunity for a party in the house or to establish relationships with godparents who may be advantageous to us socially or politically. No, that’s not baptism!”⁵²⁶ The Salvadorean people adore a party atmosphere – soft drinks, cakes, dancing, music and perhaps a drop of something stronger in order to help the mood. Archbishop Romero does not reject this social aspect, but he reminds the people that this isn’t the point of baptism. Specifically, he points out that the relationship that the parents establish with the godparents has an ecclesial, Christian sacramental function, not just a social one. Baptismal godparents represent the community’s Christian solidarity and its human support in the lives of the new Christians. To put the social aspect before the sacramental is to “concentrate on the shell, the wrapping”.⁵²⁷

6.1.3 A sacrament of commitment

Archbishop Romero stresses the complementary dimension of baptism. It means a commitment to the “Christification” of the human being. Baptism is the door into the community of those who believe in Christ. “It makes citizens of an earthly country, citizens of the Kingdom of God.”⁵²⁸ Nevertheless, “this other kingdom does not alienate us from our country, but it trains us, gives us special insights, gives us new and original criteria ... to be the leaven of the Kingdom of God in society”.⁵²⁹

⁵²⁰ CELAM, Puebla, 269

⁵²¹ Homilies, 14th April 1979, vol. VI, 295

⁵²² Homilies, 14th January 1979, vol. VI, 114

⁵²³ Homilies, 22nd–25th November 1979, vol. VII, 8

⁵²⁴ Homilies, 29th October 1978, vol. V, 263

⁵²⁵ Vatican II, *Gravissimum Educationis*, 1

⁵²⁶ Homilies, 26th February 1978, vol. IV, 46

⁵²⁷ Homilies, 14th January 1979, vol. VI, 113

⁵²⁸ Homilies, 13th January 1980, vol. VIII, 138

⁵²⁹ Ibid.

Archbishop Romero criticizes those priests who are “more interested in the baptism offering” than its sacramental meaning of communication with God.⁵³⁰ He also criticizes lazy parents and godparents who have no commitment to the Church or the sacraments, and are more interested in the social aspect. They fail to understand and appreciate the deep meaning of the messianic gift offered in the sacrament. This provokes a cry of distress from Archbishop Romero: “How few people understand this! That is why we have a country of people baptized, but without any consciousness of this very serious commitment”.⁵³¹

6.1.4 The equality of baptism

The sacrament of baptism ought to break down the barriers of social class in daily life, because all human beings and all the baptised enjoy the dignity of being human in equal measure. This means we share in the same glory and the same poverty of the human condition. “Now there is no longer slave nor free; now there are only sisters and brothers in Christ”. How beautiful is the equality that baptism creates.⁵³²

6.1.5 Dying to sin to be reborn in grace

Baptism means a total commitment to life. It means:

“sharing in the death of Christ so as to die to all that is evil in life, banishing from us all selfishness, all injustice, all hatred, all violence, all wickedness, all that is diabolical or perverse in nature; and instead, rising to a new life of holiness, simplicity, humility, chastity, of all those virtues that form an escort for holy souls”.⁵³³

The sacrament of baptism is not to be treated lightly. “Without a commitment to being a Christian as we have defined it today, as a member of the People of God, it would be better that there were no baptism. Maybe the person would get on better without baptism.”⁵³⁴

6.2 The Eucharist

6.2.1 Body broken and blood shed

The abused and murdered people make present the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, his broken body and his blood shed. They are bodies, people whose human, vital presence has been taken away from them violently by the powerful. They have been tortured and murdered. They are bloodshed, life brought to an end. The people are a crucified people, and Archbishop Romero links the suffering of the people to the sufferings of Christ:

“I would like to unite, in this homage of our faith, to the presence of the Body and Blood of Christ, shed for us, all the blood and the piles of corpses, massacred here in our country and throughout the world. Without doubt, Christ gathers up this blood each time this mystery is celebrated”.⁵³⁵

In the eucharist all the victims that die at the hands of murderous idolaters are made present and are remembered. They are united to Christ, “marked by the signs of torture, of injustice, of assassination.”⁵³⁶ They embody the hope of the resurrection, but a resurrection that does not escape the horror of the cross. It is better not to suffer a violent death, although the violent death in the cause of justice always

⁵³⁰ Homilies, 14th January 1979, vol. VI, 114

⁵³¹ Ibid.

⁵³² Homilies, 4th March 1979, vol. VI, 182

⁵³³ Homilies, 8th April 1977, vol. I-II, 19

⁵³⁴ Homilies, 11th March 1979, vol. VI, 199

⁵³⁵ Homilies, 17th June 1979, vol. VI, 397

⁵³⁶ Ibid

carries with it the pledge of resurrection. And so “death is not the end; death is opening ourselves to this door of eternity”.⁵³⁷ And the eucharist, in its sacrificial dimension, signifies the pledge of resurrection for this tortured and murdered people.

To murder the people is to murder Christ. What is done to the people is done to the eucharistic Christ. And what is done to the eucharistic Christ is done to the people. “It is as if the divine bride of Christ, the holy Church, here and now in this diocese of San Salvador, should kneel reverently to pick up, with love and tears hosts trampled in Aguilares”.⁵³⁸ When the armed forces trample the people they trample Christ, “who gives his Body and his Blood for the life of the world”.⁵³⁹

“If the eucharist is the presence of the merciful love which in Christ redeems the world, sin is the absence of God. When I say sin I am including the whole of this situation of crime, violence, murder, and injustice. The eucharistic presence exposes God’s absence in mortal sins committed against the people.”⁵⁴⁰

6.2.2 Abuses against the eucharist within the Church

Unfortunately, within the Church sins are committed against the eucharist. This happens, for instance, when the eucharist “is sought after selfishly, as if God were the family’s servant.”⁵⁴¹ By tradition, the “master of ceremonies”, the person in charge of organizing the mass and the secular celebration, comes from one of the wealthier families in the community. And often his position and status lead him to think of himself as the owner of the feast-day mass. Just like his ancestors, he is responsible for finding the priest and paying him the amount he asks for. This means house-to-house collections, accompanied by the statue of the saint whose feast is being celebrated as a stimulus to generosity. After collecting these funds, the master of ceremonies goes on to charge “entry fees” to those who come from the neighbouring hamlets and districts. With this money he buys fireworks (which are let off during the mass or the procession), pays the visiting musicians and provides a piece of cake and a little soft drink for the participants. No one ventures to question the honesty of the master of ceremonies, who steals a substantial part of the festival collection to make up for his trouble. This is the sort of abuse of the sacrament in ordinary circumstances, among the poor. But among the rich and powerful there is usually greater abuse of the sacrament. For example, the military and politicians in El Salvador pay for masses as political propaganda, to give themselves airs of respectability when, in reality, they are committing atrocities against the poor and defenceless. Archbishop Romero denounced these abusive situations”:

“The Mass is made subject to the idolatry of money when it is used to give a covering of honesty to sinful situations.”⁵⁴²

Sometimes priests multiply the celebration of masses simply in order to make money, thus committing the sin of simony. Archbishop Romero affirms solemnly: “The mass is also prostituted within the Church when it is celebrated out of avarice ... It is like the action of Judas in selling the Lord... Let’s not play with the eucharist.”⁵⁴³

6.3 Reconciliation

A month before his assassination Archbishop Romero wrote in his retreat diary:

⁵³⁷ Homilies, 17th June 1979, vol. VI, 397

⁵³⁸ Homilies, 12th June 1977, vol. I-II, 86

⁵³⁹ Homilies, 20th March 1977, vol. I-II, 7

⁵⁴⁰ Homilies, 30th June 1979, vol. VII, 34

⁵⁴¹ Ibid

⁵⁴² Homilies, 30th June 1979, vol. VII, 35

⁵⁴³ Homilies, 30th June 1979, vol. VII, 35

“Father Azcue came and we all went to confession. I expressed two fears: that I wasn’t as careful as I used to be with my confessions during retreats and in general, with my spiritual life. He gave me guidance, commenting that I might have had inclinations towards scruples about confessions, and that the main thing was the inner disposition, and as regards spiritual exercises it was good to have a plan for one’s spiritual life, but without being enslaved by it; here the main thing ought to be life and spirit as the soul of the whole of my activity. My other fear is about the risks to my life”.⁵⁴⁴

6.3.1 Personal and social conversion

In his personal life, Archbishop Romero used to go to confession frequently, and he always recognized the importance of this sacramental practice. At the same time he realized that a private spirituality alone was insufficient, and would not resolve the economic, social, and political problems of El Salvador.

“The struggle of the prophetic people is against sin, against the devil, and against the consequences of all that: liberation also from earthly servitudes. Therefore, to talk about going to confession so as not to have sins as an individual and then not also to fight against the injustice of the environment in which we live is not to be part of the People of God. What is required is, as well as the effort not to have personal sins, that I should also work to eradicate social sins, to go to the root, to fight against the power of hell and the devil.”⁵⁴⁵

Puebla defines social sin as follows: “The luxury of a few becomes an insult to the wretched poverty of the vast masses”.⁵⁴⁶ A person who frequently confesses his or her personal sins in the confessional and doesn’t care about dealing with the sinful situation of society, sins by omission.

On the last evening of his life, about 4.30 p.m., Archbishop Romero visited his confessor in Santa Tecla, San Salvador:

“On seeing him and greeting him he said. ‘I’ve come here, Father, because I want to be clean before God,’ and he made a lengthy confession. Those who saw him that evening in Santa Tecla noted his usual serenity and his characteristic timidity, perhaps a little more taciturn. That was understandable: he didn’t have much time and was worried about getting home. He had taken time from the little he had to go to confession”.⁵⁴⁷

6.4 Confirmation

6.4.1 A sacrament for young people, not for children

All the sacraments of the Church presuppose an act of faith in Jesus Christ. Of course, in the sacrament of baptism the child lacks sufficient consciousness to make this act of faith in Christ, so the parents and godparents take on the responsibility and commit themselves to educate their child in the faith.

The practice of the Church today is not to confirm children. Nonetheless, in the seventies in El Salvador the fixed custom was to confirm even children two or three months old. Archbishop Romero sought to change this custom and make the sacrament of confirmation a sacrament for young people with a social conscience. He was therefore opposed to administering it to children:

“I tell you frankly, I don’t like this mass of confirmations in the cathedral crypt, because many of them don’t know what they’re receiving and the very small children don’t need this strength, but they will need it when they’re bigger. But it’s better that they come prepared, and the priests in

⁵⁴⁴ Notes of the Retreat in the House of the Passionist Sisters, Planes de Renderos, Monday, 25th February 1980, quoted in J. Delgado Oscar A. Romero, *Biografía*, San Salvador 1980, 190

⁵⁴⁵ Homilies, 15th July 1979, vol. VII, 82

⁵⁴⁶ CELAM, *Puebla*, 28

⁵⁴⁷ J. Delgado, *Oscar A. Romero, Biografía*, San Salvador, 1990, p. 204

the parishes are now doing this, doing better preparation of these groups for confirmation, so that it can be truly what the word says: confirmation of their baptismal faith, a strengthening in the Holy Spirit, a sacrament for young people.⁵⁴⁸

“I want to ask for your cooperation in this respect, that we help the Church to present the real meaning of confirmation, not insisting on having small children confirmed. That’s not the proper age for confirmation. Confirmation is a sacrament for young people, a conscious sacrament of someone who was baptized as a child and, now that they are older wants to be aware of their commitments and of the gift of the Holy Spirit, who comes to strengthen for their young adulthood a situation of faith which they have had since their baptism.”⁵⁴⁹

“Confirmation isn’t as necessary as baptism. It’s a confirmation of baptism. That’s why it’s left for when the children understand what is happening.”⁵⁵⁰

6.4.2 A sacrament of conscience and valiant testimony

Confirmation is a sign and it is essential that the young person understands the meaning inherent in the sacramental commitment of confirmation:

“Confirmation is a sign and for the one who discovers it, it is like an unknown language. What happens when a bishop’s hand anoints the forehead of a youngster? If the person who’s going to receive the sacrament doesn’t understand this, better they don’t receive it. Why come and make a sign that has no meaning?”⁵⁵¹

In El Salvador at the end of the 1970s, confirmation came to mean the courage of Christ and his condemnation of sin.

“Confirmation is only received when there is a firm purpose of following Christ faithfully, even at the cost of one’s life. If it were not for Confirmation we wouldn’t have martyrs in the Church. Confirmation is the sacrament of martyrs.”⁵⁵²

Confirmation is the sacrament of the brave. “If necessary, let confirmation become for us the sacrament of martyrdom, and may we be ready to give our lives for Christ, and not betray him with the cowardice of the false Christians of today!”⁵⁵³

Confirmation doesn’t mean not being afraid, but not letting yourself be overcome by fear in a situation of persecution. Receiving the sacrament of confirmation means boldly condemning sin, the evil that takes place in the history of society, being prepared to accept courageously the inevitable consequences of opposing the powerful who go unpunished.

“Sisters and brothers, being a Christian now means to have the courage to preach the true teaching of Christ and not to be afraid, to keep silent out of fear or to preach something easy that doesn’t cause problems. But being a Christian now means the strength the Holy Spirit gives you by your confirmation to be brave soldiers of Christ the King, to make his teaching reign, to get through to people’s hearts and preach to them about the bravery they need to defend the law of God.”⁵⁵⁴

⁵⁴⁸ Homilies, 6th November 1977, vol. I-II, 306

⁵⁴⁹ Homilies, 16th April 1978, vol. IV, 169-170

⁵⁵⁰ Homilies, 26th November 1978, vol. V, 329

⁵⁵¹ Homilies, 3rd June 1979, vol. VI, 376

⁵⁵² Homilies, 5th December 1977, vol. IV, 29

⁵⁵³ Homilies, 5th December 1977, vol. IV, 29

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid.

6.5 Matrimony

6.5.1 A human relationship with God

Archbishop Romero's reflection on matrimony develops the distinction between the perspective of secularisation and the perspective of secularism. Secularization is founded on human qualities as something lived out with autonomy, but with an openness to the infinite. In contrast, matrimony rooted in secularism rejects the idea that God has anything to do with this purely human, totally human relationship without any higher status or transcendence. Secularization is legitimate, but believers refuse to accept their own marriage as a form of secularism. They believe in the human values of matrimony, in its anthropological basis, but recognize at the same time "a divine dimension of love".⁵⁵⁵

"This is the great difference between those living in concubinage: two people who have come together to live their whole lives united as a family may love each other deeply, but they have not blessed their union with the sacrament. They have not raised it up to the meaning of that mysterious union of Christ and redeemed humanity."⁵⁵⁶

6.5.2 A woman and a man together made into Christ

The sacrament of marriage means that a woman and a man ask the blessing of God on their union, desiring to accept together the mystery of the divine revelation in Christ and so enrich their human love. In this way their human, sexual relationship is made into Christ within the community, sealed by an "irrevocable personal consent"⁵⁵⁷, and by their mutual self-giving. "On the day on which the bride and groom become wife and husband before the altar they have become an alliance strong until death".⁵⁵⁸

According to Archbishop Romero, marriages break down and families are split up because the husband and wife "have not counted on the Absolute, have not stopped to think that they have a transcendent mission on this earth, and have only tried living in a human way".⁵⁵⁹

6.5.3 An unbreakable union in love

Archbishop Romero emphasizes the indissoluble aspects of the marital union: "You shall not commit adultery!... Only in marriage can a man have a sexual relationship with a woman ... God absolutely forbids any relationship between a man and a woman outside marriage".⁵⁶⁰ The Archbishop castigates the "houses of sin",⁵⁶¹ the brothels. "How much rottenness; how much distress, how much exploitation of the dignity of womanhood, of health, of the life of the country!"⁵⁶² And he laments that "there is no austerity in life".⁵⁶³

The greatest expression of the image of the Triune God within humanity occurs in a good marriage:

"Man is incomplete if he doesn't find his connection in the other sex and his perfection in love. So it is then when a man and a woman are a true image of God. God is love and never are man and woman so true to the image of God. God is love and never are man and woman such perfect images of God as when they love one another and formalize that alliance".⁵⁶⁴

⁵⁵⁵ Homilies, 26th August 1979, vol. VII, 195

⁵⁵⁶ Homilies, 15th October 1978, vol. V, 246

⁵⁵⁷ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 48

⁵⁵⁸ Homilies, 12th November 1978, vol. V, 291-292

⁵⁵⁹ Homilies, 26th August 1979, vol. VII, 196

⁵⁶⁰ Homilies, 18th March 1979, vol. VI, 215

⁵⁶¹ Ibid.

⁵⁶² Ibid.

⁵⁶³ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁴ Homilies, 12th November 1978, vol. V, 292

6.5.4 The social dimension

Marital love has a social dimension: “Nobody gets married just to be happy with another person. Matrimony has a great social function”.⁵⁶⁵ Christian couples are called upon to leave their homes and become involved in human development, evangelizing the social and political realms, collaborating in the construction of a new society based on justice. It’s important that they strive to “work for the happiness of everyone”.⁵⁶⁶

6.6 Priestly ordination

6.6.1 The duty to make the Gospel incarnate

Archbishop Romero preached the Word of God incarnate in the reality that the Salvadorean people lived and suffered: “The priest’s preaching... must expound the Word of God, not merely in a general and abstract way, but by applying the eternal truth of the Gospel to the concrete circumstances of life”.⁵⁶⁷ At the same time he recommended that his priests incarnate the Gospel in the reality of abuse suffered by the people:

“My dear brother priests, let not your service be false to the word of God. It’s very easy to be servants of the word without disturbing anybody to preach a very spiritualist word, a word without any commitment to history, a word that can sound the same in any part of the world, because it doesn’t belong to any part of the world. A word like that creates no problems, starts no conflicts. What starts conflicts and persecutions, what marks out the authentic Church is when the word burns like that of the prophets, to announce and denounce”.⁵⁶⁸

6.6.2 The risk of incarnation

The blazing word of God creates conflicts and brings danger for the one who speaks it:

“The priest cannot tolerate sin. Wherever it may be found he has to denounce it, and destroy it, and he knows that often he will be assassinated and killed by those that strive to enthrone sin.

The priest cannot be an accomplice in enthroning sin. For that reason, his has to be a mission of salvation, difficult and involving conflict”.⁵⁶⁹

Times are dangerous; it’s “a time in which being a priest means being either mad or heroic”.⁵⁷⁰

Despite the death threats, the priest cannot live for himself alone, but for his people. “We haven’t been ordained for ourselves, but for you”⁵⁷¹, Archbishop Romero told the people. Besides being “a man of prayer committed to God”⁵⁷², the priest must be “a man of the people, feeling with his people their sorrows and their hopes”.⁵⁷³

6.6.3 “The habit doesn’t make the monk”

When some critics of priests’ behaviour picked on the failure of many to wear a clerical collar, Archbishop Romero replies with realism, focusing the question of ministry on love for the suffering, and not on the cut or colour of a suit:

⁵⁶⁵ Homilies, 7th October 1979, vol. VII, 324

⁵⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁷ Vatican II *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 4

⁵⁶⁸ Homilies, 10th December 1977, vol. III, 45

⁵⁶⁹ Homilies 1st March 1980, vol. VIII, 279

⁵⁷⁰ Homilies, 14th May 1978, vol. IV, 241

⁵⁷¹ Homilies, 23rd March 1978, vol. IV, 90

⁵⁷² Homilies, 14th May 1978, vol. IV, 241

⁵⁷³ Ibid

“What the pope said to them was, yes, that they be proud of their habit, but the habit doesn’t make the monk. What makes the monk is love; the love of Christ which is translated into help and love for one’s neighbour. However elegant in dress a priest or religious may be, if he is the priest who leaves the injured person on the road, he is not a good priest, although he may dress well”.⁵⁷⁴

6.6.4 A call to unity among the clergy

Archbishop Romero tried to maintain the unity of his clergy. And when the immigration authorities expelled some “foreign” priests, he reminded them that “there are no foreign priests, there are only Catholic priests”.⁵⁷⁵

It upset him and made him angry when some archdiocesan priests became dissidents, placing themselves at odds with the pastoral policy of the Church:

“I recognize my limitations and my inadequacies, but I cannot renounce the role that Christ has given me, that of being the sign of unity of teaching, of truth, of the Church in the Archdiocese. Because of this, it hurts me that there are so many dissidents, not only among the laity whose ignorance one can understand when they are enemies of the Church and serve other idols, interested in the things of the earth. But it’s hard when that dissidence nests in the heart of a person who ought to be an intimate and wholehearted collaborator of the bishop. I know with sadness that there are priests who are ashamed to speak my name in the prayer of the Mass, where it is an obligation for all priests, as a sign of unity with his bishop, to pray for his bishop by name. If someone does not have that sense of solidarity, what is he doing in this diocese?”⁵⁷⁶

6.6.5 The sacraments work ex opere operato

Archbishop Romero defends the ex opere operato character of the sacraments, maintaining that their validity does not depend on the goodness or badness of the priest who celebrates them. “Often in the administration of the sacraments we get carried away by personalities, as though Father A did good sacraments, and Father B didn’t do good sacraments. The sacraments do not depend on the goodness or badness of a priest”.⁵⁷⁷

6.6.6 Priests for ever

Archbishop Romero’s charity is seen in his attitude to those of his priests who cease to exercise their ministry. His pastoral position is one of understanding, compassion, not condemnation:

“And these poor men who not only have distanced themselves because they felt the call to holiness in a different vocation, but have distanced themselves with a feeling of rebellion, with a sense of disagreement, the Church continues to love them. They are still her priests”.⁵⁷⁸

“Many of our brothers who were priests and now don’t exercise their ministry, should not feel themselves separated; the character that has always marked them for the whole of eternity should make them feel still very close to the life of the Church”.⁵⁷⁹

⁵⁷⁴ Homilies, 26th November 1978, vol. V, 327

⁵⁷⁵ Homilies, 28th May 1977, vol. I-II, 64

⁵⁷⁶ Homilies, 25th February 1979, vol. VI, 168

⁵⁷⁷ Homilies, 19th August 1979, vol. VII, 179

⁵⁷⁸ Homilies, 10th December 1977, vol. III, 47

⁵⁷⁹ Homilies, 12th November 1978, vol. V, 298

6.7 The anointing of the sick

During his three years as archbishop, Oscar Romero lived in a two-roomed house in the grounds of the Hospitalito, a hospital dedicated to the care of people with terminal cancer. He was “devoted to the sick and the dying, visiting them and comforting them in the Lord”.⁵⁸⁰

6.7.1 The oil of consecration

In the mind of Archbishop Romero it seems that the anointing of the sick with oil symbolizes, first and foremost, the consecration of the sick person so that his or her suffering, united with that of the crucified Christ, may bring salvation to the world:

“The anointing of the sick, is no longer a sacrament to make a sick person despair; and is no longer called “extreme unction”. As before, it is an anointing of the sick that means consecration of those organs in pain, so that united to the crucified Christ they may be more effective in being what Christ wants every sick or suffering person to be, a suffering member of his passion to save the world”.⁵⁸¹

The sanctifying and redemptive value of sickness mystically united to the crucified Christ was deeply rooted in Archbishop Romero’s spirituality:

“Ricardo Hernández. If you knew his story, it would move you deeply. Thirty years bed-bound, paralysed, getting worse day by day, but always optimistic. When he eventually went blind, he could still give clear directions for the work on his little farm and had time to offer his sufferings for anyone who asked him.”⁵⁸²

6.7.2 The oil of comfort

Besides consecrating the pain of the sick person, Archbishop Romero sought to alleviate that pain and encourage carers to work at the task of comforting the sick:

“In the sick person who wants to be visited Christ is saying to you: “I was sick and you came to visit me”.⁵⁸³

“This persuaded me to appeal to the young people and tell them: that’s how Christianity is lived out, by pushing wheelchairs for the sick and old people, bringing comfort to those who perhaps don’t have young people to comfort them”.⁵⁸⁴

6.7.8 Care of the sick

Although Archbishop Romero worked for justice, he did not ignore the need for charity. On one occasion he campaigned for funds for the orphans left by the mothers who were patients at the Hospitalito:

“In these notices, I want to pass on an appeal from the Carmelite Sisters of the Divine Providence Hospital, because their charitable work of constructing a home for the orphans left by the patients who die there still needs 290,000 colones. It’s a pity the Nobel Prize went to India, because that would have given them their money! But, whether in India or in El Salvador, the way of the poor is the way of peace”.⁵⁸⁵

⁵⁸⁰ Vatican II, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 6

⁵⁸¹ Homilies, 5th February 1978, vol. III, 183

⁵⁸² Homilies, 31st December 1978, vol. VI, 91

⁵⁸³ Homilies, 16th March 1980, vol. VIII, 339

⁵⁸⁴ Homilies, 24th December 1978, vol. VI, 67

⁵⁸⁵ Homilies, 21st October 1979, vol. VII, 371. Archbishop Romero had been nominated for the 1979 Nobel Peace Prize, but the prize was awarded to Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

CHAPTER SEVEN - THE HUMAN AND CHRISTIAN INVOLVEMENT OF ARCHBISHOP ROMERO IN THE SALVADOREAN SITUATION

7.1 Life is Sacred

7.1.1 The right to life

The right to life “is an inalienable fundamental right”.⁵⁸⁶ Everybody, even the humblest rural worker, has the right to life”.⁵⁸⁷ All lives are sacred, and murder is murder, no matter the motive or aim. Violence is unworthy of humanity”.⁵⁸⁸ The sacredness of life is an absolute religious principle.

