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**Oscar Romero and Juan Gerardi: Truth, Memory, and Hope\***

**Scott A. Wright**

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Washington D.C.**

*Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero and Guatemalan Bishop Juan Gerardi were prominent defenders of human rights during the civil wars that characterized their two countries during the 1980s and 1990s. By their public proclamations and prophetic witness, they laid the foundation for the United Nations Truth Commission in El Salvador, the United Nations Commission for Historical Clarification in Guatemala, and the Recovery of the Historic Memory (REMHI) project in Guatemala. Inspired by the need to dignify the victims of state-sponsored violence by refusing to forget, and accompanying the survivors in their struggle for justice, Romero and Gerardi were instrumental in uncovering the truth, establishing justice, and recovering the historic memory of the people as essential elements of hope and reconciliation in their respective countries.*

*Keywords:* El Salvador, Guatemala, human rights, truth commission, historic memory, justice and peace, reconciliation

*The truth of Auschwitz remains hidden in its ashes. Only those who lived it in their flesh and in their minds can possibly transform their experience into knowledge...*

*Memory is the key word. To remember is to create links between past and present, between past and future. To remember is to affirm man's faith in humanity and to convey meaning on our fleeting endeavors. The aim of memory is to restore its dignity to justice...*

*But – after Auschwitz, hope is necessary. Where can it be found? In remembrance alone. (Wiesel, 1990, pp. 166, 194, 196)*

**Introduction**

On March 21, 2000, a remarkable, though little-publicized, event took place in Washington D.C. at the Holocaust Museum. There, in the heart of that building dedicated to the memory of six million Jewish victims of the Nazi Holocaust, Roberto Cabrera spoke of the work of the Recovery of the Historic Memory (REMHI) project he directed, and its attempt to document the remembrance of thousands of indigenous survivors of Guatemala's thirty-six-year-old civil war (REMHI, 1999, pp. 38-41). Joining him at the event was Christian Tomuschat, one of the authors of the United Nations Commission for Historical Clarification (UNCEH) report that characterized what happened in Guatemala as "state-sponsored genocide," placing the number of victims at 200,000 (UNCHC, 1999). The titles of both reports are evocative, as they allude to the boundaries of human speech: *Guatemala: Never Again!* and *Guatemala: Memory of Silence* – the cry of the victims and the silence of the dead.

I chose to begin this essay with this event, and with several quotations from one of the survivors of the Holocaust, Elie Wiesel, precisely to draw attention to the claim that the victims have upon the living. Wiesel writes and speaks passionately in the voice of the survivor about remembrance, and he links memory to truth, justice, and hope. My intention is to present the testimony of the Church in El Salvador and the Church in Guatemala and their defense of human rights through the figure of their leaders and now martyrs, Archbishop Oscar Romero and Bishop Juan Gerardi. In

doing so, I hope to weave into the narrative the elements of memory, truth, justice, and hope previously mentioned.

At the same time, by focusing on the words and witness of Romero and Gerardi, I hope to make clear their deepening conversion to share the suffering of the poor and to speak out even more boldly in defense of their most basic rights – especially the right of the poor to life itself. They were, by their privileged position as bishops, in a position to speak out; and they became, by opening their hearts to the suffering of their people and to the grace of God, the voice of the voiceless. Because they were not willing to forget the suffering of their people, they chose to remain in solidarity with the poor and to speak the truth, demand justice, and offer hope to their people in return. Now, after their martyrdoms, the Salvadoran and Guatemalan people remember their words, their lives, and their witness as their own.

**“The truth of Auschwitz remains hidden in the ashes.”** There are plenty of ashes in El Salvador and Guatemala. One need only recall the victims of El Mozote, in El Salvador, where 767 men, women and children were massacred on December 11 – 13, 1981 by the Atlacatl Battalion of the Salvadoran army (Danner, 1993). One person, Rufina Amaya, witnessed the cries of her four young children as they were led away to be slaughtered, and she survived to tell the world about what happened, despite denials by the Salvadoran government and the U.S. Embassy and State Department that the massacre ever happened. Only ten years later, as the exhumation teams began to uncover the skeletons of adults and children, did the world begin to pay attention.

