

Reflection from Jacek Orzechowski, OFM
On the Canonization of Archbishop Oscar Romero
October 14, 2018

This Sunday, October 14, Archbishop Oscar Romero is being officially recognized in Rome as a saint. There will be a lot of jubilation, especially among the Salvadorans and many thousands of people who have been inspired by the prophetic words and deeds of this contemporary saint. I count myself as one among them. At the same time, I cannot shake off a lingering, somber question: what would Oscar Romero do and say to us in the United States if he were alive today?

This is not just a pointless speculation. Forty years ago, Oscar Romero vigorously denounced the state-sponsored violence and terror that were being inflicted upon people defending their human dignity and seeking justice. Our Salvadoran saint was radical in a sense that he looked deeply beyond the surface into the root causes. His commitment to peacemaking was radical too, in the sense that he sought to expose the roots of evil and violence. He spoke about structural violence and social injustice. He worked to uncover the perfidious actions of the powers that be bent on systemic marginalization and repression of those deemed “undesirable.”

We, too, at this time in our nation’s history are called to be radical in our way of seeing reality. We must not allow disinformation to cloud our vision and we must renew our commitment to seeing the world in and through the eyes of the poor, the marginalized, the voiceless. State-sponsored, structural violence and social injustice appear to be on the rise at home and abroad. We witness an assault on the dignity and basic human rights of immigrants. The current Administration, under the guise of national security, has been carrying out its racist, anti-immigrant policies, even to the point of tearing away children from the arms of their parents. There are strong reasons to believe that Oscar Romero would, in unequivocal terms, denounce that terror and the systemic war against the poor. And he would take action as a shepherd of God’s Church.

Our Salvadoran saint called people to conversion: personal and collective; spiritual and political – even to a “cosmic liberation,” that is, an ecological conversion. Still, he was not a prophet of doom. He saw himself as a troubadour of hope. Oscar Romero used to tell people that their small, imperfect efforts did matter. He encouraged patience and radical trust in God. We ought to glean some wisdom from now Saint Romero when we feel overwhelmed by the gravity of the problems that beset us. Even in the face of our own sense of impotence, our impatience with ourselves and others, or disillusionment with our civic and ecclesial institutions, Oscar Romero reminds us that, “The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is beyond our vision,’ and that, ‘we are workers, not master builders, ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.”

Archbishop Romero called on Christians to be active and critical. He challenged them “not to accept the situation without analyzing it inwardly and deeply.” Currently, in the United States, we face a situation of a particularly acute and perilous, state-sponsored war on truth

and on democratic principles and institutions. Blithely choosing to ignore the overwhelming scientific evidence about climate change, refusing to take any actions to avert a climate catastrophe and potential collapse of the human civilization, the Trump Administration and its enablers are sowing seeds of unimaginable, horrific violence. Oscar Romero came to understand the correlation between the plight of the poor and the harm inflicted on God's earth and its fragile ecosystems. We, too, if we want to preserve his legacy, must work to overcome the fragmentation between, for example, the struggle for immigrant rights and the struggle for climate justice, or between the struggle for women's rights and the struggle to uphold the dignity of every human being, already and not-yet-born. Moreover, the legacy of Oscar Romero commits us to denounce and expose the violence carried out by the purveyors of willful lies and propaganda that stigmatize the poor, scapegoat the most vulnerable, and divide our nation so as to maintain unjust power structures and protect the greedy.

Like the Hebrew prophets – and Jesus himself – Archbishop Romero had the courage to question institutional religion and its commitments to the vision and values it claimed to uphold. Echoing the prophet Isaiah 56:10, Romero described religious leaders who fail to see and speak the truth as “dumb dogs that cannot bark” and are unable to protect the people. In one of his homilies, Romero said: “A church that suffers no persecution but enjoys the privileges and support of the things of the earth - beware! - is not the true church of Jesus Christ. Preaching that does not point out sin is not the preaching of the Gospel. Preaching that makes sinners feel good so that they are secure in their sinful state, betrays the Gospel's call.”

What would Oscar Romero have said to Christian churches and their leaders that traded the integrity of the Gospel for political expediency and dominance? What sort of prophetic action would he have chosen to drive the point to other religious leaders and their followers that we cannot build a viable Culture of Life on the dead corpse of American Democracy? How would he challenge the contemporary iterations of ancient idolatries that lure with their false promises Christians across the political spectrum? What stance would he take vis-a-vis the pretense of invoking Christian values while acquiescing with a racist, anti-immigrant/ anti-poor agenda, with the evil of militarism and creeping fascism? Today, each one of us is invited to seek answers to these questions. And not just with words but with individual and collective action. Saint Archbishop Oscar Romero show us the way.

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