For Archbishop Romero the right to life is a universal right (pertaining to every human all the time and in every place). It is inalienable. To respect life is a radical duty which can never be abandoned or negotiated. It is inviolable: no human power ever suppress or diminish this absolute religious principle. It is a fixed right, more than any other human law, because the law, the authorities, will pass away, but the human being remains and laws and authorities are there to serve human beings.

“All offences against life itself, such as murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia and wilful suicide, all violations of the integrity of the human person, ... all these and the like are criminal... and militate against the honour of the creator”.⁵⁸⁹ Life is sacred”.⁵⁹⁰ All human life, in whatever circumstances, has an inherent right to be treated with dignity”.⁵⁹¹ Archbishop Romero does not admit as legitimate any attack on the life of any human being. To kill is to insult the Creator: “The Lord’s commandment ‘Thou shalt not kill’ makes all life sacred, even if it is that of a sinner: blood shed always cries out to God, and killers are always murderers”.⁵⁹²

7.1.2 “Thou shalt not kill”

In the desperate tones of a prophet rejected, Archbishop Romero repeated God’s commandment: “Thou shalt not kill!”

“Thou shalt not kill! This is a proclamation of the sanctity of life... People are ordered to kill.

People are paid to kill.... Who paid? What interests lie behind this death? ‘Thou shalt not kill!’

It’s terrible... Torturers are murderers(. . .) No one should lay hand on another person, because a human being is the image of God. ‘Thou shalt not kill!’... The law of God commands this!”⁵⁹³

He detested the murderous coldness that orders killings, pays to have life cut short, spilling human blood on the altar of idols. Who are those dehumanised cowards who torture the defenceless? Who are those who insult the Creator of the universe with their acts of pitiless violence?

“‘This is my Body ... this is my Blood.’ All blood is sacred; and every body sacrificed, even by murder, is a life cut short, and life is sacred”.⁵⁹⁴ “I have always been deeply moved by the death of anyone... All life is sacred, whether rich or poor”.⁵⁹⁵ Archbishop Romero is moved by the wickedness of a human being who can inflict such atrocities on God’s creatures. They are devotees of the idols of death who shamelessly set themselves against the God of Life. “I want to place myself in full solidarity with

⁵⁸⁶ Paul VI, *Appello per i diritti dell’ Uomo* (Appeal for human rights), 23 October 1974: http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/it/speeches/1974/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19741023_appello-diritti-uomo.html

⁵⁸⁷ Homilies, 8th July 1979, vol. VIII, 70

⁵⁸⁸ Homilies, 7th October 1979, vol. VIII, 320

⁵⁸⁹ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 27

⁵⁹⁰ Homilies, 12th May 1977, vol. I-II, 40

⁵⁹¹ Homilies, 23rd March 1980, vol. VIII, 364

⁵⁹² Homilies, 30th June 1979, vol. VII, 37

⁵⁹³ Homilies, 18th March 1979, vol. VI, 214

⁵⁹⁴ Homilies, 17th June 1979, vol. VI, 397

⁵⁹⁵ Homilies, 25th March 1979, vol. VI, 236

those persons threatened and I am sending the U.G.B. a clear message: Enough! Enough of trifling with life in El Salvador.”⁵⁹⁶ With the authority of God, the giver of life, Archbishop Romero lashes out at “The White Warrior Union” (U.G.B.), a shadowy organization that was a cover for the death squads who came out of the barracks of the armed forces in order to commit their grisly atrocities against members of political organizations. “Enough!” Romero cries. “They are in opposition to the God who is love. “God wants to give us life, and every human being who takes or destroys life by mutilating and torturing and repressing, is revealing to us, by contrast, the divine image of the God of life, the God who respects human freedom”.⁵⁹⁷

The death squads are the torturers and murderers of Christ. Christ is incarnate in the people, and what they do to the people, they do to him. “Every person murdered is a Christ sacrificed whom the Church also venerates”.⁵⁹⁸ “This is the fundamental idea of my preaching. Nothing is as important to me as human life. . . It’s something so serious and so deep, much more than the violation of any other right, because it’s the life of the children of God, and because this blood simply denies love and awakens new hatreds; it makes reconciliation and peace impossible. What we need here and now more than anything is an end to the repression”.⁵⁹⁹

7.2 Non-violence

7.2.1 Violence is inhuman and unchristian

The state is always a coercive power. For a state to function it has to have determined powers of coercion and it has to be able to exercise a certain degree of force, for example, to put a stop to the activities of criminals. Nevertheless, when a state uses unjust and excessive force, damaging the well-being of the people, *salus populi*, there must be protest and resistance against its perverse actions.

In a situation of increasing violence, principally directed by agents of the Salvadorean state against the people’s political organizations, Archbishop Romero stated the Church’s position:

“The Church does not choose these violent paths.”⁶⁰⁰

“Violence and all such tactics do not bring peaceful solutions.”⁶⁰¹

“We do not believe in violence, from whatever side; it is not the proper way to solve the problems of our countries, because we are aware that the Gospel of Christ offers the only valid way to forge a just and human society in which the basic needs of all are satisfied.”⁶⁰²

“Violence is not worthy of us.”⁶⁰³

“Violence is not Christian; it is not human. It’s not by meeting violence with violence that we secure world peace.”⁶⁰⁴

“Violence is inhuman. It is not constructive, but destructive.”⁶⁰⁵

Archbishop Romero bases his assertions quite simply on the Christian ideal that “violence is not Christian nor in accord with the Gospel”.⁶⁰⁶

⁵⁹⁶ Homilies, 29th July 1979, vol. VIII, 121-122

⁵⁹⁷ Homilies, 17th February 1980, vol. VIII, 235

⁵⁹⁸ Homilies, 2nd March 1980, vol. VIII, 292

⁵⁹⁹ Homilies, 16th March 1980, vol. VIII, 349

⁶⁰⁰ Homilies, 29th January 1978, vol. III, 23

⁶⁰¹ Homilies, 7th October 1979, vol. III, 334

⁶⁰² Homilies, 22nd April 1979, vol. VI, 318

⁶⁰³ Homilies, 7th January 1979, vol. VI, 99

⁶⁰⁴ Homilies, 11th May 1977, vol. I-II, 37

⁶⁰⁵ Homilies, 14th August 1977, vol. I-II, 171

⁶⁰⁶ CELAM, *Medellin*, “Paz”, 15

7.2.2 No to hate

The Gospel does not allow hatred even towards one's enemies. "We are Christians and there are no traces of hate or rancour in the soul".⁶⁰⁷ "We condemn the wave of violence, of hate, of calumny, of vengeance which makes the country mourn."⁶⁰⁸ "The Church never preaches hatred. The Church always preaches love".⁶⁰⁹

Archbishop Romero addresses the torturers and murderers, people driven by hatred, pointing out to them that hatred is demonic, and in the end destroys anyone who submits to its power. "Hell begins when hatred begins".⁶¹⁰ Hatred is morally destructive, and so Archbishop Romero advises the people: Don't destroy yourselves in hatred and violence".⁶¹¹

The arrogant torturer, full of resentment, ought to feel ashamed of his acts of cowardice: "Whoever hits a fellow human being always feels shame; he is more humiliated than the person they struck".⁶¹² At least, a torturer ought to feel ashamed of striking a defenceless person, that is, if they had any touch of human feeling in their soul. Torture brutalizes the torturer and dehumanizes the victim. But one thing is sure: God does not side with the arrogant, cowardly torturer: "God does not travel that road, through puddles of blood and marks of torture. God travels on clean roads of hope and love".⁶¹³ God accompanies the defenceless person who is a victim of torture and murder.

At the same time, Archbishop Romero tries to stop the victims being poisoned by the repressive and hateful violence. He tells the Mothers of the Disappeared: "Don't let the serpent of resentment nest in your hearts. There is no greater evil than a resentful heart, not even towards those that tortured your children, not even towards the criminal hands that 'disappeared' them. Don't hate".⁶¹⁴

7.2.3 Violence is an expression of weakness

"Violence that kills is sinful. Violence that kills does not come from God".⁶¹⁵ The solution to the Salvadorean crisis does not lie in sin. Sin only serves to worsen an already serious situation. The real solution lies in love because "it's love and not violence which is the power that is going to set the world to rights".⁶¹⁶ In fact, violence is not a strength, but a weakness. Archbishop Romero underlines the logic of this paradox: "An ideology that depends on violence reveals its own weakness".⁶¹⁷ "We ought also to stress that when an ideology appeals to violence it is recognizing its own inadequacy and weakness".⁶¹⁸ An empty ideology without capacity to reason and dialogue is left morally defeated. "Violence is the most eloquent expression of the fact that a person who kills has no arguments or that their arguments are very weak. Violence is no honour to any movement".⁶¹⁹ In short, violence expresses weakness, shows a lack of rationality and worsens the social situation of injustice.

On the other hand, "love is not weak. Many of those who have placed their trust in violence and hate and believe that this will 'sort out' society are ignoring the fact that strength does not lie in hatred or violence. That is weakness. Strength is love".⁶²⁰

⁶⁰⁷ Homilies, 19th June 1977, vol. I-II, 101

⁶⁰⁸ Homilies, 22nd May 1977, vol. I-II, 57

⁶⁰⁹ Homilies, 6th August 1977, vol. I-II, 15 s ?

⁶¹⁰ Homilies, 10th July 1977, vol. I-II, 126

⁶¹¹ Ibid.

⁶¹² Homilies, 14th August 1977, vol. I-II, 172

⁶¹³ Homilies, 7th August 1977, vol. I-II, 165

⁶¹⁴ Homilies, 1st December 1977, vol. III, 15

⁶¹⁵ Homilies, 14th November 1977, vol. I-II, 235

⁶¹⁶ Homilies, 12th April 1979, vol. VI, 276

⁶¹⁷ Homilies, 27th January 1980, vol. VIII, 204

⁶¹⁸ Homilies, 20th January 1980, vol. VIII, 178

⁶¹⁹ Homilies, 2nd March 1980, vol. VIII, 300

⁶²⁰ Homilies, 13th May 1979, vol. VI, 333

7.2.4 The spiral of violence

“Violence inexorably engenders new forms of oppression and slavery, generally more grievous than those from which they are seeking liberation”.⁶²¹ Archbishop Romero argues that revolutionary violence “generally” produces a greater evil than that which it seeks to eradicate”.⁶²² Medellín emphasizes that this is “generally” the case, while *Evangelii Nuntiandi* declares that the loss and damage caused by revolution are “often” more serious than those they were trying to eradicate.⁶²³ Nevertheless, theoretically, at least, there is a set of conditions that make a popular insurrection legitimate: “where there is manifest, longstanding tyranny which would do great damage to fundamental personal rights and dangerous harm to the common good of the country”.⁶²⁴

Political realism dictates that every revolution brings with it evil and painful sad consequences. A country’s economic activity is paralysed. Civil rights are restricted or abolished. Countless human lives are lost in bloodshed. Would these evils be greater than the evils existing before the insurrection? Would a civil war make an inhuman situation of repression more inhuman? Would the final outcome be a greater evil? Neither Pope Paul VI, nor Archbishop Romero can give us an infallible path to discernment.

Archbishop Romero seeks to stop violence at the root and so prevent its progress or escalation. In fact, it is impossible to apply the principle of proportionality in advance, which is why representatives of the Church will always speak in favour of a little more time and space for dialogue and necessary reforms. They will assert that all peaceful means of solving the conflict have not yet been exhausted. And when history disappoints them, and the people, from their bases of socio-political organization, decide to resort to arms to defend themselves and the tragedy of civil war unfolds, wisdom will dictate the course attempted by Archbishop Rivera Damas, Romero’s successor, to do everything possible to humanize a civil war. In such an extreme situation, the role of the Church is to keep alive the human quality of compassion and to remind the fighters that “the enemy” is also their brother, and public danger can never justify private hatred.

In his analysis in paragraph 31 of *Populorum Progressio*, Pope Paul VI had to review the Church’s tradition on a just war”.⁶²⁵ Accordingly he noted the real threat posed by “the revolutions caused by explosions of despair”.⁶²⁶ “Whole nations... are sorely tempted to redress these insults to their human nature by violent means.”⁶²⁷ The Pope saw in the signs of these times an imminent catastrophe and prudently wanted to avoid it by an appeal to the rich and powerful to share their wealth and power with the excluded and despairing and so avoid the threat that demands for redress would take a violent form.

Archbishop Romero realized that “violence invites more violence,”⁶²⁸ and that the use of violence risks dehumanising a whole nation. “We have become wild animals to each other”⁶²⁹,

⁶²¹ Homilies, 20th January 1980, vol. VIII, 178

⁶²² CELAM, *Medellin*, “Paz”, 19

⁶²³ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 37

⁶²⁴ Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, num 31

⁶²⁵ Saint Augustine, *City of God*, Book 19 c.7; Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 11-11 q 40

⁶²⁶ Paul VI, “Alocución en la Misa del Día del Desarrollo”, Bogotá, 23 agosto 1968, quoted in CELAM, *Iglesia y Liberación Humana*, Barcelona 1969, 297

⁶²⁷ Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, 30

⁶²⁸ Homilies, 28th May 1978, vol. IV, 277

⁶²⁹ Homilies, 14th December 1977, vol. III, 26; In Plato’s *Republic*, para. 566, Socrates speaks of ‘the popular leader’ as “getting an unholy taste for the blood of his fellows...change from man to wolf and make himself tyrant” (*The Republic*, London 1955,

lamented the Archbishop, attempting to calm the frustration and anger of the people, now dangerously muzzled by right-wing repression. But he also criticized the left: “They deify violence as the only source of justice and advocate and practise it as the only method of establishing justice in the country. This pathological mentality makes it impossible to halt the spiral of violence, and feeds on the extreme polarization of the different groups”.⁶³⁰ Archbishop Romero strives to calm passions by appeal to reason: “A Christian has to fight ideas with ideas, and not with violence”.⁶³¹ “Ideas are fought with ideas, not with bombs and weapons”.⁶³²

7.2.5 Institutionalized violence is the primary violence

Archbishop Romero realised that revolutionary violence is a reaction of anger at systematic injustice embodied in the structures and institutions of society: “The privileged, as a group, use all the means at their disposal, to put pressure on the governments and so block necessary changes”.⁶³³ This union of the oligarchy and the government is the epicentre of absolute power and the source of the social injustice and military repression directed at the people’s social and political organizations: “The source of all violence is social injustice and the violation of freedom”.⁶³⁴ The base of all forms of violence is institutionalized violence, the country’s injustice”.⁶³⁵ If we want this violence to stop, all this ill-feeling must stop. We’ve got to get to the root and the root is here: in social injustice”.⁶³⁶

Archbishop Romero repeated this important message about the origin of the violence and the urgent need to seek a solution at the root, “the urgent need to dig up the real root of all the violence”.⁶³⁷ “The root of all violence, of all terrorism, is social injustice”.⁶³⁸

Owing to the frustrating situation of unemployment, underemployment, and hunger, the voice of protest swelled from among the people. The prosperous refused to heed the voice of that suffering; they stifled it with repression, ordering the murders of workers organized in unions and co-operatives to preserve “national security” from the “communists”. But the essential reality is that bloody repression was carried out to protect the private interests and private property of those that opposed the just demands of the mass of the people. The next step in the process was for the repressed to defend themselves with their own violence, an uprising, hoping to assert their demands by force. “The Church defends the just elements in the demands of those who suffer... Repressive violence is not justified”.⁶³⁹

7.2.6 The violence of the insurgency

Archbishop Romero did not support revolutionary violence, but he understood it. He knew that it came as a desperate reaction to the violence of the state, which had separated itself from its people, institutionalizing its arrogance and accumulating for itself what by right was destined for the common good:

p.339). T. Hobbes in *Leviathan*, London 1949, part 1, chapter 13,64 “a time of warre, where every man is Enemy to Every man”. The philosophers translated this maxim into Latin: *Homo homini lupus*, “Every human being is like a wolf to every other.”

⁶³⁰ Homilies, 3rd December 1978, vol. VI, 23

⁶³¹ Homilies, 18th September 1977, vol. I-II, 223

⁶³² Homilies, 4th November 1979, vol. VII, 413

⁶³³ CELAM, *Medellin*, “Paz”, 17

⁶³⁴ Homilies, 8th July 1979, vol. VII, 69

⁶³⁵ Homilies, 2nd September 1979, vol. VII, 222

⁶³⁶ Homilies, 5th March 1979, vol. IV, 56

⁶³⁷ Homilies, 30th September 1979, vol. VII, 310

⁶³⁸ Homilies, 29th January 1978, vol. III, 170

⁶³⁹ Homilies, 22nd April 1979, vol. VI, 121

“There is injustice, an institutionalized violence,... a frenzy to retain power, to maintain control of the economy, and they are capable, in this desire, to maintain their position, of crushing human lives and society as a whole. This is violence, institutionalised violence. It is no surprise that there should be a violent reaction”.⁶⁴⁰

“And it’s natural, sisters and brothers, that in response to institutionalised violence that becomes an institution, and has become a way of life, and refuses to look at ways of changing this institution, it is no surprise that there should be outbreaks of violence”.⁶⁴¹

In October 1979 there was a coup d’état led by progressive young officers, who wanted to democratize the structures of government and carry out an agrarian reform in the Salvadorean countryside. But this attempt at forming a civilian government in collaboration with the people failed. The repression continued as before. José Napoleon Duarte and other members of the Christian Democrat Party (PDC) stayed in office, providing a civilian façade for a brutal military dictatorship while other civilian members of the new government, such as Ungo, Zamora, Colindres and Samayoa, resigned. All except Samayoa fled into exile. Salvador Samayoa, who had been minister of education, joined the insurgency. On this controversial decision Archbishop Romero made the following declaration:

“Mr Samayoa has made his choice in conscience. He will render account to God for his conscientious acts, and we respect that... We must condemn this structure of sin in which we live, this rottenness which, sadly, puts pressure on many people to take such radical and violent options”.⁶⁴²

On preaching on the incident in the Gospel in which James and John, “the sons of thunder”, want to burn down the houses of the Samaritans who refused them hospitality (Lk 9, 51-56), Archbishop Romero explains:

“The Samaritans were political enemies of the Jews... They abused their property rights; they refused to provide accommodation. This is a form of violence..... This violence, “institutionalized violence”⁶⁴³, violence which becomes an institution, the bishops at Medellín said, produces another violence – that of Boanerges”.⁶⁴⁴

In his preaching on non-violence, Archbishop Romero suggested a course of action to the members of the workers’ organizations: “We encourage the cadres to organize in an honourable struggle, with legitimate means of pressure, and not to put their trust in violence, never to let their just demands be poisoned by ideologies of violence”.⁶⁴⁵

After the assassination of Archbishop Romero the situation in El Salvador took a turn for the worse. All hope of saving the country from civil war vanished and, in October 1980, a state of civil war was declared by the revolutionary army of the FMLN.⁶⁴⁶ Faced with this new socio-political reality, the Christian communities felt obliged to recognize the sad reality of civil war in El Salvador:

“Certainly, non-violence had always been our ideal, an ideal we sought to follow. But the Salvadorean situation was so far from that ideal that non-violence alone was not sufficient, even in the name of the Gospel. Our non-violence could not be an excuse for being accomplices of those that defend non-violence while engaging the in the worst forms of violence through their arms race, their economic exploitation, their institutionalised injustice. The violence practised by our people was so clearly a

⁶⁴⁰ Homilies, 13th November 1977, vol. I-II, 315

⁶⁴¹ Homilies, 3rd July 1977, vol. I-II, 117

⁶⁴² Homilies, 13th January 1980, vol. VIII, 156

⁶⁴³ CELAM, *Medellín*, “Paz”, 16

⁶⁴⁴ Homilies, 26th June 1977, vol. I-II, 111

⁶⁴⁵ Homilies, 6th 1978, vol. V, 112

⁶⁴⁶ Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front. Farabundo Martí was shot by the army in San Salvador cemetery after the 1932 uprising.

defensive violence, imposed on us by those who have always been violent, that to deny its legitimacy in the name of the Gospel would be to betray the Gospel itself. The recent history of El Salvador has shown clearly how all ‘peaceful solutions’, demonstrations, reform laws, elections, just demands, had been violently shut down.”⁶⁴⁷

In the end, only God can judge the morality or immorality of the revolutionaries who took up arms against the military repression in the civil war in El Salvador from 1980 until 1992.

In the time of the dirty war, towards the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, the people were faced with systematic genocide. It was a time of deep tragedy and of desperate measures taken to survive. Looking back on that phase in El Salvador’s history, it is difficult to condemn the conscientious position of the insurgency as intrinsically immoral. Their violence was an act of self-defence against the immensely greater violence the agents of the state had initiated. The experience of the people in the social and political organisations told them that all remaining peaceful options had been exhausted if they were to secure a peace based on human and Christian love, with mercy for the suffering people and social justice.