The United Nations Truth Commission confirmed the results (UNCV, 1993, pp. 114-121), and *The New Yorker* picked up the trail and made it its cover story (1993). The truth hidden in the ashes had been exposed to the light of day. Official estimates of the total number of victims during the twelve-year conflict in El Salvador put the number at 75,000 (*The New York Times*, 1993). According to the Truth Commission, 85 per cent of the cases were attributed to agents of the State, paramilitary groups allied to them, and to the death squads; 5 per cent were attributed to the FMLN guerrillas (UNCV, 1993, p. 43).

In Guatemala, the truth is even more macabre, and the ashes even more tragically strewn across the land. According to the REMHI report, the number of massacres carried out by the military or paramilitary groups against indigenous communities numbers 422 (REMHI, 1999, pp. 142-151), while the Historical Clarification report places the number at 626 (UNCEH, pp. 34-35). In one two-year period, between September 1981 and August 1983, the REMHI report documents between 4,000 and 5,000 people were killed in the single municipality (town and surrounding villages) of Rabinal, in Baja Verapaz, out of a total of 22,733 inhabitants (REMHI, p. 238). Similar testimonies have been documented for other regions of Guatemala (Falla, 1994). According to the REMHI report, the army, police forces, civil patrollers, military commissioners, and death squads were responsible for 89.65 per cent of the violence, while 4.81 per cent was attributable to the URNG guerrillas (REMHI, 1999, p. 290).

The cruelty of the Guatemalan military defies comparison: “In most of the massacres there is evidence of multiple acts of savagery, which preceded, accompanied, or occurred after the deaths of the victims. Acts such as the killing of defenseless children, often by beating them against walls or throwing them alive into pits where the corpses of adults were later thrown; the amputation of

limbs; the impaling of victims; the killing of persons by covering them in petrol and burning them alive; the extraction, in the presence of others, of the viscera [internal organs] of victims who were still alive; the confinement of people who had been mortally tortured, in agony for days; the opening of the wombs of pregnant women, and other similarly atrocious acts” (UNCEH, p. 34).

The point of describing these cruel and savage acts is to contrast such darkness and inhumanity with the courage and dignity of the victims and survivors who bear witness to the truth. For it is, in Wiesel’s words, “only those who lived [such cruelty] in their flesh and in their minds [who] can possibly transform their experience into knowledge” and, I would add, offer light and hope for the future.

**“The aim of memory is to restore its dignity to justice.”** It is precisely through the witness of the victims in El Salvador and Guatemala – and those, like Oscar Romero and Juan Gerardi, who chose to defend them – that justice is restored to the people. It is through their tenacity *to remember* – to not forget the suffering of their people, or their aspirations for life – that justice is restored to the victims. Such remembrance means being truthful about reality, about what is really happening to the poor, about who is responsible for the violence, about how unjust economic and political structures generate violence and exclude the poor and Indigenous. By staking their lives, and by extension, the life of the Church, with the victims of violence and oppression, Oscar Romero and Juan Gerardi could speak the truth with power and *to* power with a credibility that endeared them to the poor and ultimately cost them their lives.

In the witness of Romero and the witness of Gerardi, the judgment of the poor is eloquent: “They were killed because they defended the poor and spoke the truth!” And it is precisely the victims and the martyrs that lay claim to the truth today. They are the seal of credibility, both in the sense of bearing witness to what happened, but also in the sense of demanding of us the living that it never happen again. Justice is a hope yet to be realized, though the struggle for justice gives dignity back to the victims and to the survivors. It dignifies those who take part in the struggle for justice, and it bears witness to the truth, the reason people were killed, and the dreams and aspirations for life that they bore in their hearts.

**“But – after Auschwitz, hope is necessary. Where can it be found? In remembrance alone.”** We are, ultimately, people of faith; we believe in truth, we believe in justice, we hope for the future. We believe that life, not death, has the last word. In the words that another twentieth century martyr, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., liked to quote: “We shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice. We shall overcome ... because truth crushed to earth will rise again ... We shall overcome ... because truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne, yet that scaffold sways the future, and behind the demon known, stands a God within the shadow, keeping watch above his own” (King, 1986, p. 277).