Looking at what happened from a position of solidarity outside the situation of suffering and massacre of the defenceless, and from a later historical situation, one has to admit a certain element of truth in the view (summarised below) of the Jesuit economist Luis de Sebastián. But it has to be borne in mind that he does not speak in situ, that is to say, from a point during the situation of civil war and from the point of view of those who suffered the oppression in their own flesh. Neither ought we to ignore or rationalise away the bloody sacrifice of those Salvadoreans who, in clear conscience (though often with their eyes blurred by tears) took up arms. It would be naïve to recommend to the victimised people a stoic passivity in the face of savage military oppression, because such resignation and conformity means complicity with the oppressors. Moreover, it would be unacceptable to use pious formulas while the people were being pitilessly murdered. Archbishop Romero gave us an example in the case of Salvador Samayoa, when he commented that the insurgents would render account to God of their conscientious actions. So our course must be to respect their decisions, rather than rush in to condemn. This is the analysis of Luis de Sebastián, made from outside the situation of repression and with the benefit of hindsight:

“As regards, revolutionary changes, if by them we mean ‘armed struggle’, it does not seem to be valid for Christians. We have already seen how much blood and how much suffering it produces, which is not justified by the limited achievements obtained. The experience we have reveals how ineffective in the long term in satisfying the basic needs of the people are the regimes produced by armed liberation movements, which have to work in hostile geo-political environments. Let us be more modest: we are not gods and we cannot change history. Only some exceptional person is called, from time to time, to play an exceptional role. Nonetheless, the majority of us may be able to influence our respective societies by means of a cumulative movement in order that they be more human, more just and, finally, more Christian”.⁶⁴⁸

7.3 Violence to oneself

7.3.1 Self-mortification in imitation of Christ’s self-emptying

In his daily life Archbishop Romero imposed on himself a Christian asceticism with the goal of dominating the sinful appetites of the flesh. “A passion, a taste, a whim, leads us to disobey God... How many acts

⁶⁴⁷ Anonymous, *La fe de un pueblo, Historia de una Comunidad Cristiana en El Salvador*, Córdoba 1991, 108

⁶⁴⁸ L.de Sebastian, *Mundo rico mundo pobre (Pobreza y solidaridad en el mundo de hoy)*, Santander 1993, p.15

of violence does one have to do to oneself in order to fulfil the Lord's will?"⁶⁴⁹ Self-discipline of one's own will is recommended to channel those energies towards doing God's will. It's a form of self-denial, detachment, of self-domination:

"Jesus Christ calls us to do violence to ourselves when he says to the man taking leave of his family: 'Let the dead bury their own dead'; that is violence to oneself, letting go of everything. Or when he says to the other: 'No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God'. It's the violence that one has to do to oneself in order not to be content with the mediocrities of life, in order to improve oneself, to be better".⁶⁵⁰

To put it simply, Archbishop Romero was an ascetic. This aspect of his personality stands out in his notes on spirituality in which he outlines the programme of his life as a bishop:

My sensuality: Penance for my excesses

1. First of all, my duty, circumstances, the trials of life, will be my best purgatory.
2. As regards food: a diabetic's diet. Deprive myself of something at every meal, some fasting on the principal vigils (on vigils of the apostles).
3. A "discipline" (a tight garter worn on the knee to cause penitential pain). One hour a day.
4. Discipline every Friday.
5. Keep the siesta short (half an hour). Sometimes sleeping on the floor. Matins at midnight.⁶⁵¹

After Archbishop Romero's assassination, the Vicar General of the Archdiocese, Mgr Ricardo Urioste, entered Archbishop Romero's room and found a "discipline" in a desk drawer.⁶⁵² The use of a "discipline" is common in the spirituality of Opus Dei. For the Archbishop of San Salvador, "the true violence that saves is that which one does to oneself".⁶⁵³

This ascetic spirituality practised by Archbishop Romero was not an end in itself, nor any type of masochism, but a freely chosen method of disciplining himself in the following of the kenotic Christ.

"True freedom is that which does violence to oneself and, like Christ, who almost rejects his sovereignty becomes a slave to serve others".⁶⁵⁴

7.3.2 Let yourself be killed

Through the particularity of the incarnation, God accepts limitation. The Divinity becomes incarnate in a man belonging to a particular culture, a particular language, a particular place. And this is done out of love for humanity. And in addition in Jesus of Nazareth God let himself be killed. This divine self-emptying, to the point of enduring death as a human being, moved Archbishop Romero deeply.

"Perhaps this evening is the most emotive, seeing that a God out of love for me became man and let himself be killed".⁶⁵⁵ Archbishop Romero encourages his listeners to have the bravery to choose to be killed rather than kill someone else. "To each of us Christ is saying: 'If you want your life and mission to bear fruit like mine, change yourself into grain that lets itself be buried, let yourself be killed. Don't be afraid.'"⁶⁵⁶ The meekness of the suffering servant of Yahweh is the model of life for a Christian: "Christ humiliated to the point of the cross. Violent, yes, but towards himself, in order to give his life for others,

⁶⁴⁹ Homilies, 4th June 1978, vol. V, 22

⁶⁵⁰ Homilies, 26th June 1977, vol. I-II, 112

⁶⁵¹ J. Delgado, *Oscar A. Romero, Biografía*, San Salvador 1986, 45-46

⁶⁵² A detail mentioned by Mgr Urioste in a lecture given in San Francisco, Mejicanos, San Salvador, 22nd March 1996

⁶⁵³ Homilies, 9th September 1979, vol. VI, 237

⁶⁵⁴ Homilies, Good Friday, 23rd March 1978, vol. IV, 98

⁶⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁶ Homilies, 1st April 1979, vol. VI, 249

and not to take it from others”.⁶⁵⁷ It is an easy cowardice to kill someone else, but a difficult bravery to let yourself be killed for love of the people:

“The only violence the Gospel accepts is that which one does to oneself. When Christ lets himself be killed; that is violence: to let yourself to be killed. Violence to oneself is more effective than violence to others. It is very easy to kill, especially when you have weapons, but how difficult it is to let yourself be killed for love of the people!”⁶⁵⁸

7.3.3 The violence of love

Love is a greater force than violence. Forgiveness is a greater force than vengeance. “There is a violence that is far superior to the violence of tanks and the violence of guerrillas, and that is the violence of Christ: Father, forgive them, they know not what they do”.⁶⁵⁹

It is paradoxical that love be considered as a violence, a force, a violence capable of assimilating all hate, all vengeance, every act of killing, and come out of it risen and triumphant. If the violent force of love were to fill society completely, there would be an atmosphere of creativity and not an atmosphere of destruction. In such a climate, “victory would go to the violence of love and fraternity that want to turn weaponry into sickles for working the land”.⁶⁶⁰

It is the victims who always achieve the moral victory over their persecutors. It is they who demonstrate true courage in the face of death. Their love is greater than hate; their passive confrontation shows a trust in the transcendence of this world. “They said that it was not that the martyrs lacked courage when they let themselves be killed, but that their situation as victims made them stronger and gave them the victory over their persecutors”.⁶⁶¹

7.4 Peace

7.4.1 The peace of the cemetery is not true peace

It is not enough to define peace in the negative, by what it is not. Peace can only be defined adequately by what it is (or ought to be). In other words, “peace is not the absence of war... Nor is peace the balance between two opposing forces”.⁶⁶² A situation of apparent calm can disguise a sub-current as explosive as a volcano. Two armies that face one another tensely, with hate for each other, do not live in peace, although neither of them has fired a bullet. Peace does not consist of this:

“Peace is more than the absence of war; it cannot be reduced to the maintenance of a balance of power between opposing forces.”⁶⁶³

“Peace is not the absence of war. Peace is not the balance between two forces in conflict. Peace, above all, is not shown by death under repression, when it is impossible to speak – the peace of the graveyards.”⁶⁶⁴

In El Salvador, in the name of national security, and beneath the pretext of conserving public peace, the agents of the Salvadorean state arrested, tortured and murdered the opponents of the military government. The military’s false peace of death, of repressing any political attempt to express social and

⁶⁵⁷ Homilies, 8th April 1979, vol. VI, 262

⁶⁵⁸ Homilies, 12th August 1979, vol. VII, 170

⁶⁵⁹ Homilies, 21st January 1979, vol. VI, 136

⁶⁶⁰ Homilies, 27th November 1977, vol. III, 9

⁶⁶¹ Homilies, 17th September 1978, vol. V, 193

⁶⁶² Homilies, 3rd July 1977, vol. I-II, 116

⁶⁶³ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 78

⁶⁶⁴ Homilies, 14th August 1977, vol. I-II, 173

political demands, of silencing every opposing voice, is condemned emphatically by Archbishop Romero: “We want peace, but not a peace of violence, of the graveyards, of imposition and extortion”.⁶⁶⁵

7.4.2 Opus iustitiae pax

Archbishop Romero followed the teaching of the Church’s magisterium that peace is essentially dynamic: “Just public peace is to be found where people live together in good order and true justice”.⁶⁶⁶ “The true and noble nature of peace, ... a peace based on justice and charity”.⁶⁶⁷ “For peace is not simply the absence of warfare, based on a precarious balance of power; it is fashioned by efforts directed day after day toward the establishment of the ordered universe willed by God, with a more perfect form of justice among men.”⁶⁶⁸

“But it is precisely from this place that the invitation we give to celebrate peace resounds as an invitation to practise justice: ‘justice will bring about peace’ (Cf: Is 32:17). We repeat this today in a more incisive and dynamic formula: ‘If you want peace, work for justice’”.⁶⁶⁹

As a means of developing this message and giving it emphasis, Archbishop Romero used a metaphor from rural life: that of the tree. The fruit of love and peace cannot exist without first receiving the nourishing sap from the root. In the same way, in society there cannot be a situation of love and peace without justice. “Only justice can be the root of peace”.⁶⁷⁰ This teaching has the authority of the Church’s magisterium:

“Pius XII made the motto of his beautiful coat of arms: Opus iustitiae pax – Peace is the fruit of justice”.⁶⁷¹

“Let this also be very clear, sisters and brothers: the voice of the Church is calling for peace, but, as the saintly pontiff Pius XII said “Opus iustitiae pax, peace must only be the fruit of justice and not a fake peace, a silent peace”.⁶⁷²

True peace is fruit and flower, the product of the sap, the resin that flows up from the root of the tree. “Peace is the fruit of justice; peace will be the flower of love and justice in the environment”.⁶⁷³ This peace and this love come only from justice. If that were not the case they would be “a superficial peace and love, a matter of feelings, appearances”.⁶⁷⁴

7.4.3 Peace has to be built continuously through justice

Medellin illustrates this doctrinal point using a comparison taken from the construction of a building. “Peace does not just exist; it has to be built. The Christian is a constructor of peace... An authentic peace implies struggle, inventive capacity, permanent achievement”.⁶⁷⁵ We Christians are the workers in the task of building a peaceful society based on justice. Peace is a gift, and every gift implies a task. A gift from God is always developed through the goodwill and active responsibility of human beings. “Let us love one another. Let us build a society based on peace that is cemented in justice, just as God wants.”⁶⁷⁶

⁶⁶⁵ Homilies, 8th October 1978, vol. V, 233

⁶⁶⁶ Vatican II, *Dignitatis Humanae*, 7

⁶⁶⁷ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 77

⁶⁶⁸ Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, 76

⁶⁶⁹ Homilies, 27th August 1978, vol. V, 158.

⁶⁷⁰ Paul VI, *If you want peace, work for justice*, Message for World Peace Day 1972.

⁶⁷¹ Homilies, 3rd July 1977, vol. I-II, 116

⁶⁷² Ibid.

⁶⁷³ Homilies, 6th January 1978, vol. III, 134

⁶⁷⁴ Homilies, 14th November 1977, vol. I-II, 326

⁶⁷⁵ CELAM, *Medellin*, Paz, 14a; cf Puebla, 1188

⁶⁷⁶ Homilies, 7th May 1978, vol. IV, 248; cf. Is. 32,17

Archbishop Romero goes back to the prophet Isaiah: “Peace can only be the product of justice: *opus iustitiae pax*” (cf Is 32.17).⁶⁷⁷

Archbishop Romero insists that justice is the foundation of peace. He upholds this principle unshakably, because he knows that “silence gives consent”, and that the Church cannot keep silent and be accomplice to a false peace which is the fruit of lies and massacres:

“If what they want is our collaboration in a false ‘peace’, a false order based on repression and fear, we ought to remember that the only peace God wants is one based on truth and justice, and faced with this false alternative our choice is clear. Do not be in any doubt: we will obey the order of God rather than the order of human beings”.⁶⁷⁸

The Government wants to have a situation of falsehood and cover-up, of disappeared people, in which silence is imposed by threats and fear. Courageously, Archbishop Romero rejects this sinful façade:

“There can be no strong peace unless there is truth to sustain it.”⁶⁷⁹

“There can be no peace as long as it is built by repression. There will only be peace when human rights are respected, among which rights is the natural right to engage in politics and in the government of the peoples to work – with the particular gifts God has given us - for the common good of the nation”.⁶⁸⁰

In this declaration Archbishop Romero echoes the teachings of Medellín, which said that:

“Peace . . . presupposes and demands the establishment of a just order in which human beings can be fulfilled as human beings, in which their dignity can be respected, their legitimate aspirations satisfied, their access to the truth recognized, their personal freedom guaranteed, an order in which human beings are not objects, but creators of their own history. Wherever unjust inequalities exist between human beings and nations, peace is under attack.”⁶⁸¹

7.4.4 Truth, freedom and justice precede peace

An atmosphere of truth, of freedom, of justice is essential if there is to be a real, solid, and lasting peace. In an atmosphere laden with sin, in a social situation in which the dignity of the poor is abused with impunity, their freedom of expression is suppressed, their legitimate demands spurned, and their physical, moral and psychological well-being is damaged, in such an atmosphere the Church maintains, “There can be no peace without freedom”.⁶⁸²

There can be no peace if there is no justice. “The main cause of these problems is social injustice... The peace there might have been, which we have lost, cannot come if there is no justice”.⁶⁸³ It is not possible to build a stable house without first laying a solid foundation. It is not possible to have a green and healthy tree without a sound root.

Individual and social harmony and well-being will flourish in a society which carries out the plan of God for his creatures as regards a more equal distribution of creation’s goods. “Peace consists in being in harmony with God’s plan... Peace consists in knowing what God wants of this society, of what God wants of my life, what God wants of the Republic”.⁶⁸⁴

⁶⁷⁷ Homilies, 14th May 1978, vol. IV, 248

⁶⁷⁸ Homilies, 1st July 1979, vol. VII, 53

⁶⁷⁹ Homilies, 30th December 1979, vol. VIII, 103

⁶⁸⁰ Homilies, 26th February 1978, vol. IV, 43

⁶⁸¹ CELAM, *Medellin*, Paz, num 14a

⁶⁸² Homilies, 3rd June 1979, vol. VI, 381

⁶⁸³ Homilies, 2nd September 1979, vol. VII, 220

⁶⁸⁴ Homilies, 14th August 1977, vol. I-II, 172

7.5 Necessary Conflict

7.5.1 Christ the fighter

Historically, it is dangerous to treat as absolute a function of the risen Christ without any reference to Jesus of Nazareth. For instance, it would be an error to treat as absolute the peace-loving Christ without bearing in mind the prophetic denunciation of the preacher from Nazareth who cried, “Woe to you rich!” (Lk.6.24). It would be a distortion of the truth to profess faith in Christ the Reconciler without bearing in mind the historical clash of Jesus with the religious authorities of his time, when he defended the poor. The consequence of this clash was his torture and murder on the cross. If we fail to situate this title Christ the reconciler in its post-Easter context, we will favour the ideologies that portray an absolutely passive Christ who refuses to reject evil, and which forbid all political dissent under the pretext of maintaining ‘law and order’ or ensuring ‘national security’.

7.5.2 Love is partial

Christian love is not neutral, but partial, in favour of the victims of social injustice, and against their exploiters. The Christian ought not to adopt a neutral position towards a situation of evil and sin, because the impoverished and poor are the first to enter the Kingdom of God (Lk 4.18), and we must be in solidarity with them. The Christian must not appeal to Christ the reconciler in order to calm those who are plunged into a situation of exploitation and get them to submit passively to that situation of misery and impoverishment. It is not enough to promise people a world after death without being concerned about a commitment to fight evil in history, here and now.

Following this line of thought, Albert Nolan O.P., a South African theologian, maintains that reconciliation is not an absolute principle because

“there exist conflicts in which one of the sides is right and the other is wrong; conflicts in which one of the sides is unjust and exercises opposition against the other, who is victim of injustice and oppression. In such instances it is a grave error to want to arrive at a consensus and not take sides. The task of Christians does not consist in trying to reconcile good with evil, justice with injustice. On the contrary, the task of Christians consists in eliminating evil, injustice, and sin”.⁶⁸⁵

It can never be God’s will to keep the oppressed silent and passive in a type of imposed pseudo-reconciliation in which justice is absent.

The Dutch theologian Edward Schillebeeckx takes the same position of denouncing the false notion of “reconciliation”, criticising those who declare themselves neutral in the name of love. Schillebeeckx argues that such people are in reality on the side of the oppressors. He ends his reflection on this point by expressing a personal opinion on the role of faith and theology at the end of the second millennium:

“The present-day context in which we speak meaningfully and productively, in a liberating way, about God, is the existential context of oppression and liberation. It is not the only possible context, but in my view without this context all other possible contexts become detached from life and become incredible to many people”.⁶⁸⁶

⁶⁸⁵ Albert Nolan, “Conflicto Social y Amor a Los Enemigos”, José María Vígil (ed.), *La Opción por Los Pobres*, Santander 1991, p. 82.

⁶⁸⁶ E. Schillebeeckx, *Church. The Human Story of God, Collected Works, vol. X*, London and New York 2014, p. 54.

7.5.3 Peace provokes conflict

Faced with a situation of cruel repression carried out by agents of the Salvadorean state, Archbishop Romero understands the need to confront them and to call them to conversion. And if there is no conversion there has to be conflict. “True peace always sows division”.⁶⁸⁷ When the oppressors are challenged, there is inevitably conflict. “The Church is no lover of conflict, but it accepts conflict”.⁶⁸⁸ This historical confrontation is the result of the Church’s opposition to the anti-kingdom, to the sin of idolatry:

“It’s very difficult going about like an eel, fleeing the conflicts that the Word of God will provoke, if truly we are living out that fullness of God’s Kingdom and taking the consequences”.⁶⁸⁹

“The Kingdom of God that is being built in history will inevitably clash with historical realities and this is not meddling in politics, but simply searching for God’s salvation in our history”.⁶⁹⁰

To sum up, without liberation from the sinful situation there can be no reconciliation, only conciliation, which consists of a simple integration without any changes, in an increase of sweet phrases about unity, settling down into a situation of injustice. This conciliation is worthless in both human and Christian terms.

7.5.4 There is no Christian neutrality about sin

In the midst of these conflicts there can either be an option for the oppressed or an option for the oppressors. One has to choose to support good or bad: “Sisters and brothers, do you want to know if your Christianity is authentic? Here is the touchstone: Who do you get on well with?... One day Christ said “I have not come to bring peace, but division”.⁶⁹¹

This paradoxical situation of a peace that brings conflict with it is painful, in no way desirable, but it is necessary:

“It’s not an attempt to challenge anyone; I’m not fighting with anyone... I want to be simply an affirmation. When a person says ‘Yes’ to something he is convinced about, he isn’t starting a confrontation, but simply affirming himself, and, naturally, there are others who don’t think the same as him, and then comes the confrontation, but not because one sets out to look for it”.⁶⁹²

Owing to the option for good against evil, conflict has to express itself historically. This is sadly unavoidable in a situation where sin is rooted. It arises as a consequence of striving to construct true peace:

“In a society, yes, there will be division. So long as there be those, determined on their set path, arbitrary in their thinking, wishing to build peace on foundations of injustice, on selfishness, on repression, on violation of rights (this is not the way to make peace) there will be a fictitious peace”.⁶⁹³

The Church will not be complicit in a sinful situation of cruel repression of the people:

“As long as there are mothers who weep at the disappearance of their sons and daughters, as long as there is torture in our security centres, as long as there are sybaritic excesses in private

⁶⁸⁷ Homilies, 9th April 1978, vol. IV, 147

⁶⁸⁸ Homilies, 4th September 1977, vol. I-II, 208

⁶⁸⁹ Homilies, 30th July 1978, vol. V, 96

⁶⁹⁰ Homilies, 19th November 1978, vol. V, 304

⁶⁹¹ Homilies, 13th November 1977, vol. I-II, 323

⁶⁹² Homilies, 20th August 1978, vol. V, 130

⁶⁹³ Homilies, 14th August 1977, vol. I-II, 173

property, as long as there is this horrifying disorder, sisters and brothers, there cannot be peace and the violence and bloodshed will continue”.⁶⁹⁴

Another important point Archbishop Romero emphasised is that the direct protagonists of this conflict are not the State and the Church, but the State and the people: “Anyone who is in conflict with the people will be in conflict with me”.⁶⁹⁵

7.6 The preferential option for the poor

7.6.1 “You always have the poor with you” (Jn 12.8)

The real presence of the poor in the midst of us, apart from being a challenge to our human and Christian sensibility, is of soteriological importance for those who are not poor. Their presence impels us to create bonds of solidarity, protest, and struggle with them, because poverty is not desirable and is caused by greed and selfishness. The task for human beings and Christians is to produce a better distribution of the world’s resources. It is necessary to protest against egoism which divides society into rich and poor, causing a socio-economic gap which inhumanly excludes the mass of the world’s people while the comfortable become even more prosperous. There are poor because there are rich. There are rich because there are poor. Excessive riches cause excessive poverty. This is not God’s will. God turns lovingly and in an eternally dynamic manner towards the poor because they are poor.

Archbishop Romero uses the biblical term *ptochos*, but not in a demeaning way. He gives them their dignity as privileged persons in the eyes of God, and he encourages and collaborates with them in a sound approach to development leading to integral liberation. He also recognises that the poor are excluded and anonymous. If a rural worker is murdered, the event passes unnoticed, because the worker has no social relevance in the eyes of the world. On the other hand, if a priest is murdered, it is news and reported in the newspapers, because a priest has social status. Someone who has social status has something and so is not poor.

7.6.2 The Christian on the side of the poor

The bishops of Latin America gathered in Puebla, Mexico, proclaimed: “We affirm the need for conversion on the part of the whole Church to a preferential option for the poor, an option aimed at their integral liberation”.⁶⁹⁶ The evangelizing task of the Church includes as intrinsically central to its mission the liberation of all the excluded of the world. This struggle to eliminate the evil of poverty, which is always dehumanizing in its causes and effects, implies bringing the poor themselves to position in which they can shape their own fate. Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, puts it like this:

“In the ultimate instance we will not have an authentic theology of liberation if the poor themselves do not freely raise their voices and express directly and creatively in society and in the breast of God’s people the hope which they bear, and that they themselves gestate their own freedom”.⁶⁹⁷

If we are to be realistic and honest, we have to admit that Gutiérrez’s dream, beautiful as it may be, has not come true, nor does it look likely to do so in the near future. Alistair Kee, twenty years after Gutiérrez’ optimistic claim, argues that theology is not capable of liberating people from being

⁶⁹⁴ Homilies, 25th September 1977, vol. I-II, 240

⁶⁹⁵ Homilies, 20th August 1978, vol. V, 134

⁶⁹⁶ CELAM, *Puebla*, 1134

⁶⁹⁷ G. Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, Salamanca, 1990, 329

dehumanised and enslaved, nor does it need to presume itself capable of doing so.⁶⁹⁸ Kee adds that in our time: “Emancipation from suffering and misery was brought about by medical sciences and not by theology”.⁶⁹⁹

Although Kee is correct in what he says regarding medicine and the emancipation from human suffering, sometimes a humble presence of someone caring for the poor and sharing, more or less, with them can give, at least, a small consolation. This is what Archbishop Romero did: “The God of Jesus Christ, who identified himself with the poor, who gave his life for others; the God who sent his Son Jesus Christ to show an unambiguous preference for the poor, without undervaluing others. He called them all to take sides with the poor in order to be able to do what he did”.⁷⁰⁰

True following of Christ means identifying oneself with the poor, according to one’s circumstances. All of us, without any exception, are called to support the cause of the poor: “How do I behave with a poor person? Because that is where God is. And to the degree that you make contact with a poor person and to the degree of love you show that poor person (or the contempt you show in your contact with them) that’s how you are approaching your God. What you do to the poor person you do to God”.⁷⁰¹

7.6.3 An option for every Christian without exception

The option for the poor is “not exclusive”.⁷⁰² That means that nobody ought to feel excluded from this commitment with the poor. Also, nobody ought to feel themselves included in the Church without this option: “It is inconceivable that anyone should be called Christian without, like Christ, making a preferential option for the poor”.⁷⁰³ Those who claim to be Christians and members of the Church without committing themselves to the cause of the poor are neither Christians nor members of the Church in practice: “The key to understanding the Christian faith is the poor”.⁷⁰⁴ Everyone, without exception, is called from where we are at in life, to make the cause of the poor our cause: “It is an invitation to all social classes, rich and poor, to be concerned, as though it were our own interest, with the poor who are identified with Christ: ‘Whatever you do to them, you do to me’”.⁷⁰⁵ It’s a call to live out fraternity in a human way, without falling into any condescending paternalism: “Don’t give from your great height to those below. The time for paternalism is over. Now is the time for fraternity, feeling that this person is my brother or my sister, that the interest of the rural worker, the person who has nothing, is my interest.”⁷⁰⁶

7.6.4 Let the rich be converted to the side of the poor

The rich exclude themselves from an option for the poor if they themselves exclude themselves by living locked up in avarice without any compassionate openness to their sisters and brothers in need. The Church calls on them to live with austerity, to participate in poverty by sharing their riches. “True poverty is to be concerned preferentially for the poor, as if it were our own cause”.⁷⁰⁷ The rich are called

⁶⁹⁸ A. Kee, *Marx and the failure of Liberation Theology*, London 1990, 192: “We must display some humility and acknowledge that theology cannot liberate people from all that constrains them or dehumanises them, nor need it pretend to do so”.

⁶⁹⁹ Homilies, 27th May 1979, vol. VI, 365

⁷⁰⁰ Homilies, 27th May 1979, vol. VI, 365

⁷⁰¹ Homilies, 5th February 1978, vol. III, 189

⁷⁰² CELAM, *Puebla*, 1165

⁷⁰³ Homilies, 9th September 1979, vol. VII, 263

⁷⁰⁴ Homilies, 17th February 1978, vol. VIII, 232

⁷⁰⁵ Homilies, 14th October 1979, vol. VII, 345

⁷⁰⁶ Homilies, 15th July 1979, vol. VIII, 78

⁷⁰⁷ Homilies, 16th December 1979, vol. VIII, 41

to this “preferential option of solidarity with the poor”.⁷⁰⁸ This has soteriological importance; it has to do with our salvation, because “it is through the poor that Christ saves, all those who want to be saved”.⁷⁰⁹ German theologian Jürgen Moltmann refers to “the judge of the world who is present in concealed form in the poor”.⁷¹⁰ In other words, “The other, the one who is overlooked, the Lazarus before Dives’ door, becomes one like Christ, a saviour and judge”.⁷¹¹ Here and only here is the touchstone, the point of reference for humanity and Christianity. In Christian life there must be an action in favour of the poor prompted by human compassion. This is the dominant theme of the Archbishop of San Salvador’s preaching and pastoral ministry: “The priest, voice of the Church, is love, if he takes the side of the poor, in a preferential option, not to exclude the prosperous, but to tell them that they cannot be saved as long as they do not place themselves in a position where they feel as their own the anguish of the poor”.⁷¹²

7.6.5 Christ is in the poor

“The poor represent Jesus”,⁷¹³ and therefore “the Church will not abandon the poor”.⁷¹⁴ It is its duty to stand by them. “The Church must sustain preferentially the weakest and most excluded”,⁷¹⁵ “stand in solidarity alongside those who suffer to say to them, ‘Cheer up!’”⁷¹⁶ “The Church is obliged to fulfil this duty of accompanying the poor, of being the voice of those who have no voice”.⁷¹⁷ The poor are “God’s favourites”,⁷¹⁸ and although the Church feels herself a sister to everyone, she feels herself a sister “especially of those who suffer poverty, torture, rejection”.⁷¹⁹ The Church’s aim is to restore the dignity of the human being abused and humiliated by the powerful. “We have to ensure that justice (the respect and dignity of people, even the lowliest labourers) be respected, because that is the Lord’s will”.⁷²⁰ The Lord’s will is that all his creatures should have sufficient food to sustain themselves, that everyone, without exception can participate in the multiplication of the loaves at the table of creation: “Starving masses! That is literally what we have in El Salvador”.⁷²¹ Decent work with pay sufficient to live comfortably, without material need, is a prerequisite for the human condition. All human beings have the right to work and earn enough for their sustenance and personal development. It is unjust that some have more than enough while others go hungry, because all of us are human beings, sisters and brothers, children of the same Father, God, and therefore all ought to share the same human dignity, at the same table of creation, without feeling superior or inferior to one another. No human being is superior in humanity to another; we are all equal, all mortal beings. “For God there are not some people who sit at the table, and some who wait like dogs for the crumbs; in God’s eyes all are guests at the great banquet of life that he has served us”.⁷²² In El Salvador’s rural areas a genuine agrarian reform is an urgent need:

⁷⁰⁸ Homilies, 1st July 1979, vol. VII, 47

⁷⁰⁹ Homilies, 17th February 1980, 242

⁷¹⁰ J. Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, London 1977, p. 128.

⁷¹¹ Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, p. 127.

⁷¹² Homilies, 21st June 1979, vol. VII, 9

⁷¹³ Homilies, 30th September 1979, vol. VII, 314

⁷¹⁴ Homilies, 28th October 1979, vol. VII, 390

⁷¹⁵ Homilies, 5th March 1978, vol. IV, 54

⁷¹⁶ Homilies, 22nd April 1979, vol. VI, 313

⁷¹⁷ Homilies, 15th May 1979, vol. VI, 335

⁷¹⁸ CELAM, *Puebla*, 1143, quoting Pope John Paul II

⁷¹⁹ Homilies, 22nd May 1977, vol. I-II, 60

⁷²⁰ Homilies, 16th October 1977, vol. I-II, 275

⁷²¹ Homilies, 29th July 1979, vol. VIII, 120

⁷²² Homilies, 9th October 1977, vol. I-II, 271

“Our people are hungry, they need land to work, they need partners in dialogue to find a solution to their problems”.⁷²³

7.6.6 Support for the workers’ just demands

Luxury and destitution co-exist: “While a few enjoy the maximum possibility to choose, many lack, almost completely, any possibility of acting on their own initiative and responsibility, often finding themselves living and working in conditions unworthy of a human person”.⁷²⁴ The Church is in solidarity with the exploited and so “the Church will always be on the side of the workers’ just demands”.⁷²⁵ If the rural and urban workers had the opportunity to work in decent conditions and earn a just wage, they would be in an adequate position to progress in life independently. Archbishop Romero supports the workers in their justifiable complaints. “My position as pastor obliges me to be in solidarity with all those who suffer and support every effort to ensure the freedom and dignity of human beings”.⁷²⁶ Nonetheless, although Archbishop Romero backs the exploited, his backing is critical and always based on the values of the Gospel. This means that he does not gloss over the sinful or dishonest behaviour of the poor. He supports them “but not with vices, not in your excesses, but I say to you, too, change your behaviour, try to get on in life, work, give up vices and become real men”.⁷²⁷

7.6.7 The option for the poor leads to persecution

The consequence of the option for the poor adopted by the Church is persecution. The Puebla conference of Latin American bishops recognizes this: “The Church’s prophetic denunciations and its concrete commitments to the poor have in not a few instances brought down persecution and oppression of various kinds upon it”.⁷²⁸ The Church of San Salvador suffered persecution for its commitment to the cause of the poor. This persecution at the hands of the agents of the State is a sign of a life lived in accordance with the beatitudes and therefore, paradoxically, a reason for rejoicing: “I am happy, sisters and brothers that our Church should be persecuted precisely for its preferential option for the poor and for trying to incarnate itself in the interests of the poor”.⁷²⁹

7.7 The Political Organization of the Poor and the Poor in Spirit

A phenomenon of the 1960s and 1970s in El Salvador was the increasing political consciousness of the Salvadorean people. The poor, with a sense of self-esteem and consciousness of their own dignity, joined co-operatives and unions to secure their objectives of social justice, realising the strength there is in unity. Despite the years of oppression, torture, and assassination, these movements survived and remain a very important force. “The peoples are united like the kernels in a cob”⁷³⁰ In these words José María Hernández proclaims the ideal of the socio-political organizations in Latin America. If we are to be realistic, we have to admit that in these years the political and trade union left, in El Salvador at least, tended to suffer from internal fragmentation, that is to say, sectarianism in parties and organizations.

This lack of cohesion deprived them of political force. A Spanish theologian, José Ignacio González Faus, has described this fragmentation as “the ridiculous allergies and unforgiveable

⁷²³ Homilies, 19th March 1978, vol. IV, 78

⁷²⁴ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 63

⁷²⁵ Homilies, 22nd April 1979, vol. VI, 325

⁷²⁶ Homilies, 7th January 1979, vol. VI, 313

⁷²⁷ Homilies, 16th October 1977, vol. I-II, 282

⁷²⁸ CELAM, *Puebla*, 1138

⁷²⁹ Homilies, 15th July 1979, vol. VII, 79

⁷³⁰ J. M. Hernández, *Los profetas bíblicos en Centroamérica*, San José 1992, 155

squabbles”⁷³¹ that set the left-wing groups against each other. González Faus added salt to the wound with his comment that “the Salvadorean left is still a huge acronym soup, far too big for such a small soup dish”.⁷³² And given that all political activity is a quest for power, the lack of unity of the popular organizations in El Salvador proceeds from “personal sins, each one wanting more power than the other”.⁷³³

Despite these divisive ambitions and other human failings, the people’s organizations are – although not exclusively – those poor in spirit. They are those who advance from the bottom of society and struggle to bring about a humanization of economic, political, and social structures that oppress the poorest. They fight to improve working conditions and increase salaries in the factories, in the coffee fields, and in other sectors, in an attempt to secure lives without hunger and desperate poverty for the masses who daily struggle to survive.

7.7.1 The right of free association

Archbishop Romero quotes Article 191 of the Salvadorean constitution on the right of workers to free association in defence of their own interests. He also quotes Article 192 which recognises the right of workers to strike in the last resort to secure their just demands. Archbishop Romero maintains that “the right to form trade unions is recognised as a social right.”⁷³⁴ The Catholic Church, in its official teaching, supports the inalienable right of free association and urges governments to establish “a politico-juridical order in which the rights of the human person in public life will be better protected – for example, the right of free assembly and association, the right to express one’s opinions”.⁷³⁵ Archbishop Romero validates this right by reference to papal teaching: “The Pope also said that rural workers ought to have a say in political decisions”.⁷³⁶

Despite pleas and arguments, the Salvadorean government intensified the injustice and repression against the political organisations of the poor, forbidding them “the natural right to take part in politics”,⁷³⁷ and to contribute to the common good of the nation. “Every person is free to choose the political path by which they want to help their country. They have a right to organise with others who have the same ideas about the paths to true liberation”.⁷³⁸ But this right was not respected in practice.

7.7.2 The Church backs the popular organizations without identifying with them

Archbishop Romero insisted categorically that “the Church maintains its autonomy, its independence from any party and any ideology”.⁷³⁹ “The Church has no systems. The Church has no methods. The Church only has Christian inspiration, an obligation of charity that urges her to side with those suffering injustices and to help the people with their just demands”.⁷⁴⁰ The attitude of the Church reflects the spirit of Jesus, summed up in the beatitudes, and Christians who are poor in spirit and involved in the popular organizations, if they try to live in a Christian manner, will model their political struggle on this Gospel programme. This will distinguish them from those who are not followers of Jesus Christ:

⁷³¹ J.I. González Faus, *Paseo por la resurrección y la muerte*, Santander, 1980, 52

⁷³² González Faus, 53

⁷³³ Ibid.

⁷³⁴ Homilies, 1st September 1978, vol. V, 174

⁷³⁵ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 73; cf. CELAM, *Medellin*, “Justicia”, 12

⁷³⁶ Homilies, 22nd July 1979, vol. VII, 127

⁷³⁷ Homilies, 26th February 1978, vol. IV, 43

⁷³⁸ Homilies, 9th July 1978, vol. V, 58

⁷³⁹ Homilies, 5th March 1978, vol. IV, 57

⁷⁴⁰ Homilies, 16th April 1978, vol. IV, 166

“Sisters and brothers, bear in mind the attitudes the Church teaches her children. In your personal choices, you are free to join any group you like, but if you want to give the name ‘Christian’ to those groups, you have to keep deep in your hearts these sentiments of the beatitudes”.⁷⁴¹

Archbishop Romero called on those Christians involved in the people’s organizations to be “faithful to what the Church teaches”.⁷⁴² Individual Christian citizens should take the responsibility of acting in accordance with the teaching of the Gospel set out in the Church’s doctrine. Nonetheless, although Catholics form the majority of the organizations, “Let this be very clear: FECAS and UTC are not the Church”.⁷⁴³ But “the sin lies not in political organization. The sin, for a Christian, is to lose God’s perspective”.⁷⁴⁴ Archbishop Romero did not want the Church as an organization to be manipulated politically. He tried to keep a respectful distance so that the Church’s name should not be involved in violent protests, acts of corruption and other sinful excesses particular organizations might commit: “The Church has to be very much in possession of herself... What good does it do to plague victims if the doctor catches the plague? I am not saying that all the organizations are ill - this is simply a comparison to tell you that the Church must first define her mission very clearly.”⁷⁴⁵

7.7.3 Popular organizations are not the only way to fight for justice

In size the Church is much bigger than any popular organization, but the people is bigger than the Church. The Church, the people’s organizations, and the people itself are not identical. Archbishop Romero distinguished between the people’s organizations, the Church, and the people as a whole. “The people is much broader than a political organization”.⁷⁴⁶ Therefore, it is morally wrong to force a citizen to join a people’s organization against his or her free will: “No one is obliged to be a member; membership has to be a free choice”.⁷⁴⁷ The field of political organization is not the only way to work for justice: “Nor is the political channel the only one that leads to work for justice”.⁷⁴⁸ Archbishop Romero gave the members of the socio-political organizations a good telling-off and invited them to be more modest and less boastful, more down-to-earth: “Don’t become fanatical. Not everyone is a member of an organisation or thinks like you. There are wider visions of politics than a particular political action someone has taken”.⁷⁴⁹ You can work for justice without being a member of a popular organization.

7.7.4 The Church backs the just demands of the people’s organizations

Unity is strength. Isolated voices are like voices tossed by the wind. The Church recommends and invites the people to organize themselves to demand their rights without violence. It does not force anyone to get organized politically, against their conscience; nonetheless it recognizes that “a people disorganized is a mass that can be manipulated, but a people that organizes and defends its values, its justice, is a people that wins respect”.⁷⁵⁰

⁷⁴¹ Homilies, 1st November 1977, vol. I-II, 302

⁷⁴² Homilies, 12th February 1978, vol. IV, 11

⁷⁴³ Homilies, 2nd April 1978, vol. IV, 131. FECAS was the Christian Federation of Salvadorean Rural Workers and the UTC was the Union of Rural Workers.

⁷⁴⁴ Homilies, 16th September 1979, vol. VII, 261

⁷⁴⁵ Homilies, 10th September 1978, vol. V, 174

⁷⁴⁶ Homilies, 28th October 1979, vol. VII, 261

⁷⁴⁷ Homilies, 4th June 1978, vol. V, 110

⁷⁴⁸ Homilies, 6th August 1978, vol. V, 110

⁷⁴⁹ Homilies, 13th January 1980, vol. VIII, 154

⁷⁵⁰ Homilies, 2nd March 1980, vol. VIII, 301

Archbishop Romero brought dignity to the poor people who organized. “The Church is not ashamed that its communities have produced people restless socially and politically”.⁷⁵¹ The Church plays the role of a wise mother and housewife who teaches her children well, giving them awareness and responsibility so that they can go out and work honourably in the world. She is proud to have Christian citizens in the ranks of the people’s organizations. Nonetheless, she refuses to treat all the organizations and all their actions as above criticism. “We are not defending each and every organization... Not everything is allowed”.⁷⁵² To state it clearly, “the Church defends the right of a person to join an organization... if the ends that person seeks are honest and good, be they for material survival, be they to put bread on the table, be they, to improve people’s conditions”.⁷⁵³ The Church makes its support and help conditional on an organization working honourably for a just end. At the same time it is important to recognize that the Church backs the organizations without trying to gain converts. Catholics who are members of the organization need not be explicit regarding their faith or love for the Church as a condition of ecclesial support for the organizations: “Even if the popular political organizations abandon the Church and criticise it, the Church will continue to support what is just in all of the organizations. The Church accompanies them. . .”⁷⁵⁴ The Church does not seek flattery for itself; it seeks truth and justice. It is prepared to accept correct criticism of its sins and failings from the popular organizations. Nonetheless, Archbishop Romero insisted that the criticism should be mutual. He told the organizations: “I want to maintain my autonomy to criticise all the abuses within your organizations, and condemn whatever starts to become idolatry of the organization.”⁷⁵⁵

7.7.5 Abuses and massacres of the organized poor

Archbishop Romero commented that the objective of a group ought to be that the people can better defend their rights with methods that are within “the limits of the natural law and the law of the Gospel”.⁷⁵⁶ In opposition to this peaceful position, the forces of repression and assassination, whose aim was to crush the popular organizations, showed respect neither for the law of God or for that of human beings. Archbishop Romero lamented the litany of sufferings inflicted on the organized poor:

“Their houses have been ransacked, in some cases set on fire, their livestock has been stolen or slaughtered, their corn destroyed, and countless other things have been done to these poor people, whose only ‘crime’ is being poor and being organized”.⁷⁵⁷ It was the poor in spirit, organized socio-politically, that the military persecuted. The bourgeois poor or the poor with no political awareness were not objects of persecution.

The week following this homily, things got worse. Archbishop Romero put into words his deep sadness at the deadly destiny of the poor people who had formed political organizations. While the agents of the Salvadorean state perpetrated cruel massacres on the poor in spirit, the Archbishop hoped and prayed that so much blood sacrificed in order to achieve the humanization of society, so much grief caused in households in the question for the liberation of the people, might not be in vain:

“As pastor and as a Salvadorean citizen, I am deeply grieved at the continued massacres of the organized sector of our people simply because they came on to the streets in an orderly way to

⁷⁵¹ Homilies, 10th September 1978, vol. V, 174

⁷⁵² Homilies, 27th August 1978, vol. V, 153

⁷⁵³ Homilies, 10th September 1978, vol. V, 174

⁷⁵⁴ Homilies, 29th July 1979, vol. VII, 127

⁷⁵⁵ Homilies, 16th December 1979, vol. VII, 49

⁷⁵⁶ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 74

⁷⁵⁷ Homilies, 20th January 1980, vol. VIII, 176

ask for justice and freedom. I am sure that so much bloodshed and so much pain caused to the relatives of so many victims will not be in vain”.⁷⁵⁸

7.8 The sleeping poor

A category of the poor criticized by Archbishop Romero are those who stayed ‘asleep’. He encouraged them to abandon their slavery and tried to shake them out of their stupor. He wanted the “sleeping” poor to wake up and begin to work for their own benefit and the benefit of their people instead of accepting a life of hardship.

7.8.1 No to opium

Archbishop Romero rejected what he called the “massification” of an inert and unaware people that made no effort to rise out its poverty. For him this mass was not the real people. “The massification is frightening”.⁷⁵⁹ “The Church does not want masses, it wants a people.”⁷⁶⁰ For the rural people in Latin America, the word “mass” evokes the corn paste which is kneaded in the palms of their hands before being roasted, something pliable that does not react. The Church is saying, “Don’t be unconscious corn paste to be kneaded by someone else’s hands. Take control of your life. Protest against humiliation and injustice, but do so peacefully. Create more space for yourselves”. Of course the rich and powerful do not like initiative: “The Church, therefore, suffers conflicts, because it tries to improve people’s conditions, and tell them: ‘You are equal to everyone else. You have the same rights as all your sisters and brothers.’ The Church keeps on working for them to stop them being a sleeping mass and become shapers of our country’s future.”⁷⁶¹ We are all sisters and brothers of equal dignity, because God is our Father, Mother, and loving Creator.

The Church does not give ‘opium’ to put the poor to sleep and alienate them from their historical commitment. Quite the contrary. The Church claims to be more efficient in promoting human development than Marxism or any other ideology, because within herself the Church rejoices in the presence of Jesus Christ crucified and risen: “The Church awakens consciousness much better than any ideology on earth, with a vision of an eternity, a hope, that makes a person more energetic in shaping his or her destiny and that of their community”.⁷⁶² The incentive of eternity should stimulate Christians to commit themselves to temporal tasks.

7.8.2 No to “Egypt”

Despite wasting energy and words in the hope of awakening and illuminating the sleeping poor, many of them prefer to stay in idle ignorance and reject any enlightenment. They resemble the prisoners in Plato’s dark cave who do not wish to untie themselves in order to come out to the light.⁷⁶³ They prefer to remain immobile, asleep, without wanting to take the slightest risk. This lack of commitment is frustrating for those who seek the liberation of the whole people:

“How difficult it is to guide a people! More often than not they prefer slavery in Egypt: ‘We were far better off there, with our cooking pots, our masters, the snakes –everything in Egypt

⁷⁵⁸ Homilies, 27th January 1980, vol. VIII, 202

⁷⁵⁹ Homilies, 11th March 1979, vol. VI, 198

⁷⁶⁰ Homilies, 15th January 1978, vol. III, 152

⁷⁶¹ Homilies, 5th February 1978, vol. III, 190

⁷⁶² Homilies, 28th August 1977, vol. I-II, 194

⁷⁶³ Plato, *The Republic*, Book 7

was much better than this desert where we're dying of hunger and thirst'. How difficult it is for the people to understand the way to freedom!"⁷⁶⁴

Archbishop Romero tried to inspire all the poor to accept the responsibility of changing their situation of desperate poverty into something more human. But many people didn't want change. They didn't think of how they lived day by day, and weren't aware of their own suffering and their precarious economic situation. Archbishop Romero wanted them to know that their attitude of, 'That's how it is; that's how it always will be,' was not good enough. "How sad are a people that have got used to slavery! They prefer the onion pots to the sun of freedom. They don't want to have to endure the difficult crossing of the desert. All freedom involves sacrifice".⁷⁶⁵

7.8.3 The sin of passivity

The sin of passivity, putting up with things, is a sin of omission. It means not valuing yourself as a creature of God with a life worth living. It is despising God's creation, of which human beings are the crown. It is to ignore our adoption that makes us all daughters and sons of God. Romero tells these "sleeping poor":

"You do not understand your dignity... You don't struggle to understand what your dignity entails and work to improve yourselves. All those who go to sleep and don't worry, as if others will work out their destiny for them, are sinning... Don't go to sleep. You are a child of God. Work for your dignity. Be the architect of your own destiny. Work for your own part of the common good".⁷⁶⁶

This sin of passivity becomes blasphemy against God the loving Creator when the poor person in their sleep says that his or her life of poverty is God's will.