If this were not so, we would not care about what happened in El Salvador and Guatemala; we would not be concerned about justice being restored to the victims; we would be afraid of the future. Sadly, that describes many of us, but the blame is not entirely our own. We need to help awaken hope for life, and in no small measure the victims and martyrs of El Salvador and Guatemala do just that: they help us to be better human beings; they help us to hope for the future – *by remembering*.

## **Journey to the Heart of the People**

### **Oscar Romero and the Passion of Aguilares**

Much has been made of the “conversion” of Oscar Romero to the poor upon the death of his friend, Father Rutilio Grande, only weeks after his installation as Archbishop of San Salvador. Romero’s conversion might also be likened to a call to share more deeply in the suffering of the poor and the Good News of God’s love for his people (Clarke, 2014; Guidos, 2018; Kelly, 2013; Wright, 2016; Wright et al., 2000).

Following Grande’s death, Romero began to proclaim the Gospel in such a way that it became enfleshed in the conflictive history of El Salvador and gave hope to the poor, announcing the fullness of life and denouncing the poverty, repression, and death of so many of his beloved people. Romero illuminated the conflictive reality of El Salvador from the perspective of God’s plan of salvation and called on his people to participate in bringing to fullness the life, peace, and justice that are signs of God’s reign. And he did so with a coherence and credibility that in the end he became the Good News that he proclaimed.

The first three months Romero served as Archbishop of San Salvador laid the foundation for the remaining three years of his pastoral ministry, until his martyrdom on March 24, 1980. The death of Rutilio Grande, instead of being the occasion to draw back and reconsider options that placed the Church – and indeed his own life – in danger, became instead the defining first step in a journey that would lead finally to Romero’s martyrdom (Clarke, 2014; Guidos, 2018; Kelly, 2013; Wright 2016; Wright et al., 2000).

As Romero said in Rutilio Grande’s funeral Mass in Aguilares, “This is not the moment to speak about my personal relationship with Father Grande, but rather to gather from this cadaver a message for all of us who continue the pilgrimage.” And he would add, “Let us not forget. We are a pilgrim church, exposed to misunderstanding, to persecution; but a Church that walks peacefully because we carry within us the force of love” (Romero, 1980-1989, March 14, 1977 homily).

Romero made an exceptional decision to cancel all other Masses in the Archdiocese the following Sunday, and to invite all the faithful to celebrate a single Mass in the Cathedral of San Salvador. There he made public his support for all priests who were in danger of persecution: “Whoever touches one of my priests, touches me.” And there he received the public acclamation of the people who, in a gesture that would become the hallmark of his Sunday homilies in the cathedral, enthusiastically applauded his words:

Thank you. This applause ratifies the profound joy I feel in my heart in taking possession of the Archdiocese: just to know that my weaknesses, my inabilities find their complement, their strength, and their courage in a unified priesthood (Romero, 1980-1989, March 20, 1977 homily).

Strengthened by this relationship to his people, Romero began to define the mission of the Church amid a conflictive social reality in the weeks that followed. On Holy Thursday, he told the people: You are prophets in the world .... You have to announce like the prophets – like a prophetic people anointed by the Spirit that anointed Christ – the wonders of God in the world, to

encourage the good that is done in the world and to energetically denounce evil (Romero, 1980-1989, April 7, 1977 homily).

He called on the people not to be spectators, but to allow their hearts to enter deeply into the tradition of the Church and to find their home there, a sentiment that would one day be etched on his tomb in San Salvador: "*Sentir con the Iglesia.*"

The Word of God has a religious mission ... and a human mission: To love our neighbor [means] to be concerned about their needs, their concrete situation; and, like the Good Samaritan, to help the poor fallen by the roadside (Romero, 1980-1989, April 7, 1977 homily).

Already Romero was beginning to define the signs that would characterize his passionate defense of human rights: to announce the Good News means also to denounce what is evil in the world; to love our neighbor means concretely to come to the aid of the poor who have fallen by the roadside and to denounce the cause of their affliction. His prophetic witness would be one closely linked to the conflictive reality of El Salvador and incarnated in the life of the poor and their struggle for life.