"The person who puts up with things is a pessimist, a determinist who believes that everything comes to him 'from above' and that he has no say in it. It's a false concept, and I would say to him, 'Blasphemer of God's will! Anyone who doesn't want to escape from their situation of oppression or exclusion and believes that this is God's will is offending God. God doesn't want social injustice!'"⁷⁶⁷

7.8.4 The Church, awakener of the poor

A vital function of the Church is to enlighten its faithful so that they can act justly, with the objective of obtaining for all the people their most fundamental rights, such as land, decent work with decent pay, adequate housing, sufficient clean water, health and education. That is to say, the Church works alongside the people in their struggle for the material and spiritual goods necessary for their development as God's creatures:

"Human promotion entails activities that help to arouse human awareness in every dimension and to make human beings themselves the active protagonists of their own human and Christian development. It educates people in living together, it gives impetus to organization, it fosters a Christian sharing of goods, and is an effective aid to communion and participation."⁷⁶⁸

This Church is dynamic and inspires a spirit of sharing in every sphere of human life so that each family and community can prosper in an atmosphere of just and constructive peace.

⁷⁶⁴ Homilies, 25th March 1979, vol. VI, 229

⁷⁶⁵ Homilies, 5th August 1979, vol. VII, 137

⁷⁶⁶ Homilies, 24th July 1977, vol. I-II, 141

⁷⁶⁷ Homilies, 16th December 1979, vol. VIII, 40

⁷⁶⁸ CELAM, *Puebla*, 477

“The Church is not opium. The Church stimulates, the Church pushes us to live that holy aggressiveness that God has given to every human being. But it is an aggressiveness that we have to be able to direct properly, with reference to Christ, not for destruction, but to build. The cross, you see, is not patience without courage; it is not passivity, it is not an unresisting acceptance of the status quo.”⁷⁶⁹

The Church awakens people, shaking passive people out of their sleep:

“Sisters and brothers, it’s a real pleasure for me to belong to this Church which is creating awareness among rural and urban workers... so that they can be creators of their own destiny, and stop being a sleeping mass, and be men and women who are able to think and make demands”.⁷⁷⁰

Simple people with no formal education are not stupid. They are people capable of thinking and of grasping the situation that surrounds them. All that is needed is to hone their consciousness and let the mental fog dissipate when they come into contact with the poverty of everyday life. If they do not wake up, they and their children are condemned to exist passively in a sub-human life: “If there is not a very sensitive, very clear criterion in people’s awareness, they live on hand-outs”.⁷⁷¹

7.8.5 The Church promotes the well-being of the poor

Those who refuse to think and who refuse to demand a decent life for themselves and for all those plunged into misery are as sinful as their exploiters:

“Exclusion, hunger, illiteracy, malnutrition, are the result of sin in society, the sin of those that accumulate wealth and have nothing for anyone else, and also the sin of those who have nothing and do not strive to better their living conditions. They are passive idlers; they don’t fight to get on”.⁷⁷²

In the same breath Archbishop Romero denounces the exploiters and the exploited poor who refuse to open their eyes and take responsibility for changing the situation of social injustice. Exploiters and exploited, with their arms crossed on their chest like the dead, are both sinners: “A political class that abuses its power, a selfish capitalism that almost worships money, and poor people who don’t want to improve themselves and decide their own fate: both these groups are sinners of our time.”⁷⁷³

The Church encourages these sleeping poor to be converted, to remake their lives, to recover their stolen dignity, to live as builders of a more human society, with more love, more justice. If they don’t help, they make things worse, because trying to be neutral is a moral evil: “The poor too have to be converted... Those poor people who have no wish to improve themselves, who live in idleness, who make no attempt to remake their lives and live as God’s children, they are also collaborating with the situation of social injustice, and the Church preaches advancement”.⁷⁷⁴

7.9 The “bourgeois” poor

Jürgen Moltmann, the Lutheran theologian, describes how riches “extend from economic exploitation, by way of social supremacy, to the complacency of the people who look after themselves in every sector of life, ignore the rights of others and do not want to have to say thank you to anyone for anything”.⁷⁷⁵

⁷⁶⁹ Homilies, 3rd September 1978, vol. V, 160

⁷⁷⁰ Homilies, 13th November 1977, vol. I-II, 317

⁷⁷¹ Homilies, 9th October 1977, vol. I-II, 266

⁷⁷² Ibid.

⁷⁷³ Homilies, 28th August 1977, vol. I-II, 196

⁷⁷⁴ Homilies, 6th August 1977, vol. I-II, 156

⁷⁷⁵ J. Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, London 1977, p. 79

This concise description of attitudes such as greed, arrogance and scorn towards others, frequent in those that worship riches, reflects what Archbishop Romero has to say about those ‘poor’ people who adopt the attitudes of the rich.

Archbishop Romero maintained that greed is basically an inner attitude with outward manifestations, and does not depend on the quantity of riches a person possesses: “At the same time, those with little can be so attached to their possessions that they don’t have the poor person’s freedom”.⁷⁷⁶ Truly poor people with a spirit of openness are concerned about others in their community and their country and want to contribute to their well-being. They generously share the little they have and are not slaves to material possessions. They are people free in love for their neighbour.

Archbishop Romero commented on the paradox of ‘the poor who are not poor’, a phrase he used to describe the poor who internalize the attitudes of the rich. He illustrated this phenomenon by quoting the Puebla conference of Latin American bishops: “Evangelical poverty combines the attitude of trusting confidence in God with a plain, sober and austere life that dispels the temptation to greed and haughty pride.”⁷⁷⁷ Greed creates an attitude of enclosed self-sufficiency, which encourages pride. Greed and pride are the opposite of that openness of the person who trusts in God and has no trust in fleeting possessions. People who place their trust in God can happily live in simplicity, sobriety and austerity. Archbishop Romero criticized the closed attitude of the nominally poor who have the attitudes of the rich: “Here is the core evil of our enslavement: greed and pride. These are not just attitudes of those who have money, but also of the poor who are not poor”.⁷⁷⁸

The poor person who feels envy of the rich and hates them is not a true poor person possessed by the spirit of love. Through envies and hatreds such a person descends to the abysmal depth of the proud rich man who scorns the poor person. The real poor person is not enslaved by the evil spirit of resentment and envy. They are free from any feelings of base vengeance: “There are poor people who are not inwardly free; they are grasping, hate the wealthy, and are resentful. This has nothing to do with liberation from poverty. It is not enough to be poor because you have no possessions; the truly poor person has broken the inner chains.”⁷⁷⁹

7.10 Corrupt Legislation

7.10.1 The State belongs to all its citizens

Following the Gospel word for word, Archbishop Romero maintained categorically “The law is made for humankind and not humankind for the law”.⁷⁸⁰ With this statement he denounced a legal system in which the selfish interests of the rich and powerful are given priority over the vital necessities of the majority. This turns the law into an instrument of rigid control completely enslaving the weak of society. The legal system comes to be an instrument of “enslavement” and not of “salvation”.⁷⁸¹ A state belonging exclusively to the powerful of society does not respect or meet the needs of its weak and dispossessed citizens. In defence of these groups, disadvantaged by a state biased in favour of the powerful, Archbishop Romero raises his voice:

“We have often said to the President of the Supreme Court of Justice that his role in our country is fundamental and that his neglect in so urgent a matter will go down in history.”⁷⁸²

⁷⁷⁶ Homilies, 15th July 1979, vol. VII, 77

⁷⁷⁷ CELAM, *Puebla*, 1149

⁷⁷⁸ Homilies, 11th November 1979, vol. III, 424

⁷⁷⁹ Homilies, 15th July 1979, vol. VII, 77

⁷⁸⁰ Homilies, 9th December 1979, vol. VII, 32; cf MK 2.27

⁷⁸¹ Cf. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1282b, 16-18

⁷⁸² Homilies, 29th July 1979, vol. VII, 129

“I call on the Supreme Court of Justice to deliver more authentic justice, so that justice doesn’t become like the communications media – totally biased”.⁷⁸³

The owners of the laws also owned the media. The press, radio, television and the message these media transmitted was under their control. The owners of the media distorted the truth to reflect only their own oligarchic interests. In the same way laws were written and promulgated by them and for them. Archbishop Romero protested vigorously against this bias pervading the legal system:

“Let the laws not be solely the mouthpiece of an affluent class and the worker go unheeded, but let the law listen to them both. When that happens, the Church will recognize the laws as coming from God and say, ‘Obey them, workers and bosses’. But they must also be laws defined in accordance with Thomas Aquinas’ definition. He says. ‘The law is an ordinance of reason for the one who uses his power for the common good.’ So long as these conditions are not met, the law is not law. It’s partiality”.⁷⁸⁴

7.10.2 The common good means protecting the poor

Thomas Aquinas emphasizes that the common good implies the defence and liberation of the poor. The “Prince” (in El Salvador today this would be the National Assembly) is obliged to promote the cause of the defenceless within society. Aquinas puts it like this: “The care of the common weal is committed to those who are in authority; it is their business to watch over the common weal of the city, kingdom or province subject to them... It is said to those who are in authority (Ps. 82:4): ‘Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.’”⁷⁸⁵ The problem arises when the “Prince” or the state is repressive against their own people, when the state radically damages the common good: “The purpose of the civil authority [is] the care of the common good”,⁷⁸⁶ and when the government, which is the executive power of the State, does not perform this duty of defending the poor and unprotected this gives rise to a clash with the Church because “by virtue of the Gospel entrusted to it, the Church proclaims human rights”.⁷⁸⁷ A legitimate state promotes human rights and protects its citizens.

7.10.3 What makes true law

Archbishop Romero quotes Aquinas’ teaching to list the elements which constitute true law. First, “Law is an ordinance of reason, *ordinatio rationis*, which means that law is not the result of arbitrariness or whim.”⁷⁸⁸ This means that true law has its foundation in social justice, not in the devices of the powerful looking to defend their own interests. Secondly, “It has to be the common good that is sought..., the happiness, the good, the freedom, the dignity of all, rich and poor”.⁷⁸⁹ Thirdly, the legislator must be a righteous person who cares for the community with compassion, decreeing, through laws, what protects, helps, and promotes all citizens, especially the most vulnerable. The legislator cares for the community without this protection ever turning into overweening and dictatorial control. Thus, “only if this legislation is the echo of the community does it have force of law”.⁷⁹⁰ And so true law must be promulgated, that is, “conveyed to that community so that they can take note of it, analyse it and accept it”.⁷⁹¹ If a law of the State does not fulfil these conditions, it is not a true law and not morally binding.

⁷⁸³ Homilies, 2nd April 1978, vol. IV, 130

⁷⁸⁴ Homilies, 13th November 1977, vol. I-II, 318; cf St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III, Part II-II, q. 104.

⁷⁸⁵ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica II*, 940, art. 1

⁷⁸⁶ Vatican II *Dignitatis Humanae*, 3

⁷⁸⁷ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 41

⁷⁸⁸ Homilies, 27th November 1977, vol. III, 3

⁷⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁹¹ Homilies, 27th November 1977, vol. III, 3

7.10.4 The Public Order Law

From the beginning, Archbishop Romero opposed the Public Order Law, which gave the security forces freedom to act with impunity, arresting, imprisoning, torturing and ‘disappearing’ members of the people’s organizations, of trade unions, co-operatives and left-wing political parties. The Archbishop declared this law to be “wicked”,⁷⁹² and condemned, for instance, the fact that the magistrates of first instance did not allow the accused to be assisted by their lawyers”,⁷⁹³ and that “justice was not done when prisoners complained in court that they had been tortured by the security forces and paramilitaries”.⁷⁹⁴ Nothing can justify such cruelty by one human being to another, such criminality by someone powerful crushing someone weak. Because it is unjust, the Public Order “Law” is not a true law.

Such barbarity on the part of the security forces had the effect of igniting and spreading violent insurgency and led to the outbreak of civil war:

“It frightens me, sisters and brothers, when repressive laws or violent attitudes are blocking the legitimate channels of protest. If these escape valves are removed, what happens to the cauldron when it boils and there are no escape valves? It may well explode. There is still time, time to give our people’s voice the expression they desire.”⁷⁹⁵

7.10.5 A law without Christ, without God, without love

The law in El Salvador did not operate in accordance with the common good, and for this Archbishop Romero denounced the legislators: “Here a handful of people only want legislation that favours them, and the majority of the people don’t matter”.⁷⁹⁶ There is a law without Christ, which is not based on Gospel values and so is invalid: “Christ has to be the inspiration of all human laws, not the whim of a few powerful people”.⁷⁹⁷ It is a law with no heart to it, which takes no account of neighbour. Quite clearly, it is a law without God: “We have a nation corrupt from top to bottom, because all have forgotten the law of God”.⁷⁹⁸ Archbishop Romero exposed the intrinsic contradiction of a law without love. He argued that “Love is the soul of Christian justice. Love is what gives meaning to human laws. If there is no love, laws are superfluous”.⁷⁹⁹

7.10.6 Mercenary judges

Archbishop Romero accused the judges of being unjust, denouncing the Supreme Court of Justice as corrupt: “Judges for sale!” What is the Supreme Court of Justice doing?”⁸⁰⁰ And he quoted the proverb “The law is made, the trap is set”.⁸⁰¹ This law is a trap that blocks the development of the poor. The law is a poisonous snake that bites bare, vulnerable feet:

“A poor person told me this phrase which you will not forget, just as I can’t forget it: ‘It’s like this, Your Grace: The law is like a snake: it only bites those of us that walk barefoot.’⁸⁰² How well the rural workers put it: The law is like a snake, it only bites those that walk barefoot.”⁸⁰³

⁷⁹² Homilies, 13th August 1978, vol. V, 128

⁷⁹³ Ibid.

⁷⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁹⁵ Homilies, 19th March 1978, vol. IV, 79

⁷⁹⁶ Homilies, 9th December 1979, vol. VIII, 26

⁷⁹⁷ Homilies, 27th November 1977, vol. VIII, 10

⁷⁹⁸ Homilies, 18th March 1979, vol. VI, 211

⁷⁹⁹ Homilies, 20th November 1977, vol. I-II, 329

⁸⁰⁰ Homilies, 14th May 1978, vol. IV, 243

⁸⁰¹ Homilies, 19th November 1978, vol. V, 316; 20th November 1977, vol. I-II, 329

⁸⁰² Homilies, 20th August 1978, vol. V, 141

Archbishop Romero drew attention to the venality of the magistrates and people who buy favourable judgments. “The crime includes both the official who is bought and the buyer”.⁸⁰⁴ This deceitful practice is a blatant abuse of authority, an abuse whose roots are implanted firmly in avarice, though the crime extends further than its economic dimension:

“So we have the fundamental rights of Salvadoreans violated every day without any institution denouncing the atrocities and taking serious and effective steps to clean up the procedures”.⁸⁰⁵ Greed, impunity, the arrogance of the powerful violated the rights of the defenceless people and their organizations.

7.10.7 God is the just judge

This situation of decadence and abuse on the part of the authorities contrasts with the law of God. Although human beings fail to practise justice, God does justice and remains on the side of the poor, those morally and physically damaged by the unjust legislation of the rich. With a tone of prophetic menace Archbishop Romero issued a warning, “The judge will come, the one who cannot be bribed. He who will bring to light the abuses and all the illegalities committed in the country.”⁸⁰⁶

7.11 Impunity

7.11.1 The absolute power of the armed forces

In El Salvador, as in many countries of Latin America, there was for a long time a system of injustice embedded in every dimension of life. One of these was the absolute power of the armed forces, a power that placed the military and the security forces beyond the reach of the law. Their weapons not only made them arrogant but also gave them impunity from the law and safety from legal chastisement. They considered themselves to be, and indeed were, above the magistrates in authority. In the face of this absolute power, Archbishop Romero called on the armed forces to submit to civilian authority. Knowing the situation and the identity of the instigators of abuses of human rights, the Archbishop demanded that the origin of these crimes against the people should be publicly investigated and the culprits punished by the courts: “All these crimes must be investigated”.⁸⁰⁷

In the case of the teachers involved in trade union activity who were murdered by the security forces: “The teachers demand the swift investigation of the murders of the teachers and their family members, and punishment of those responsible”.⁸⁰⁸

In the case of those priests murdered for preaching the Gospel, he demanded that the murderers be punished with the full force of the law. For instance, after the murder of Napoleón Macías, Archbishop Romero said: “Let them investigate the murder of Father Macías and let them punish the murderers and those behind the crime”.⁸⁰⁹

It is not enough to create a smoke screen and pretend to be “investigating”. The promised investigation always ended dropping the matter. Archbishop Romero would not be satisfied with appeals to “Forget the past and start again”, or “Forgive and forget”. What was required was to for the law impose due punishment on the guilty in order to make a break with the system of impunity. In the absence of this the torturers and murderers would be emboldened and carry on with their atrocities: “I

⁸⁰³ Homilies, 5th November 1977, vol. I-II, 275

⁸⁰⁴ Homilies, 14th May 1978, vol. IV, 244

⁸⁰⁵ Homilies, 14th May 1978, vol. IV, 245

⁸⁰⁶ Homilies, 19th November 1978, vol. V, 308

⁸⁰⁷ Homilies, 20th November 1977, vol. I-II, 328

⁸⁰⁸ Homilies, 8th July 1979, vol. VII, 69

⁸⁰⁹ Homilies, 12th August 1979, vol. VII, 158

believe it to be very appropriate that there should be an investigation that allows the public to know the truth of this matter and that those responsible for crimes be punished, whoever they may be.”⁸¹⁰

Archbishop Romero appealed to the humanity and goodwill of the powerful, but to no avail. And so he appealed to economic common sense, given that no tourist would want to visit a country drowning in a bloodbath after so many murders:

“It’s useless now to try to attract new investors to the country, by covering up our battered image with a quick coat of paint. These crimes that remain unsolved and unpunished drive away tourists, investment, and expose the true image of the repression that the country is going through”.⁸¹¹

Despite calling for a genuine investigation of these crimes against the people and receiving in reply a few anodyne words, Archbishop Romero realized that the military government was involved in a cover-up and had no intention of investigating these crimes seriously: “They try to tell us that there will be a thorough investigation of these cases, but everything ends in empty promises”.⁸¹²

7.11.2 A denunciation gone with the wind

Archbishop Romero realised that the socio-political dispute in which El Salvador was involved was a conflict between the abuse of state and government authority on the one hand, and on the other, the people organized and demanding their rights. He stated it bluntly: “All these abuses of power in our country cannot remain unpunished... How terrible is authority when it does not do its duty, when it uses the force of arms to crush the people, unarmed and powerless!”⁸¹³ In this contest between the powerful and the weak, Archbishop Romero placed himself on the side of the defenceless people and continued to insist that the military murderers and the dehumanized torturers be punished under the law: “How beautiful would it be if these abuses of those in uniform were properly punished! They too are citizens and it’s not right that because they have weapons they can abuse their fellow countrymen and women who have not”.⁸¹⁴ Archbishop Romero continued in his attempts to break the rigid structure of military impunity: “So many crimes and abuses must not go unpunished, and although they wear military uniforms, they have an obligation to answer to justice for their crimes and be punished appropriately if they are found to be common crimes”.⁸¹⁵ The violence of the security forces and of the paramilitaries of ORDEN did not stop, and Archbishop Romero continued to demand justice for the victims and their families. But the powerful paid no heed to the prophetic denunciation.⁸¹⁶ Archbishop Romero was well aware that those crimes were not being investigated because those behind them were part of the highest levels of the armed forces and the government. Nonetheless, he continued to hammer away with his prophetic denunciation: “The problem of the disappeared is telling us we ought to have the courage to judge and trace those responsible and, wherever they may be, they must be punished”.⁸¹⁷

When the security forces opened fire on a peaceful street demonstration in support of social and economic demands, Archbishop Romero pointed out that the original violence came from them and that the answering violence of the people was a response to the provocation. The security forces had to accept the responsibility of what occurred on the 29th September 1979: “Only a few people have dared to

⁸¹⁰ Homilies, 30th December 1979, vol. VIII, 105

⁸¹¹ Homilies, 30th September 1979, vol. VII, 311

⁸¹² Homilies, 10th June 1979, vol. VI, 391

⁸¹³ Homilies, 7th August 1977, vol. I-II, 164

⁸¹⁴ Homilies, 3rd December 1978, vol. VI, 20

⁸¹⁵ Homilies, 18th February 1979, vol. VI, 150

⁸¹⁶ Cf Homilies, 8th July 1979, vol. VII, 69

⁸¹⁷ Homilies, 28th October 1979, vol. VII, 392

point to the security forces as probably bearing the main responsibility and blame for the large number of deaths”.⁸¹⁸

Archbishop Romero demanded punishment for the perpetrators of torture and murder. He called on them to turn from their wicked ways. “Rebels against [the law], must be punished, whoever they are; even if it’s the armed forces, they must be tried if they have committed a crime. And we must seek punishment for those who have done wrong and not mended their ways”.⁸¹⁹ And when nobody was charged for the murders of the priests Rutilio Grande and Alfonso Navarro, Archbishop Romero called into question the salvation of those responsible for these assassinations: “I know that someone has committed these crimes and that they are a sinner, and if they fail to repent, they will not enter the kingdom of heaven”.⁸²⁰

The fable of Gyges is repeated in the reality of El Salvador: Gyges, a shepherd, after an earthquake entered down into the fissure of the cracked earth and there he found a hollow horse of metal with a door to the side which permitted him entrance into the horse. There he saw the lying body of a giant who wore on his finger a ring. Gyges took the ring from his finger and put it on his own. Later, by chance, he discovered that the ring made him invisible when he pointed it to the palm of his hand. By force of this ring, Gyges violated the law for his own benefit, and succeeded in assassinating the king and became the most powerful man in the kingdom by wedding the queen and becoming the new king”.⁸²¹

The unjust man who wears the ring of Gyges enjoys impunity. He can steal, kill, or commit whichever crime he wishes with total impunity, because he is invisible. Such a species of person is neither simple nor noble. The military in El Salvador enjoy impunity, placing themselves above the law. They are the invisible possessors of the ring and it is necessary to take away their ring for the protection and security of the people.

7.12 Excommunication

In the absence of legal sanction, Archbishop Romero imposed ecclesiastical sanctions on the torturers and murderers. In his homilies there exist four cases of explicit excommunication, two for the torturers of priests, one for the murderers of a priest, and one for the members of ORDEN.

Towards the end of 1977, Fr. Miguel Ventura was tortured by the security forces. In defending his priest Archbishop Romero cited Canon 2343 of the current Code of Canon Law, which prescribed excommunication for “anyone who lays violent hands on a cleric or a religious of either sex”. With full authority of the Church the Archbishop declared: “I am saying, in other words, that all those that tied up Fr. Miguel or anyone who abuses any priest are automatically excommunicated”.⁸²²

And when members of the National Guard tortured Fr. Francisco Mejía Alvarado in the Cinquera presbytery, even though Fr Mejía had been suspended from the priesthood, Archbishop Romero defended the priestly character of Fr. Francisco, despite his suspension. He stated: “Priests are priests, and the Guards who laid hands on Fr. Francisco are automatically excommunicated”.⁸²³

Archbishop Romero also excommunicated the killers of Fr. Alfonso Navarro Oviedo and those behind the murder. Archbishop Romero called on the priest’s murderers to repent and be converted:

⁸¹⁸ Homilies, 4th November 1979, vol. VIII, 408

⁸¹⁹ Homilies, 1st December 1977, vol. III, 16

⁸²⁰ Homilies, 21st August 1977, vol. I-II, 190-191

⁸²¹ Plato, *The Republic*, 359-60

⁸²² Homilies, 6th November 1977, vol. I-II, 308

⁸²³ Homilies, 28th May 1978, vol. IV, 276

“The fifth commandment weighs as an excommunication on the intellectual and material authors of this assassination. Many unbelievers will perhaps regard the penalty of excommunication as something ridiculous, but perhaps it would impress them to know that it is not only a spiritual sanction, but it is also repudiation by an entire people. It is exclusion from the People of God, who say to the criminal: ‘You now have nothing to do with this people who journey in hope, in obedience to the law of the Lord, who do not want blood, who want love, who want peace, who want reconciliation.’”

And this action of excommunication by the people is taken without hatred, just as the cry of rejection of violence is without hatred. It’s a cry like Christ’s when he said: ‘Convert and return to the right path.’”⁸²⁴

Members of the paramilitary organization ORDEN who were members of death squads were also singled out for criticism by Archbishop Romero, who asserted that the violence they had done to human life meant that they were no longer Christians. And if they did not repent and change their lives they would be excommunicated:

“The Christian who joins ORDEN and once in ORDEN is sent to beat and kill people, is now no longer a Christian... And if any Catholic doubts the word of the bishop and goes shooting off his mouth saying, ‘Let the bishop make up his mind’. Sisters and brothers, my mind is made up! You are the ones who have to make up your minds: either with the Church or outside of the Church”.⁸²⁵

7.13 The “disappeared”

The security corps and the members of ORDEN committed atrocities against their own people in a frenzy of torture and genocide. González-Faus correctly describes the frightening reality when he writes: “The horror of torture is no longer practised in El Salvador with specific aims such as getting what is regarded as vital information from someone, but for the pure pleasure of preventing a victim’s death from being relatively painless by being too quick”.⁸²⁶ Torture shows the depravity and the dehumanization of the executioners. An added cruelty on top of their practice of arresting, torturing, and executing is ‘disappearing’ the bodies of their victims. It is a barbaric act which denies the families of the victims the psychological certainty that their loved ones are no longer alive and prevents the necessary expression of grief. Besides this the Salvadorean people are very religious. When someone dies the family and community keep a novena, prayers for the person’s eternal rest for nine nights following the burial. If there is no grave, there can be no certainty of death, no release of tears or consolation of prayer.

7.13.1 “Where are they?”

Archbishop Romero represents the whole people before the torturers and murderers and asks them persistently:

“Where are the disappeared?”⁸²⁷

“Where are the disappeared? In what gaol do they lie slowly dying or already dead? Have they already been killed? . . . Speak! if only so that their mothers know where to take a wreath for their sons and daughters. . . They weep in uncertainty”.⁸²⁸

“What have you done to them? Where are they?”⁸²⁹

⁸²⁴ Homilies, 12th May 1977, vol. I-II, 41

⁸²⁵ Homilies, 2nd April 1978, vol. IV, 139

⁸²⁶ J.I. González-Faus, *Paseo por la Resurrección y la Muerte*, Santander 1980, 11

⁸²⁷ Homilies, 26th February 1978, vol. IV, 41

⁸²⁸ Homilies, 18th March 1979, vol. VI, 214

⁸²⁹ Homilies, 19th August 1979, vol. VII, 189

“Make the disappeared appear. Let us know something about this situation”.⁸³⁰

In August 1978 the archdiocese’s Legal Aid office had documented 99 cases of ‘disappeared’ people:

“It’s not politics I’m going to talk to you about now, sisters and brothers. In our Archdiocese we have prepared a very detailed study of the disappeared. There are 99 carefully analysed cases.

There are the name, age, where arrested; what legal measures have been taken, how many times that mother has gone searching for her loved one. I am witness to the veracity of these 99 cases.

And for that reason I have had the right to ask: “Where are they?”⁸³¹

Nine months later 28 further cases of disappearance were added to the file: “The total has now gone up to at least 127 disappeared. They’re our sisters and brothers and we want to know where they are!”⁸³²

Another five months passed and the number of disappeared recorded by the archdiocesan Legal Aid office increased with 49 more persons: “176 disappeared. The Archdiocese can prove these arrests. The starting-point for the investigation should not be whether it’s true that there are disappeared. It’s obvious that there are disappeared. What the people need to know is where they are and what has happened to them.”⁸³³

With the coup d’état on the 15th of October of 1979 and the installation of a new government, the situation did not change at all. Unfortunately, Archbishop Romero had to complain that “There are already disappeared under this regime too”.⁸³⁴ The new government junta had formed a commission to discover the situation of the disappeared. Archbishop Romero supported the work of the investigation undertaken by this commission and sought the collaboration of the security forces:

“I ask you, members of the security forces who are holding the disappeared or know what has happened to them, to free them or freely inform the investigating commission what has happened to them and who are responsible”.⁸³⁵

7.13.2 The sacristan of Soyapango

The investigating commission did not produce convincing results and the Archbishop repeated his demand, asking for news of the whereabouts of the disappeared. He made a specific demand in the case of Tomás Flores García, the sacristan of one of the churches in Soyapango: “Under this new regime at least three people have been disappeared. One of them is the sacristan of Soyapango, and, despite my shouting about it every week, I have received no answer”.⁸³⁶

Two more weeks passed and Archbishop Romero continued to raise the same issue of “the detention and disappearance of the sacristan Tomás Flores García, who on the 16th October of this year was arrested by the security police in the town of Soyapango and has not yet reappeared.”⁸³⁷

7.13.3 In search of the lost sheep

For Archbishop Romero, the “lost sheep” are the “disappeared”. He felt sorry for the families who had had no news of the whereabouts of their loved ones. “The prophet talks about ‘the sheep who are lost’. Don’t you think you can hear in these words an echo of the disappeared? The sheep that ought to be

⁸³⁰ Homilies, 29th July 1979, vol.VII, 121

⁸³¹ Homilies, 20th August 1978, vol.V, 141

⁸³² Homilies, 13th May 1979, vol.VI, 341

⁸³³ Homilies, 21st October 1979, vol.VII, 367

⁸³⁴ Homilies, 4th November 1979, vol.VI, 341

⁸³⁵ Homilies, 18th November 1979, vol.VIII, 459

⁸³⁶ Homilies, 25th November 1979, vol.VII, 484

⁸³⁷ Homilies, 9th December 1979, vol.VIII, 31

being cared for in the fold with a shepherd's tenderness are being persecuted, disappeared and abandoned".⁸³⁸

Archbishop Romero described the families' search for their arrested and disappeared loved ones as a sort of Way of the Cross from barracks to barracks, without the authorities accepting responsibility for having arrested them. It is "a sad Calvary", with regard to which the Archbishop quotes Article 9 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which the nation of El Salvador has committed itself to respecting:

"Several mothers, wives and children who have travelled the country from end to end, in a sad Calvary in search of a loved one, without getting any reply at all.... It is clear that day in, day out in this most serious situation the hearts of these mothers, wives, children are being torn apart by this single principle: 'No one can be arbitrarily detained, taken prisoner, or exiled'".⁸³⁹

Breaching human rights in El Salvador with impunity had come to be normal: "This worries me, the lack of sensitivity that is being sown. They ransack districts, houses, abuse people, they 'disappear' people, and this seems to becoming the most natural thing in the world".⁸⁴⁰ But for Archbishop Romero this situation is sinful and ought not to be accepted as normal. In his pastoral visits to the rural communities, the people used to tell him directly of their anguish and of the immeasurable loss which these families were suffering, and the Archbishop's heart was broken: "In the small villages that I go to, this is a horrible anguish that can only be felt there. When the old lady in her wooden shack remembers how her son or her husband used to support her and says, "They took him away and I haven't seen him since". . .⁸⁴¹

Distressed families would also go and speak to him in the archdiocesan office, and, like a good shepherd, he would bitterly feel his powerlessness faced with the killings in his flock:

"We are distressed at the perseverance of these mothers, wives and sons who come to the Archdiocese. We must do something... The letters, the visits, are very painful for me, when I feel, alongside them, my inability to do anything for them. But you who can help, you who know where they are, tell us, please, and relieve all these people from their pain!"⁸⁴²

"With anguish, even to the point of tears, I've had visits from some mothers who go like beggars from door to door of the security centres, asking about their children."⁸⁴³

"They come to the shepherd and it breaks my heart: wives, mothers, who have no news of sons and husbands. Where are they?"⁸⁴⁴

Archbishop Romero felt the sadness of these meetings deeply. He also shared with his people the pain brought to him by the letters from suffering relatives:

"On Children's Day I received some letters that were so moving that I would just like to mention a sentence from one of the rural children who say to me, 'We would like to ask you to intercede for the political prisoners. How many of us children are weeping for the absence of a father or mother, imprisoned or disappeared?' And another letter from a small rural school that says: 'We would be very grateful if you would report this complaint: The National Guard has taken our teacher away.'"⁸⁴⁵

⁸³⁸ Homilies, 22nd July 1979, vol.VII, 103

⁸³⁹ Homilies, 14th May 1979, vol.IV, 245

⁸⁴⁰ Homilies, 8th October 1978, vol.V 238

⁸⁴¹ Homilies, 26th August 1979, vol.VII, 250

⁸⁴² Homilies, 9th September 1979, vol.VII, 250

⁸⁴³ Homilies, 25th September 1977, vol.I-II, 235

⁸⁴⁴ Homilies, 19th June 1977, vol.I-II, 95

⁸⁴⁵ Homilies, 8th October 1978, vol.V, 238

7.13.4 Mary, mother of sorrows

Archbishop Romero identified the pain of Mary, the mother from Nazareth, with the pain of the mothers of the disappeared and murdered in El Salvador: “Let’s look at the figure of the Virgin at the foot of the cross, the image of our country expressed in so many mothers of sorrows who now weep for the disappearance, the assassination, the murder of so many children”.⁸⁴⁶ But this situation is intolerable; it’s not natural; it’s the fruit of sin. And the Christian resists this grotesque sin, fighting to eliminate it:

“Like Mary at the foot of the cross, every mother that suffers the abuse of her child is a denunciation... ‘Let these children come back!’... That is a cry against sin!”⁸⁴⁷

Archbishop Romero shared with his people the deep pain that tormented the mothers of the disappeared: “Sad letters have arrived from a mother living in the rural area: ‘I am the mother of Carlos Martínez Carranza, who was arrested on 17th May 1978 and to this day I’ve had no news of him, despite the fact that we have searched everywhere for him.’”⁸⁴⁸ By publicly reading these painful letters, Archbishop sought to use his Sunday homily as a forum of free expression in which the people could express their anguish and denounce the abuses they were suffering:

“I’m a wife and mother in anguish, because since 29th of May past, the National Guard has been holding my husband Mercedes and my son, José Mario, together with my brother Pedro Juan. When they arrested them they were sowing rice near the house. We have looked for them everywhere and haven’t found them. You can imagine the anguish I feel for my children and I ask you, please, in your Sunday sermon to ask the authorities about these disappeared people. I ask you this with all my heart’. That is a voice that is not being heard and have to make it heard”.⁸⁴⁹

Faced with these atrocities, Archbishop Romero advised the mothers to form an association to join forces and unite their voices in the search for their disappeared sons and daughters. They recognised the wisdom of this advice and organized themselves into a pressure group. The Archbishop congratulated them on their initiative, regretting that the Salvadorean press, owned by the oligarchy, refused to give publicity to the fierce struggle of these courageous women:

“An Association of Mothers of the Arrested and Disappeared has been set up. Just as I said to them one day about the ten lepers who came together in their grief, the mothers who suffer this unspeakable, endless anguish have the right to form a group to console one another and help each other, and to see what they can do for their sons and daughters. I congratulate them and am sorry that the press has refused to publish this news. Why is it that our press is so fearful?”⁸⁵⁰

7.13.5 God is the judge who finds in favour of the “disappeared”

The struggle seems unequal. Families weep for disappeared family members with a weakness that tears them apart, as they are impotent before the force of arms. Nevertheless faith in God (the only ‘faith’ left to the poor) is more powerful than all armies:

“We do not have to uproot a tree and plant it in the sea, but there are other things that appear to be more difficult; for example, how can we change the situation in El Salvador? For instance, how is this situation in El Salvador going to change? For instance, the families who grieve over the disappeared. ‘How can I get my son back, or my husband or my brother?’ Faced with the

⁸⁴⁶ Homilies, 16th September 1979, vol.VII, 270

⁸⁴⁷ Homilies, 1st December 1977, vol.III, 15

⁸⁴⁸ Homilies, 1st April 1979, vol.VI, 252

⁸⁴⁹ Homilies, 19th August 1979, vol.VII, 189

⁸⁵⁰ Homilies, 27th November 1977, vol.III, 5

power of arms and force, how tiny an unarmed person seems. Nonetheless, if this person who is tiny to the forces of this world has faith in God they are more powerful than all armies”.⁸⁵¹

The relatives in their anguish demand the safe return of their loved ones, captured by the state police and military. It seems obvious that these grieving people are never going to receive a satisfactory answer from the all-powerful military, but God is aware of them and their disappeared loved ones. And God, the only Judge, is also aware of the butchers who made them disappear. Although human beings have not done justice, God will: “God has his time; our disappeared are not disappeared in the eyes of God our disappeared have not disappeared and those who have made them disappear are also very present before the justice of God”.⁸⁵²

7.14 Fear

7.14.1 The shepherd’s fear

Fear is a natural emotion which a conscious subject experiences when confronted with an object which threatens the well-being of his or her person. Normally it shows itself in psychosomatic symptoms such as sweat, trembling of hands and legs, a higher pitch of the voice. In the Garden of Gethsemane on the evening before his assassination, Jesus’ “sweat became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground”, Lk. 22.44). Even Jesus was gripped by fear when faced with death.

Archbishop Romero recognised that fear is natural when there is real danger: “Who doesn’t feel fear when threatened with death”?⁸⁵³ Like Jesus of Nazareth, Archbishop Romero felt fear of a pending assassination but despite this he remained steadfast in his accompaniment of his suffering people, because the good shepherd does not abandon his sheep: “As a parishioner of this church said to me last night: ‘Archbishop, take great care, because the beast is loose and thirsting for blood.’”⁸⁵⁴ A month before his assassination, in a retreat house, Archbishop Romero wrote these moving words which make clear his fear, and also his bravery:

“It takes a great effort for me to accept a violent death, which in these circumstances is very possible; even the Nuncio in Costa Rica advised me of imminent dangers in the coming week. The retreat father heartened me by saying that my disposition ought to be to give my life for God, however my life might end. I will endure the unknown circumstances by the grace of God. Jesus supported the martyrs and, if needs be, I will feel him very close as I give him my last breath. But more valuable than the moment of dying is to give Christ the whole of one’s life – to live for him”.⁸⁵⁵

In the editorial of the magazine *Vida Nueva* (‘New Life’), a month after his assassination, there is a reflection and tribute on the person of the martyred Archbishop. The editorial remarks on how Archbishop Romero accepted his vulnerability for love of his crucified people. It describes him as:

“a man marked for death, in a country where the machine-gun resolves all problems to perpetuate injustice... All of us who had the good fortune to know him have seen him weep. A man that weeps is a great man. He wept over his people, just as he fought for them with his words... He was not a man who hid his fear. In weeping, he acknowledged his own weakness.”⁸⁵⁶

⁸⁵¹ Homilies, 2nd October 1977, vol.I-II, 257

⁸⁵² Ibid. 261

⁸⁵³ Homilies, 12th August 1979, vol.VIII, 164

⁸⁵⁴ Homilies, 12th May 1977, vol.I-II, 42

⁸⁵⁵ Retreat notes in the Retreat House of the Passionist Fathers, Planes de Renderos, Monday 25th February 1980”, quoted in J. Delgado, *Oscar A. Romero, Biografía*, Madrid 1986, 190

⁸⁵⁶ Editorial in *Vida Nueva* 4 (1980), No 1222, 58

7.14.2 The flock's fear

In its propaganda the Salvadorean press usually used the term 'terrorism' to describe the outbursts of violence from the newly-formed Salvadorean insurgency. But Archbishop Romero emphasized the terror and butchery wrought by the police and the military:

"How much peace we need, how much blood is split, how much crime committed, how much terror surrounds us! And when we say 'terrorism' we are not only thinking of those who pursue the men in uniform, but also the terrorism in uniform, which is also horrible, killing and filling people with fear".⁸⁵⁷

In fact, the persecution of the people started with the forces of the State. They were the source of the cruel violence of repression with its apparatus of arbitrary and illegal arrests, of torture dungeons and death squads. They were the ones who threatened catechists, forcing them to leave their posts and remain silent about the systematic slaughter within their communities.

In the jaws of the beast, Archbishop Romero sought to calm and hearten his catechists to stay faithful in their pastoral work: "The work of our rural catechists is marvellous. I congratulate them... Don't be beaten by fear".⁸⁵⁸ Unfortunately many did fear the beast and abandoned their historic commitment to evangelization. "And it hurts me", says Archbishop Romero, "when they are people who have been very generous, very brave, and now they are becoming cowards".⁸⁵⁹ They do not trust in God's protection. They resemble Elijah: "For a moment Elijah also forgets the protection of God and flees: fearful flesh, the coward, the person who hides or runs away, they are also flesh without Christ, a coward."⁸⁶⁰ The coward is not the person who feels fear, but the one who flees from duty in the face of the anti-kingdom of sin. Christ felt fear, but did not flee. Cowards are not the flesh of Christ:

"And so, take heart, dear sisters and brothers. I know that for many of the moment of trial has come, and they have behaved like cowards: catechists, ministers of the Word, people we would never have believed it of, who we thought were very strong, are now afraid. But it is because they have forgotten that ours is a religion of life and that, as life, it inevitably had to come into conflict with the life that is not the life of God, but which lives as the kingdom of darkness and sin in the world".⁸⁶¹

Fear paralyses organized protest. The death squads used to dump the corpses of their victims in public places in order to create fear among the people. And so, "with the country paralysed by terror, and all possibility of organized resistance eliminated, the oligarchy will now have their hands free to run all government policies (including reforms), just as they have for the last fifty years".⁸⁶²

The programme of the Kingdom of God is proclaimed in the beatitudes, which give new heart to the poor, the hungry, those who mourn, those scorned and persecuted for the sake of justice (cf. Lk 6. 20-26). God gives his fearful people courage. On the other hand, the Gospel denounces the rich oppressors, because they embody the anti-kingdom of idolatry. "The paths of the beatitudes are today very dangerous paths, which is why few people want to follow them. Let us not be afraid".⁸⁶³ There is "an atmosphere of violence and fear.... Christ does not want terror".⁸⁶⁴ It is the task of the Christian to

⁸⁵⁷ Homilies, 3rd December 1978, vol.VI, 12

⁸⁵⁸ Homilies, 12th May 1977, vol.I-II, 42

⁸⁵⁹ Homilies, 3rd September 1978, vol.V, 163

⁸⁶⁰ Homilies, 12th August 1979, vol.VII, 164; cf 1 Re 4-8

⁸⁶¹ Homilies, 29th October 1978, vol.V, 265

⁸⁶² J.I. Gonzalez Faus, *Paseo por la resurrección y la muerte*, Santander 1980, 25

⁸⁶³ Homilies, 1st November 1977, vol.I-II, 304

⁸⁶⁴ Homilies, 20th November 1977, vol.I-II. 328

reject violence and terror and to try to transform situations in order to “make of this world not a pack of wild dogs, but a paradise, a waiting room for the children of God”.⁸⁶⁵

Archbishop Romero tried to give people hope: “There will come a time in which there is happiness, when we can go out on the streets and into our fields without fear of being kidnapped and tortured”.⁸⁶⁶

7.15 The threat of civil war

7.15.1 The danger of civil war

Archbishop Romero foresaw the threat of a civil war. The probability of a war pitting brother against brother crept closer to Salvadoreans like a bloodthirsty animal. The only way to avoid this bloodshed was to change the socio-economic system of El Salvador to allow real participation by a broad spectrum of political parties, in particular left-wing parties excluded by the repression of the right. If no dissent were permitted, and no real possibility of transforming deep-rooted social injustice, there would be war. El Salvador was on the threshold of a civil war:

“They are closing down the safety valve that can release the pressure of this explosive situation... What the Council calls “moral force on a base of freedom”; let it be this the moral force of our government, not that of the rifle, not that of the machine gun, nor of ransacking people’s houses, nor repression... For me, what is happening now is almost a civil war, a clandestine civil war between extreme right and extreme left. Is that not a war? God grant that this process does not go further, but that we find in time the solutions that a moral force based on freedom may bring to our beloved country. . .”⁸⁶⁷

Archbishop Romero was afraid of the apathy of the people as the danger of war grew. He called on the people to open their eyes to the reality that was being imposed on them, and for everyone to try to transform this situation with the moral force of love, not with the immoral force of hatred and weapons:

“Let’s not fall asleep like idiots who can’t see the reality of the situation - a powder-keg which may explode at any moment”.⁸⁶⁸ “What an atmosphere of violence we are living in!... This violence must stop... Let’s not play games with our powder-keg of a country!”⁸⁶⁹

Little by little Archbishop Romero realised the size of the monster, and that the bloodthirsty creature was not going to stop. Goodwill, prophetic appeals, human efforts to turn evil into good, were not enough. All human efforts seemed to have failed, and Archbishop Romero asked God to have mercy on his people: “What can we expect of 1980? Will it be the year of civil war? Will it be the year of total destruction?... May the Lord have mercy on us in this uncertain future”.⁸⁷⁰

7.15.2 A call to reflection

Despite the darkness gradually enveloping the country, the absolute necessity was to keep trying to build a peace based on justice. Although the situation seemed desperate, in obedience to the Lord, Archbishop Romero felt obliged to make one last effort:

“Urged on by the word of God and by so much violence that has affected different regions of our country, I feel compelled to make another appeal to all Christians and people of goodwill to

⁸⁶⁵ Homilies, 30th December 1979, vol.VIII, 108

⁸⁶⁶ Homilies, 2nd September 1979, vol.VII, 224

⁸⁶⁷ Homilies, 12th August 1979, vol.VII, 168

⁸⁶⁸ Homilies, 29th July 1979, vol.VII, 117

⁸⁶⁹ Homilies, 4th November 1979, vol.VII, 412

⁸⁷⁰ Homilies, 30th December 1979, vol.VIII, 111

reflect upon this present moment in the history of our country and to act responsibly to save it from falling into a civil war”.⁸⁷¹

Human reasoning was needed to recognize the uselessness of violence and especially of institutionalised violence of the state, waged by the security forces. State violence was the original violence that provoked rebel violence. Therefore, said Romero, “it is necessary to understand in time,⁸⁷² and purge the socio-economic rottenness that was destroying the weakest members of society.

7.15.3 Dialogue

Dialogue was needed between the parties in contention. There had to be an attitude of listening and a rational evaluation of the other’s point of view. A dialogue of the deaf in which neither side was prepared to listen to the other was not conducive to a just peace:

“At the same time, sisters and brothers, considering the reasons given for opposing dialogue, I would like to recall a remark of Pius XI’s, a man who can’t be criticized for weakness - he had to face Hitler and Mussolini. It’s a remark that’s almost funny... ‘Dialogue is the way to many solutions, and if it were for the good of the Church I would dialogue with the devil himself’. We don’t want legalistic arguments about whether such a body or organization is legal. As The Imitation of Christ puts it: ‘Don’t think about who is saying it, think about what is being said’. Let’s dialogue with anyone and everyone. That does not mean being in solidarity, being complicit in the sins of any group. Let’s simply listen”.⁸⁷³

Dialogue based on an attitude of listening to another’s opinion was the only way of coming to a lasting and true solution. An armed struggle would cause chaos without any reasonable solution. Do not exclude the opposition’s views; look for the good that may be contained in the arguments of the other side. If this is done the people’s voice would gain authority in a democratic environment: “It’s not going to be acts of repression or violence that will resolve this situation. A sound, genuine democracy has to open channels of dialogue to listen to the anguish of the people”.⁸⁷⁴

7.15.4 The price of blood

Saint Augustine speaks of the misery that war brings and comments that civil wars “are the worst sort of wars”.⁸⁷⁵ He says: “If I wanted to give an adequate description of the many and varied calamities brought by these evils, though I am quite unequal to the task, what limit could be set to this lengthy tale?”⁸⁷⁶

Archbishop Romero shares this horror of war: “They ought to consider... the enormous difficulty of civil war, the evil atrocities that it would produce. The Christian’s preference for peace ought to lead us to collaborate so that the progress of the people who are politically aware and organized may be put at the service of justice and peace”.⁸⁷⁷

The truth is there is no such thing as a bloodless war. Every war exacts its price in blood. This reality affected Archbishop Romero and he repeated his call for a solution through dialogue to avoid the terrifying cost of bloodshed. The current situation was bloody, but the approaching situation of civil war, would demand an even more catastrophic price in bloodshed:

⁸⁷¹ Homilies, 20th January 1980, vol.VIII, 173

⁸⁷² Homilies, 18th November 1979, vol.VIII, 453

⁸⁷³ Homilies, 13th November 1977, vol.I-II, 316

⁸⁷⁴ Homilies, 16th April 1978, vol.IV, 66

⁸⁷⁵ Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, Book XIX, Chapter 7.

⁸⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷⁷ Homilies, 16th December 1979, vol.VIII, 58

“There’s still time to avoid paying the cost of so much blood . . .”⁸⁷⁸

“I believe, sisters and brothers, that we can still find a way to peace and justice without having to pay for it with so much blood, which would be the outcome of an insurrection, which would come about when all peaceful means had been taken. They have not yet been exhausted”.⁸⁷⁹

Archbishop Romero addressed the rich in the Salvadorean oligarchy, demanding a new spirit of sharing the goods of creation. Such a generous move would relieve the desperate poverty of the poor and help to create a society based on mutual support:

“Dispossess yourselves or you’ll be dispossessed! This is the Church’s message: Be generous! What can you contribute? It’s not possible for you go on selfishly enjoying what belongs to everyone. Let’s all participate and share as sisters and brothers. There is still time to find a solution with charity and love, with justice and reason. Otherwise, they will dispossess us by force, and then there will be blood. Such victories are very costly! May we not have to come to that!”⁸⁸⁰

Archbishop Romero regarded the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua as a possible model for what could take place in El Salvador. He wanted to avoid the bloody solution of a popular insurrection. He preferred the political language that seeks the common good of the nation, which includes in a special way the integral liberation of the poor and gives them the means to attain a decent life with justice:

“They are leading us to ruin, to a fratricidal war. We will never be in agreement with objectives that lead to even more bloodshed. The political language of all those that want to work for our people is only this: “The common good of the people”.⁸⁸¹

“We still have time to avoid having to pay in so much pain and blood for what we can still achieve by love and reason”.⁸⁸²

Archbishop Romero addressed to young people his message of non-violent change, to achieve the objective of justice in the country: “Young people, restrain the instincts of violence and hatred which produce wars and all its resultant evils”.⁸⁸³ He addressed this appeal to young people of both right and left.

7.15.5 The last chance

Archbishop Romero wanted to squeeze out the last drop of hope for a non-violent solution to the social, economic, and political problems of El Salvador. He maintained that while there was the slightest possibility of a dialogue, war should not be an option: “This is not time for guerrillas. At the present time, guerrilla activity and everything that encourages violence and underground activities is inappropriate when there is an appeal for open dialogue”.⁸⁸⁴ Nevertheless, he recognised that “although Christians are naturally peace-loving, and are not ashamed of this, they are not simply pacifists, because they are capable of fighting”.⁸⁸⁵ This fighting spirit could be displayed as a last resort when human rights are so gravely abused that the people, backed by their socio-political organizations, decide to defend themselves by force of arms. This situation is truly sad and tragic. If it is humanly possible to avoid this course it is better to do so. The role of the Church entails rejecting all violence revolt to the point where dialogue completely fails and the tyranny of the State is unbearable. When this happens, the people decide to take

⁸⁷⁸ Homilies, 19th August 1979, vol.VII, 190

⁸⁷⁹ Homilies, 23rd September 1979, vol.VII, 293

⁸⁸⁰ Ibid, 295

⁸⁸¹ Homilies, 23rd December 1979, vol.VIII, 77

⁸⁸² Homilies, 30th September 1979, vol.VII, 313

⁸⁸³ Homilies, 28th October 1979, vol.VII, 396

⁸⁸⁴ Homilies, 11th November 1979, vol.VII, 440

⁸⁸⁵ CELAM, *Medellin*, “Paz”, 15

up arms to defeat tyranny. In such an impossible situation, the task of the Church is to keep searching for a rational solution in love, while trying to humanize a civil war: “War is the last resort. When there have been attempt at dialogue and there is possibility of peaceful agreement, just war is nothing other than demanding a right which was not granted in negotiation”.⁸⁸⁶

There is no glory in a civil war, and to kill a human being, even a wicked human being, is always a denial of love. We must not attempt to cover up the crude bloodiness of war in such terms as “holy” or “just”.

The concept of justice is so sacred that it seems wrong to apply it to war. Perhaps it would be more correct to say “necessary” war or “unavoidable” war. This would preserve the value of the word “justice” rather than cheapening it by linking it with the profane word “war”. Be that as it may, there is no avoiding guilt when using revolutionary force and killing another human being. But, in an extreme situation it may be that not rising in revolt could be more blameworthy still. Nonetheless, the one who takes up a weapon to kill and kills or wounds another human being has to bear that guilt. Force can never be sanctified, but the use of force can be pardoned. In the last resort, only God knows.

7.15.6 All hope fading

The darkness deepens. The day before his assassination, Archbishop Romero seemed to admit the sad inevitability of a civil war in El Salvador:

“They are not letting the people develop normal politics. They are being persecuted and massacred, hampered in their work of organising, in their attempts to broaden their relationships with other democratic groups. And so, what we will get is a situation of radicalization and desperation. It’s difficult in these circumstances for people not to embark on revolutionary activities and armed struggle. The least that can be said is that this country is in a pre-revolutionary stage and in no sense in a transition stage”.⁸⁸⁷

7.16 Repentance precedes forgiveness

If a sinner wants to receive God’s forgiveness, he or she has to recognize their guilt and repent of it. Repentance must include material restitution on the part of the sinner to the families thrown into mourning by these crimes, if such an action is humanly possible. Of course, such an act of reparation by the State or an individual criminal can never make up for the sorrow of losing human dignity in prison or in a torture chamber, or the pain of losing a loved one through assassination. But such an act of repentance, freely chosen, benefits the sinner psychologically and morally, and brings at least a minimal benefit to the victims and their families. A change of attitude has to be expressed in behaviour. The sinner has to cease doing evil and show repentance in a tangible way. “God does not want sin... Those that carry out violence, those who murder, those who shed blood, are not loved by God until they stop doing these things”.⁸⁸⁸

God does not love the sinner while he or she persists in sin. It would be false to soften the requirement of repentance, with a vague assertion that God loves everyone. The truth is that divine love calls the sinner to respond to the offer of total salvation, which includes eternal happiness. Torturers and killers must cease from committing their mortal sins and look for an appropriate expression of repentance within the community. Saint Paul, member of a death squad and murderer of Christians, had to pass

⁸⁸⁶ Homilies, 16th October 1977, 278

⁸⁸⁷ Homilies, 23rd March 1980, vol.VIII, 379

⁸⁸⁸ Homilies, 28th December 1977, vol.III, 106

through this process of falling from his white charger and journeying in repentance towards the people in order to receive their pardon and healing (cf Acts, 9, 1-19).

“Anyone who kills and tortures, who betrays the law of God, is wicked. And if they want to be saved and enter the kingdom of God, they have to repent and, once converted, obey the law of God”.⁸⁸⁹

God’s forgiveness and that of the human and Christian community presupposes that the evil-doer no longer commits atrocities against his sisters and brothers in humanity. It presupposes that he or she has left behind that life once and for all, that they feel remorse for the evil they have committed, and that they seek some way to replace the evil with acts of kindness, especially towards the victims and the families left mourning:

“Forgiveness presupposes repentance in the other person. Forgiveness presupposes conversion in the other, a change of conduct. And when that person has changed and seeks the Lord in repentance, then the Lord uses the violence of non-violence: mercy, the embrace of peace”.⁸⁹⁰

With repentance and an attempt to make restitution, the sinner is transformed and made a new creature in Christ:

“Every person who repents of his or her guilt, leaves something like an old husk behind, their past wicked life, and like a chrysalis (the butterfly that is born again, leaving the husk) is now a new creature”.⁸⁹¹

In declaring that repentance has to precede divine forgiveness, Archbishop Romero could use the paradigm of the prodigal son who had to learn his lesson and recover his senses in order to humbly recognize his offence before God and his father. He himself had to go to his father before receiving forgiveness, because repentance precedes forgiveness (Lk 15.11-32). In this model, the work of repentance produces the grace of forgiveness.

But there is another paradigm in the Gospel: the parable of the lost sheep (Lk. 15, 1-7), in which a lost sheep is saved although it did nothing to move towards its shepherd and the flock. The sheep remains passive, but the shepherd rescues it, simply because it is lost, and because it is his. According to this narrative, the grace of forgiveness is freely given and is not the work of the lost and helpless sinner.

In another parable, a coin is a passive and lost object. It can do nothing to return to its owner. God is a poor woman trying to find her precious coin, simply because it belongs to her. This parable emphasizes grace as pure gift that does not depend on the repentance of the sinner, who is represented as a precious coin, passive, and has no other existence than being lost.

Archbishop Romero based himself on the paradigm of the prodigal son in order to emphasize the absolute necessity for the sinner, the killer, to change attitude and behaviour. The sinner does not receive pardon until he or she mends their ways.

We contingent mortals cannot fathom the depths of the divine mercy, but within a situation of blatant injustice that produces pitiless slaughter of the poor and defenceless, the prophet demands conversion of the sinner. Were the prophet to stay silent or preach resignation to the people, this would be encouraging the impunity of the butchers. Whether or not there exists a person definitively sinful, with no saving love in their soul, nobody knows. Judgement belongs to God alone.

I am in agreement with Schillebeeckx when he argues that the biblical threats of hell ‘are a therapeutic and pedagogically meaningful perspective on the future’,⁸⁹² illustrating the possibility that

⁸⁸⁹ Homilies, 14th October 1979, vol.VII, 342

⁸⁹⁰ Homilies, 17th September 1978, vol.V, 195

⁸⁹¹ Homilies, 24th September 1978, vol.V, 208

⁸⁹² E. Schillebeeckx, *Church. The Human Story of God, Collected Works*, vol. X, London, 2014, p.134.

every person can make a definitive choice of good or evil. My view is that the possibility of hell is anthropologically plausible, but we do not know if it is a possibility for God.

If a definitive sinner exists, it is anthropologically possible that such a person experiences “the second death” (Rev 20.6), as the fruit of his own perverse conduct, and simply ceases to exist at the moment of death. The person is annihilated himself by their own logic, disappearing into nothing. They enter the void. And so we must acknowledge a degree of truth in Saint Teresa of Lisieux’s remark: “*Je crois dans l’enfer, mais je crois qu’il est vide*” (“I believe in hell, but I think it’s empty”).⁸⁹³

7.17 The call to conversion

7.17.1 The role of the Church in the reality of sin

The starting point of Jesus’s message is “Repent!” or “Mend your ways!” (Mk.1.15; Mt.4.17). Biblical scholars tell us that the word *metanoia*, “repentance”, means a radical change of direction, an “about turn” to face in a different direction. This means, in this context, a radical (root-deep) upheaval in attitude and behaviour. The Good News of Jesus demands that the recipient of that good news responds with a personal transformation in his or her way of living. And so it is that conversion is the dynamic essence of what the Church proclaims; it’s the proper response which allows the good news of integral health to take effect:

“Repentance was the word with which Christ began to preach the Gospel and it is the substance of the Church’s preaching: ‘Do penance; be converted. Leave your evil ways.’ How timely it is, in these times, to go out along all the roads in our country, where we find so much hatred, so much slander, so much vengeance, so many twisted hearts, and say to them: ‘Be converted!’⁸⁹⁴

When the Church proclaims a living and incarnate word, it challenges the reality of its time and place. And where there exists a situation of sin, the word of Christ spoken by his Church confronts sin with a view to transforming this sinful situation into one of goodness and wholeness: “This is the role of the Church: not to ignore circumstances and name their sin to people so that they can repent”.⁸⁹⁵

7.17.2 “I confess”

The enemies of Archbishop Romero accused him of being a hypocrite, because he condemned the sins of others as if he himself was without sin. In reply to this accusation Archbishop Romero declared himself to be a sinner like any other human being and confessed that he is not exempt from conversion in his personal life. We are all sinners, and we all have to change our lives continually. He states this on various occasions with simplicity and humility:

“We must be converted, and I first of all”.⁸⁹⁶

“We all need to be converted, and I am the first: I need conversion.”⁸⁹⁷

“We all need conversion, I first of all.”⁸⁹⁸

“I am the first in needing to be converted. We all need conversion.”⁸⁹⁹

“It doesn’t scare me when they criticize my sins, because I have sins.”⁹⁰⁰

“I’m the first to feel my deficiencies, my limitations.”⁹⁰¹

⁸⁹³ Ibid.

⁸⁹⁴ Homilies, 15th May 1977, vol.I-II, 74

⁸⁹⁵ Homilies, 16th April 1978, vol.IV, 163

⁸⁹⁶ Homilies, 16th October 1977, vol.I-II, 292

⁸⁹⁷ Homilies, 23rd October 1977, vol.I-II, 292

⁸⁹⁸ Homilies, 31st December 1977, vol.III, 114

⁸⁹⁹ Homilies, 22nd January 1978, vol.III, 165

⁹⁰⁰ Homilies, 30th April 1978, vol.IV, 202

⁹⁰¹ Homilies, 25th April 1979, vol.VI, 167

“I’m first to recognize myself as limited, human, that not everything that I have done is good.”⁹⁰²
“All of us, beginning with the Archbishop have got to review our lives deeply to see if they conform to the will of God”.⁹⁰³

In publicly admitting his personal sinfulness, Archbishop Romero declared himself to be a penitent, asking pardon of God and his neighbour. In doing this he encouraged his detractors to do the same and also become penitents, and ask forgiveness of God and of the neighbour they have offended: “If we are sinners – and more than enough people are ready to tell us so – then we are also penitent and ask for forgiveness”.⁹⁰⁴

7.17.3 A loving call to conversion

In condemning sin, the Church harbours no rancour against the sinner. Quite the contrary, by making this appeal to them to change their mentality and behaviour, it is doing them good, because if they do not change, they are condemning themselves to hell:

“So the Church, then, has to proclaim the Word of God. But when it proclaims prophetically in this way this rejection of the evil of sin, the Church does not do so with hatred. Take note! The Spirit of truth enlightens the Church to say to the sinner, whoever they may be: ‘Don’t be a sinner. Don’t be cruel. Don’t torture. Don’t torment. Don’t mistreat people.’ The Church does this out of love. It seeks your good. It seeks your conversion”.⁹⁰⁵

The Church does not hate its persecutors. It wants them to change like Saint Paul:

“How I would like, sisters and brothers, all those who today sow terror, as Saul did throughout Jerusalem and the Holy Land, to be converted one day”.⁹⁰⁶

“We don’t hate them. From this altar we ask God, ‘Lord, give them repentance. May they return to the ways of piety. Let them take stock of the horrible crime they are committing, so that they may one day be holy, like the blessed in heaven’”.⁹⁰⁷

In simple terms, if the murderers and torturers do not convert and mend their ways, they will perish. They themselves will condemn themselves to hell: “The last word always belongs always to the person themselves about being good or bad. And heaven and hell is not something God gives us, each of us chooses for ourselves. You want to be wicked and persist in evil and die in your sins? You will die”.⁹⁰⁸ Every human being has within themselves the key to his salvation or damnation.

“And conversion is the Church’s slogan. It does not preach against those in power with hatred or resentment, but with love for the one who wants to be saved, that they may be converted”.⁹⁰⁹

Christians protest vigorously against their persecutors, but they do so without feelings of hatred, in order not to close down their enemies’ space, in order to leave them an opportunity to reject evil and begin to live good lives: “Let’s be firm in defending our rights, but with great love in our hearts, because defending them in this way, with love, we are also looking for the conversion of sinners. That is a Christian’s ‘vengeance’. We pray for the conversion of those who have struck us”.⁹¹⁰

⁹⁰² Homilies, 30th December 1979, vol.VIII, 111

⁹⁰³ Homilies, 14th August 1977, vol.I-II, 176

⁹⁰⁴ Homilies, 1st April 1979, vol.VI, 250

⁹⁰⁵ Homilies, 29th May 1977, vol.I-II, 74

⁹⁰⁶ Homilies, 9th September 1979, vol.VI, 243

⁹⁰⁷ Homilies, 1st November 1977, vol.I-II, 301

⁹⁰⁸ Homilies, 1st October 1978, vol.V, 223

⁹⁰⁹ Homilies, 6th August 1977, vol.I-II, 155

⁹¹⁰ Homilies, 19th June 1977, vol.II-II,101

7.17.4 The appeal to the rich

“Those that abuse power in government are on a sinful path. Those that abuse economic power are on a sinful path. And if they don’t repent and search for the path of justice, they will not live – and the responsibility will be theirs”.⁹¹¹ The situation of salvation or damnation was urgent, and it was therefore necessary not to delay the required change. The poor were dying slowly from malnutrition and from lack of adequate health care, or they were dying tortured and murdered at the hands of the military and paramilitaries who were defending the interests of their rich masters. This situation of sin, ‘mortal’ because it leads to death, had to be changed into a situation of sharing and love. There had to be an existence of well-being and of happiness for the whole people:

“Dear capitalists, let us not use the idolatry of money, the power of money, to exploit people who are poorer. You have the power to make our people so happy, if you had little bit of love in your hearts. What instruments of God you would make, with your chests full of money, your bank accounts, with your estates, and lands, if you didn’t use them selfishly, but to create happiness in this people who suffer such hunger and need and malnutrition”.⁹¹²

Archbishop Romero applied to the situation before him the teaching of Puebla: “‘rationed prosperity’, that is, a frugality shared by all, rather than a growing wealth not shared by all”.⁹¹³ This wise formula pointed the road to salvation for the rich hoarders. We are part of the fabric of a system of unjust distribution of power and riches, and, speaking to the local situation, Archbishop Romero called upon those who kept hold of an excess of material goods in the midst of this national situation of extreme poverty to share what they had. The rich man who is greedy does not develop as a human being if he remains suffocated in his riches. This “egolatry”, this self-idolatry, had to fade away to make possible human solidarity.

The German biblical scholar Gerd Thiessen tells a parable about a fire in a theatre.

“Fire had broken out on the stage. Everyone was rushing to the exit. But the door opened inwards. Everyone was asked to take a step back. But no-one did – impelled by their own fears for their lives and pushed by others. The door remained shut. The fire on the stage was put out. But some people died in the human crush nonetheless. It’s the same with us: if we were ready for everyone to take one step back, we could open the door towards solving the problem of unemployment. That’s human, but it’s nonetheless deeply shaming. It’s shaming that we can’t do the obvious, at least share the burdens between the generations, between those who have work and those who have none.”⁹¹⁴

Archbishop Romero repeated his personal position and that of his Church in the face of these divisions, stating that “there is only one Church”,⁹¹⁵ and that is the Church of the poor. The rich are warmly invited to be converted and join this one true Church, and this call he makes comes from ‘below’, from the Church of the poor:

“It is no prestige for the Church to be at ease with the powerful... This is the prestige of the Church: to feel that the poor regard it as their own, to feel that the Church is living a dimension on Earth calling everyone, including the rich, to be converted and be saved by entering the world of the poor, because only they are the blessed”.⁹¹⁶

⁹¹¹ Homilies, 1st October 1978, vol.V, 223

⁹¹² Homilies, 25th March 1979, vol.VI, 230

⁹¹³ CELAM, Puebla, 130

⁹¹⁴ G. Thiessen, *The Open Door. Variations on Biblical Themes*, London 1991, pp 163-64.

⁹¹⁵ Homilies, 11th November 1979, vol.VII, 426

⁹¹⁶ Homilies, 17th February 1980, vol.VIII, 239

The poor are those who bring the salvation of Christ to the world, because Christ identifies fully with them (Mt. 25.40). It is from the position of Christ's poor that we are saved and only from their position: "God wants to save the rich too, but, precisely because he wants to save them, he tells them they cannot be saved as long as they are not converted to Christ who lives, precisely, among the poor".⁹¹⁷ The rich must adopt as their own the cause of the poor, because that cause is also the cause of Christ. In a word, the rich must become Christians:

"The rich person kneeling before their money, even if they go to mass and even if they perform a lot of pious practices, if they have not detached themselves in their heart from the idol money, they are an idol-worshipper and not a Christian. There is only one Church, that which adores the true God and who knows how to give things their relative value".⁹¹⁸

Archbishop Romero asked the rich of the Salvadorean oligarchy not to act with greed and not to be violent to those who call them to conversion:

"I want to extend a brotherly call, a pastoral call, to the oligarchy so that they might repent and be converted and live, so that they might use their economic power to bring happiness to people... Let them share what they are and have. Let them not keep on silencing with violence the voice of those of us who offer this invitation. Let them not keep on killing those of us who are trying to achieve a more just sharing of the power and wealth of the country." ⁹¹⁹

"And because the Church is a mother she says to you too, the rich and powerful: Be converted, my children! Be converted!... Don't make laws to defend yourselves, though you are a minority. Make laws to defend the poor. Make arrangements. Bring into the dialogue not only people like yourselves, also bring in the rural worker who is dying of malnutrition, and because he is dying of starvation joins an organization, not for subversion, but to survive". ⁹²⁰

From January 1980 the repression against the people became harsher and the tone of Archbishop Romero's homilies became more severe. On at least on three occasions he used the image of the rings the rich wear on their fingers to warn that them the country was heading for civil war and massive bloodshed if they did not introduce a more just distribution of wealth:

"I am simply the shepherd, the brother, the friend of this people, who knows its sufferings, its hunger, its anguish; in the name of these I raise my own voice to say: Don't worship your riches like an idol. Don't protect them in a way that leaves others to die of hunger... You have to be able to take off your rings before you have your fingers taken off". ⁹²¹

"Once again, in the name of our Church, I renew the appeal to you to listen to God's voice and willingly share with all your power and riches, instead of provoking a civil war which will drown us in blood. There is still time to take off the rings so that you don't have your hand taken off".⁹²²

"It's better, to repeat the now familiar image, to take your rings off in time, before you have your hand cut off". ⁹²³

The excessive and constantly increasing wealth of the few was an insult to the raw poverty of the many. Archbishop Romero condemned this abuse in a telling remark: "Sisters and brothers, don't you think that this 'dance of the millions' is an outrage to the poor of our country?"⁹²⁴

⁹¹⁷ Homilies, 1st July 1979, vol.VII, 49

⁹¹⁸ Homilies, 11th November 1979, vol.VII, 426

⁹¹⁹ Homilies, 24th February 1980, vol.VIII, 275

⁹²⁰ Homilies, 29th July 1979, vol.VII, 129

⁹²¹ Homilies, 6th January 1980, vol.VIII, 134

⁹²² Homilies, 13th January 1980, vol.VIII, 156-157

⁹²³ Homilies, 17th February 1980, vol.VIII, 251

⁹²⁴ Homilies, 14th October 1979, vol.VII, 342

7.17.5 The appeal to the military

Archbishop Romero addressed a message to those involved in the torture, disappearance and assassination of the defenceless people who were demanding their rights. The soldiers, the para-militaries and the National Guard were the defenders of the greedy interests of the oligarchy, and were the greatest oppressors of the people. His condemnation always contained a plea to them to convert treat the people well:

“Be converted! You cannot find God on these paths of torture and abuse”.⁹²⁵ “You who have your hands stained with crime, torture, abuse, injustice, be converted. I love you very much.

You make me sad, because you are heading for damnation”.⁹²⁶

“The Church highlights the great sins of the military, but it is calling them to conversion”.⁹²⁷

“Don’t be blood-thirsty like Herod. Don’t be servile like the soldiers who, on Herod’s orders, went round killing the innocent. Don’t be cruel. Don’t torture. Don’t mistreat people”.⁹²⁸

These words, like all the words of condemnation spoken by Archbishop Romero, were free from all bitterness; they were hard-hitting, but full of love for the brutal enemies of the people. They were words intended to save them from eternal damnation. They were words of truth. Comparing the country’s armed forces with Herod’s murderous troops would wound the pride of the military dignity, but it was also a statement of historical truth about a situation of sin, a people drowning in blood.

The blind obedience of soldiers who obeyed immoral orders to torture and kill defenceless people was cowardice and a blindness to the moral responsibility demanded of every human person. The soldiers who blindly obeyed the immoral orders of their officers were as cowardly as their superiors. They demonstrated a lack of human feeling for their own people. They should have known that their people were more important than the armed forces. The Church has the duty to educate the conscience of every member of the People of God so that they learn to live lives of virtue and love. To torture, abuse and kill defenceless people in obedience to a superior or out of a false sense of ‘duty’ based on fanaticism is a grave sin. Such a practice of obeying immoral orders is roundly condemned by the Church.⁹²⁹ The German theologian Bernard Häring singled out for condemnation “the stubborn, stupid obedience of Christians towards cruel orders”.⁹³⁰ Following this honourable ethical tradition of support for human life, Archbishop Romero appealed directly to the military rank and file:

“Brothers, you are part of our own people, and you are killing your own brothers and sisters from the rural areas. Against any order to kill given by a human being, God’s law must prevail: Thou shalt not kill! No soldier is obliged to obey an order that is against the law of God.... In the name of God, and in the name of this suffering people, whose tears rise to heaven with more force each day, I beg you, I ask you, you, I order you in the name of God: stop the repression!”⁹³¹

This sermon was preached the day before Archbishop Romero’s assassination. It is possible that these words sealed his prophet’s bloody fate. Passionist priest Juan Macho concelebrated that last Sunday Mass with Romero, and later described his conversation with Archbishop Romero in the sacristy afterwards:

“An American Franciscan and I were concelebrating that last Sunday mass of Archbishop Romero’s. And I remember that when he’d finished the mass, while we were taking off our

⁹²⁵ Homilies, 6th August 1978, vol.V, 113

⁹²⁶ Homilies, 10th September 1978, vol.V, 113

⁹²⁷ Homilies, 4th November 1979, vol.VII, 405

⁹²⁸ Homilies, 28th December 1977, vol.III, 106

⁹²⁹ cf Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 79

⁹³⁰ J. Dunn, *No Lions in the Hierarchy*, Dublin 1994, 299.

⁹³¹ Homilies, 23rd March 1980, vol. VIII, 382

vestments, I said to him, with the friendship and confidence that marked our relationship: ‘Archbishop, you used some very strong language today,’ and I added, ‘Had you planned them, or did you say them on the spur of the moment?’ And he answered, ‘I planned them’. And I said to him, ‘Archbishop, the military are going to take this as incitement to rebellion.’ I had been a military chaplain in Spain and I knew how the military think on these issues. And he told me: ‘That’s the risk, but it had to be said.’”⁹³²

7.17.6 The letter to President Carter

On his return from his journey to Louvain, where he was awarded an honorary doctorate, Archbishop Romero took one of the most far-sighted, prophetic and risky initiatives of the whole of his three years as Archbishop. In the open letter he wrote to US President Jimmy Carter he challenged the US policy of military and economic assistance to his country. He mentioned the systematic violation of human rights, arguing that “political power is in the hands of unscrupulous military, who can only do one thing, repress the people to benefit the interests of the Salvadorean hierarchy”.⁹³³ With the arms they received from the United States Government they were killing the members of the popular socio-political organizations. Archbishop Romero went on to urge President Carter, “as long as our armed forces are not converted, do not give them any more aid”.⁹³⁴

Unfortunately, neither Carter, nor Reagan or George Bush Senior heeded the firm request of the Archbishop of San Salvador, made in the name of the vast majority of Salvadoreans. The result was a bloody twelve-year civil war.

7.17.7 Christ is the eschatological Judge

“Be converted. Let us return to the kingdom of that love where these episodes of bloodshed have no place. Christ is giving us time, until the time of our death, until the time when he will come to judge the living and the dead”.⁹³⁵

⁹³² Z. Díez and J. Macho, *Monseñor Romero (1975-76) 'En Santiago de María me topé con la miseria'*, San José 1994, 205

⁹³³ Homilies, 17th February 1980, vol.VIII, 248

⁹³⁴ Homilies, 24th February 1980, vol.VIII, 276

⁹³⁵ Homilies, 20th November 1977, vol.I-II, 335

CONCLUSION

CHAPTER EIGHT - THEOLOGICAL AND PASTORAL ASSESSMENT OF ARCHBISHOP ROMERO'S HOMILIES

In the course of this investigation I have commented systematically on the theological and pastoral thought of Archbishop Romero, demonstrating how his preaching was solidly based on the bulwark of the Church's magisterium. From what I have heard on the 'Romero Tapes', the recordings of the homilies, and read on the transcription from the spoken word to the written word, we are indeed in possession of a valuable piece of history, thanks to the late María Julia Hernández. She recognized the significance of Archbishop Romero in his time and place and recorded his homilies live, almost from the beginning of Romero's tenure as Archbishop, which lasted three years, perhaps the same period as the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

María Julia was, for many years, the director of Tutela Legal, the Archdiocesan Human Rights Office. During the years of civil war she drove to her work by car every weekday without changing her route, undeterred by the high profile of her office and the distinct possibility of assassination. We owe a debt to María Julia and her team of stenographers, who recorded Romero's radio broadcasts each Sunday, and produced recordings which became a forum of truth and the Gospel for the listeners. María Julia and the stenographers produced the written volumes of Romero's spoken word and we are in debt to her and her team for following through with this intuition that this was history in the making. I remember pointing out that when Cardinal Basil Hume wrote Archbishop Romero a letter of solidarity and he read it out as an "honour" for him to receive the missive from England, Maria Julia hid her face in her hands when I pointed out that the transcriber had taken the word "honour" to be "horror". Basil Hume, with his self-deprecating sense of humour, would have enjoyed that slip.

Historically I would place Romero alongside Basil the Great of Cappadocia, Saint Ambrose of Milan and St John Chrysostom of Constantinople. Like them, the Archbishop of San Salvador lived a life of simplicity and austerity, a sign of greatness. His spiritual notes, quoted in this book, reveal his asceticism, his ascetical base of self-mortification in the Lord. Like Basil, who resided in a hospice for the poor and homeless, Archbishop Romero resided in a simple room in the grounds of a hospice for people dying of cancer. Like these three bishops, Romero defended the poor against the avarice and exploitation of the rich, not fearing the loss of popularity with the wealthy through his stand in favour of those on the underside of history. Bravely, Ambrose excommunicated the emperor Theodosius after a massacre of thousands of people in the tax revolt of Thessalonica, for which the emperor was directly responsible.

Bravely, Chrysostom (Golden Mouth) confronted the Empress Eudoxia for being luxurious and greedy and not caring sufficiently for her poor subjects. With the same stubbornness, Romero confronted the Salvadorean state, condemning the abuses of the powerful few who ruled the country, while others starved and struggled to eke out an existence. These four bishops (Basil, Ambrose, Chrysostom, and Romero) are prophetic voices for the universal destiny of creation's gifts. According to this key Church teaching, the things of the world are to be enjoyed by everyone and are not for the use and abuse of those who dominate economically and politically. Like Chrysostom, Romero suffered martyrdom for evangelically defending the weak. Chrysostom's tumultuous ministry ended in exile and a martyr's death through exhaustion and ill-treatment near the Black Sea. Archbishop Romero was martyred for his devoted and merciful commitment to the victims of State repression in El Salvador. A

bullet fired from the doorway ended his life as he celebrated the eucharist in the chapel of the cancer hospital where he lived. “Archbishop Romero died as he had lived, as a priest, that is to say, offering his life as an extension of the sacrifice of Jesus”.⁹³⁶

8.1 Theological Perspective

8.1.1 The richness of the content

In three short years and in many long (but pleasant) homilies, Archbishop Romero fulfilled his calling as catechist of his community and teacher of the faith. His cathedral came to be a focal point for family reunions in which the children looked for enlightenment and affirmation from their ‘father’ in God, Monseñor, as the people affectionately called him. But for the oppressors of the people the words of the Archbishop stung like the flick of a scorpion’s tail. For the oppressors of the people, the words of the Archbishop were words of darkness and condemnation. They were words of power, carefully prepared in consultation with his group of advisers, and with God in prayer. They were not words of banal ‘street talk’, nor of the classroom, nor of table-talk. No. They were words that echoed the will of God in unrepeatable historical circumstances, words spoken in the Spirit of Jesus Christ. The words uttered by Archbishop Romero are spoken words which came from his mind and his tongue, but they transcended him, because they were also the anguished cry of God. He took up the Word, and the Word took possession of him. He became the prophet possessed by the Spirit of God, and his words were, and continue to be, *sacramentum verbi*, a sacrament of the Word.

Archbishop Romero was the teacher for simple people, setting out for them a simple *Summa Theologiae* to guide them in their thinking and feeling of life’s issues, strengthening their humanity and their Christianity in the midst of a highly dangerous situation. To his congregation he communicated his own understanding of God, of his Christ, and of the Church, amidst the perplexities of bloodshed and a *de facto* civil war. Every Sunday he would proclaim passages of scripture in accordance with the liturgical calendar, but Archbishop Romero did not concentrate exclusively on these specific texts, as a thought for each biblical reading. His preaching was more global, embracing the major themes of life and death within the Salvadorean context. Archbishop Romero treated sacred scripture in its totality as a love letter from God to strengthen and guide people, and enable them to live more tenderly with their God and with each other. This preaching was an exposition of ecclesiology designed to open the eyes and revive the hearts of the pilgrim people.

And this people, great in its simplicity, caught the resonance of Romero’s words, and they would punctuate his words throughout the course of the homily with applause filled with tenderness and support. The eloquence of the anointed prophet causes commotion and spontaneous applause, similar to the approbation Chrysostom received for his eloquence and gift of rapport.

8.1.2 The inter-weaving of faith and life

For Archbishop Romero, Christian faith and daily life formed a symbiosis, an organic union that could not be broken. The objective of his homilies was to reinsert the people into their everyday lives life in order to transform it evangelically. His word was incarnate in the reality of El Salvador, in the hope of coaxing the people to change the cruelty of the situation radically, through love and non-violence. His was no ethereal, disembodied word, because Archbishop Romero knew well that in the preaching of the Word of God we cannot evade historical reality. The Word questions the believer and drives him or her towards commitment in his or her particular situation and circumstances, and if it does not do this, it is

⁹³⁶ Ignacio Martín-Baró, “El Liderazgo de Monseñor Romero (un análisis psico-social)”, *ECA* 4 (1981) No 389, 176

not the Word of God. This means that Christianity's orthopraxis" is not ethereal and spiritualistic. For Archbishop Romero, preaching is relevant to the situation and circumstances of daily living.

8.1.3 Discernment of events from the perspective of the Gospel

The Second Vatican Council declared: "At all times the Church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel".⁹³⁷ And this same paragraph points out the afflictions of hunger and misery as sad signs of our times adding that poverty is also a lack of spiritual goods, as is, for instance, the right to an education: "Countless numbers are totally illiterate".

On examining the signs of the times in El Salvador, Archbishop Romero became aware of the existence of hunger, extreme poverty and illiteracy. In particular he noted the lack of available land for the rural population, whose livelihood depended on working the land. The poor lacked medical care, decent housing, and other basic requisites of human existence. Archbishop Romero witnessed the sub-human situation of the excluded in contrast to the super-luxurious living conditions of the super-rich, and- this is the sad reality in El Salvador - the chasm separating the two worlds of the rich and poor. At the beginning of the 1980s, when rural workers joined their trade unions in huge numbers to demand their rights by peaceful political means, the oligarchy used its military and police to crush the voice of dissent, and systematically murdered the leaders and disrupted the base of the movements. In order to legitimize their repressive violence the Congress passed a Public Order Law which forbade workers and the poor to form political organizations, and so began an epoch of cruelty against the defenceless people of El Salvador and their organizations. The signs of the times were: unjust "law", repression, the "disappearance" of people suspected of being members of political organizations, torture and assassinations. Among these thousands of people assassinated there were six priests. Others were threatened, slandered, expelled and tortured. Female religious were also objects of persecution. But hardest hit of the repression were the poor and defenceless. It was from within these tumultuous circumstances that Archbishop Romero incarnated the word of God.

8.2 Pastoral Perspective

8.2.1 Simplicity of exposition

The language of Archbishop Romero's homilies had to be rooted in simplicity and popular idiom, with a catechetical tone within the reach of the most humble. To help him with this task he used to invite chosen advisers to a "homily advisory breakfast".⁹³⁸ Among them were staff of the Legal Aid Office, who gave him detailed information of human rights abuses from the past week. This accurate information rooted the Archbishop's homilies in the reality of the country.

On special occasions he could call on distinguished theologians:

"I had lunch with Fathers Ellacuría and Sobrino to chat about a forthcoming pastoral letter on the situation of the country and the mission of the Church, which I hope will be ready for publication by 6th of August. We'll meet again in a week's time in order to confirm the outline and we hope to have it ready by then".⁹³⁹

⁹³⁷ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 4

⁹³⁸ Oscar Romero, *Su diario, del 31 marzo 1978 al 20 marzo 1980*, San Salvador 1989, 209, San Salvador, 1989, 209

⁹³⁹ Ibid, 204: Archbishop Romero met with several people before writing his Sunday homily. Among them was his Vicar General, Ricardo Urioste, Roberto Cuellar of the Legal Aid Office and the Mexican Jesuit Rafael Moreno, who presented an analysis of the country's political situation. (cf. T. Whitfield, *Paying the Price*, Philadelphia 1995, 114. It is interesting that the adviser on the two last homilies was Ellacuría, in the absence of Moreno, who was out of the country. Nevertheless the final preparation of the homilies each Sunday and the final exposition was Romero's alone.

Not only did Archbishop Romero incarnate the word of God, but he adapted it to the people's comprehension. His 'summa' of theology was not only for the elites, but was directed to the poor themselves, for the most part unable to read and write, as his privileged recipients. To achieve this simplicity of exposition was an absolute necessity. And even without looking at the text of the homilies we can judge the success of this endeavour. First of all, each Sunday the Cathedral was packed. And the huge congregation stood – as did Archbishop Romero himself – throughout a homily that lasted over an hour.

The listeners applauded. Romero also received many letters of appreciation from people whose writing was hardly legible, looking for their missing 'disappeared', asking his support over the radio. A third sign of the impact of his homilies was the way the people gathered round their radios to hear what the archbishop had to say, despite government jamming, and the destruction of the archdiocesan transmitter on several occasions by bombs.

The technique of repetition used by Archbishop Romero was a sign that he had something important to say and wanted his listeners' attention. Repetition also makes it easier to remember the message and makes it easier to understand. Archbishop Romero used to repeat key ideas. In a written text this would be redundancy, but not in the spoken word.

Another method used by Archbishop Romero with great naturalness is metaphor. They are to be found scattered throughout his homilies. This literary technique captures the attention of the listeners, because the rural folk and simple people are enchanted by what is descriptive or narrative. They also tend to remember images more than abstract words. Here are some of the abundant examples of the use of metaphor:

1. "The husks that the pigs eat don't fill a human being with happiness."⁹⁴⁰
2. "There is no more diabolical sin than to steal the bread of someone who is hungry."⁹⁴¹
3. "The Church persecuted is like those rocks in the sea which, when battered by the waves, are made beautiful by strings of pearls."⁹⁴²
4. "The senseless beast that kicks a rock does no harm to the rock, but only to itself."⁹⁴³
5. "Sin jumps like a snake pelted with stones."⁹⁴⁴
6. "This Church, like the wife whose husband is far away, sighs for his presence."⁹⁴⁵
7. "What blame has the sun on finding in its pure, dazzling light, puddles, excrement, and rubbish on this earth?"⁹⁴⁶
8. "The blame for a bad photograph lies not with the photograph, but with the photographer."⁹⁴⁷
9. "Our preaching, against the flow, seems like ploughing the sea."⁹⁴⁸
10. "When someone puts his hand into a pot of salted water, if the hand is uninjured, nothing happens. But if he has a cut on his hand, then how it smarts!"⁹⁴⁹
11. "No-one likes a wound to be touched."⁹⁵⁰

⁹⁴⁰ Homilies, 11th September 1977, vol. I-II, 216

⁹⁴¹ Homilies, 24th February 1980, vol. VIII, 262

⁹⁴² Homilies, 29th May 1977, vol. I-II, 77

⁹⁴³ Homilies, 11th September 1977, vol. I-II, 214

⁹⁴⁴ Homilies, 25th November 1977, vol. I-II, 339

⁹⁴⁵ Homilies, 13th November 1977, vol. I-II, 321

⁹⁴⁶ Homilies, 4th December 1977, vol. III, 20

⁹⁴⁷ Homilies, 15th January 1978, vol. III, 148

⁹⁴⁸ Homilies, 19th November 1978, vol. V, 310

⁹⁴⁹ Homilies, 29th May 1977, vol. I-II, 77

⁹⁵⁰ Homilies, 11th September 1977, vol. I-II, 214

12. “In the presence of a saint, shadows flee, justice gets annoyed, there’s violence, and they kill him.”⁹⁵¹

13. “The wild animal is loose and thirsting for blood.”⁹⁵²

14. “[The situation of the country seems like] a powder-keg, ready to explode at any minute.”⁹⁵³

15. “They are shutting the valve which could release the pressure from this explosive situation.”⁹⁵⁴

16. “Sisters and brothers, don’t you think that this dance of the millions is an insult to the poor of our country?”⁹⁵⁵

17. “You have to be able to take off your rings before you have your fingers taken off.”⁹⁵⁶

Archbishop Romero’s gift for metaphor is obvious as he explains the situation of El Salvador with ideas from everyday life, such as pigs, bread, rocks, sea, waves, pearls, wild beasts, snakes, married couples, puddles, dung, a photo, a plough, salt, a wound, gunpowder, valve, dance, rings, and so on.

8.2.2 Word and character

Every word spoken by Archbishop Romero in his homilies sprang from love. Even the words that are harsh in their condemnation of torture and assassinations are a call to radical change and love, a call to conversion, words forbidding the use of violence, words testifying to the Archbishop’s kindly and compassionate heart, a reflection, a “shadow cast by the true”, as the poet has it. “Every sound tree bears good fruit” (Mt 7.17).

8.2.3 The life of the messenger within the message

The words of Archbishop Romero are honest words, because he was honest and incapable of corruption. They are words which shine with compassion for the victims of repression, because he was a compassionate person. This dimension of *misereor super turbas*,⁹⁵⁷ of love for the lost, suffering people, is fundamental in the being and in the words of Archbishop Romero. He was moved by entering into direct contact with the poor and came out bravely in their defence. But his love was not exclusive, because he loved the rich too by calling them to salvation through generous giving to the poor. He called them to conversion, following that great patristic line of his forefathers in the Church, but he, too, like them, was never a sycophant of the rich and wealthy, and spoke to them in plain language. He proclaimed to them the will of God, that they must share what they have with those that have not. He was the proverbial just man, a doctor of the Church and a martyr at the same time, resembling St John Chrysostom in that aspect – in my opinion.

The key to Romero is in his option for the poor. Their affliction tore open his heart. He made their distress his own distress, and felt their indignation in his veins as would any prophet in a situation of so much misery, so much injustice, so much death. And such indignation against what is undignified for the diminished ones of society is the point of departure of true ethics and is also its finality. The attack against the humanum, the dignity of the human person, leads to the practice of a love that frees.

⁹⁵¹ Homilies, 11th September 1977, vol. I-II, 214

⁹⁵² Homilies, 13th November 1977, vol. I-II, 321

⁹⁵³ Homilies, 4th December 1977, vol. III, 20

⁹⁵⁴ Homilies, 15th January 1978, vol. III, 148

⁹⁵⁵ Homilies, 19th November 1978, vol. V, 310

⁹⁵⁶ Homilies, 6th January 1980, vol. VIII, 134

⁹⁵⁷ Cf Mt 9.36: “When he saw the crowds he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

Moved by the memory of Archbishop Romero, his vicar general, Ricardo Urioste, Romero's collaborator and friend, described him in English as "a marvellous man".⁹⁵⁸ The Jesuit theologian Jon Sobrino echoes this sentiment and sums up his experience of having known the Archbishop of El Salvador – prophet and martyr – in the following words:

"Archbishop Romero was a gift to us".

We give thanks to God for this gift.

⁹⁵⁸ Monsignor Urioste conversing in English with Archbishop Keith O'Brien of St Andrews and Edinburgh in a private interview in San Salvador.

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