This commitment to the poor was precisely that which provoked the death of so many Christians in El Salvador. Rutilio Grande did not hesitate to denounce the oppression of the poor by wealthy landowners, or to empower poor peasants to organize and defend their rights so that they would not continue to be assaulted but break free from their bondage – that is why he was killed (Guidos, 2018; Kelly, 2013).

In the weeks that followed Rutilio Grande's death, Romero began to define the marks of a church that defends the life of its people:

The Church is concerned about the rights of people ... and about life that is at risk.... The Church is concerned about those who cannot speak, those who suffer, those who are tortured, and those who are silenced. This is not getting involved in politics.... Let this be clear: when the Church preaches social justice, equality, and the dignity of people, defending those who suffer and those who are assaulted, this is not subversion, this is not Marxism. This is the authentic teaching of the Church (Romero, 1980-1989, May 8, 1977 homily).

And, Romero added, "The Church cannot remain silent. It has to speak out."

In the months following Rutilio Grande's death, however, the violence escalated. On May 11, a second priest, Alfonso Navarro, was assassinated. Also in May, the Army occupied Grande's parish in Aguilares, killing the sacristan, expelling a foreign priest, and turning the church into a military barracks. In June, Romero returned to Aguilares to reclaim the parish. There he told the nervous crowd that had gathered in the church:

Today it is my responsibility to assemble this Church. This sanctuary has been profaned, the tabernacle for the Blessed Sacrament has been destroyed, and the people have been humiliated and sacrificed in such an undignified manner.... I bring you the Word Christ sends you: a word of solidarity, a word of encouragement and orientation, and, finally, a word of conversion (Romero, 1980-1989, June 19, 1977 homily).

Once again, Romero reaffirmed the commitment he had made to the poor of El Salvador at the Mass in the cathedral three months before. In a phrase that would characterize the paschal character of his spirituality, he referred to the poor who had gathered in the parish of Aguilares as a crucified people:

You are the image ... of Christ, nailed to the cross and lanced by the spear. You are a symbol of every town, like Aguilares, that will be struck down and trampled upon; but if you suffer with faith and give your suffering a redemptive meaning, Aguilares will be singing the precious song of liberation (Romero, 1980-1989, June 19, 1977 homily).

Romero pointed to the redemptive significance of the suffering of his people, not in a passive way, as victims, but rather as inspired Christians participating with the Spirit of the Gospel in the liberation of their people:

Let us be firm in defending our rights, but with great love in our hearts, because to defend our rights in this way we are also seeking the conversion of sinners. This is the vengeance of the Christian (Romero, 1980-1989, June 19, 1977 homily).

For the next three years, until his martyrdom March 24, 1980, Romero would continue to be a prophetic voice in defense of human rights in El Salvador. Already, by the time of his death, the violence had escalated to nearly 1,000 assassinations a month. Military incursions in the rural areas were frequent, and death squads were the order of the day.

### **Juan Gerardi and the Passion of Santa Cruz del Quiché**

At the same time that Oscar Romero accompanied the passion of his people following the assassination of Rutilio Grande in March 1977 and the reclamation of the parish in Aguilares in June, Juan Gerardi and the people of his diocese of El Quiché were enduring a similar passion. In 1975 and 1976, military operations had claimed their first victims among Catholic Action members in the northern part of the Quiché diocese. These events are reflected in Gerardi's 1977 Lenten message to the people of his diocese:

For some time now, our diocese, especially in the northern part of El Quiché, is living a climate of tension and violence. We see with sadness and pain the very things the bishops of Guatemala recognized in our message ... a situation of institutionalized violence, marked by unjust social structures, where oppression is evident, and the marginalization of the great majority cause them to live under an insupportable tension. (Gerardi, 1999, p. 53)

Santa Cruz – indeed all of El Quiché – like Aguilares, was a region marked by a profound disparity between a wealthy landowning elite who held political power and a poor indigenous majority who struggled to survive as landless peasants and farmworkers without any political participation. Worse, when the poor had organized, with the encouragement of the Church, to demand their rights, their protests were met with the cruelest military repression:

Effectively, it appears that respect for the dignity of human persons and the recognition of their most fundamental and inalienable rights has been lost. Instead, persecution has been unleashed against citizens ... and in some cases, the vile use of torture and the detention and imprisonment of people without sufficient cause has been confirmed. (Gerardi, 1999, pp. 53-54)

Gerardi went on to characterize this situation, in the light of the Gospel, as “a decomposition of society ... a radical change of values ... a sinful situation that contradicts, opposes, and makes difficult the implantation of the Gospel values of the Reign of God.” The reasons for this sinful situation are many, but among them are “the thirst for riches, injustice, and the desire for power.” And in words that later would be echoed by Romero, he added:

We want our word to be one of encouragement and comfort for all those who suffer. We also want this word to be the *voice of the voiceless* [italics added] so that they are able to make their necessities heard and denounce the injustices that they suffer.... We want to direct our word to the great and powerful – who consider themselves and call themselves Christians and Catholics, daughters of the church – to take note of their responsibilities for the suffering of the people, and the obligation and possibility they have to alleviate that suffering and reestablish true relationships of justice (Gerardi, 1999, p. 55).

Again, like Romero, Gerardi quotes Paul VI’s Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* to lend strength to his pastoral message: “Evangelization brings with it an explicit message, adapted to and actualized in diverse situations and circumstances, about the rights and duties of every person ... [including] peace, justice, development ... and an especially vigorous message in our days about liberation” (Gerardi, 1999, p. 55).

And even though many were tempted to accept the actual situation of injustice and confusion as inevitable or without solution, Gerardi urged upon his people the conviction that “reconciliation requires sacrifice, requires the cross, requires the shedding of blood to the point of death ... but reaches its glorious fullness in the resurrection.... Christ is the great defender of human rights. He is the great liberator of all people and the great reconciler of people with God and with each other” (Gerardi, 1999, pp. 55-56).

Over the next three years, the repression of Indigenous peasants and catechists increased exponentially. Already by November 1977, just eight months after Gerardi’s Lenten message, 143 Catholic Action catechists had been abducted and murdered in El Quiché. With the election of General Romeo Lucas García in July 1978, a new wave of state-sponsored terror swept Guatemala, culminating in the death of thirty-nine Indigenous people, many of them from El Quiché, when they were burned to death by the Guatemalan police on January 31, 1980, after they occupied the Spanish Embassy to protest the repression.

Once again, Gerardi responded, together with the clergy and religious of the diocese, to condemn the repression. This time, the tone and the judgment of the letter was even more urgent and unequivocal in its denunciation:

As human beings and as Christians, we cannot but raise our voice in protest against the intolerable situation that has led to the death of our sisters and brothers.... For four years, a situation of extreme violence weighs upon us in El Quiché, aggravated by the military occupation of the northern part of the department and other measures that strike our people and benefit a minority. We find the fundamental cause of this is a system of economic, social, and political development, supported by a doctrine of national security, which doesn’t take into consideration the interests of the poor, forcing people to live under a reign of terror (Gerardi, 1999, pp. 60-61).



The violence in El Quiché continued unabated. The REMHI report documents no less than twenty-seven massacres in El Quiché during 1980 alone (REMHI, 1999, pp. 142-151). And the Church was targeted for persecution as well. In June, Father Jose Maria Gran was assassinated in Chajul, and in July, Father Faustino Villanueva was killed in Joyabaj. In addition, Bishop Gerardi narrowly escaped assassination (Diocese of El Quiché, 1992, pp. 80-96).

On July 19, Bishop Gerardi, together with the clergy and religious of the diocese, took the extraordinary decision to “temporarily withdraw” from El Quiché until more favorable conditions of security could be restored. The decision was controversial. While Gerardi intended the withdrawal to be a means to protest the violence, others saw it as a Church abandoning its mission. The gravity of the decision echoed the gravity of the situation of violence in the diocese:

The current year 1980 has been a Calvary for the Catholic people of the diocese.... On various occasions, the Diocese of Quiché has raised its voice, demanding justice in the face of the flagrant violations of the most basic human rights. It was our duty, as human beings, as Christians, and as Guatemalans ...

In addition to the death of two priests, the attack on convents, and the threat against the bishop ... we add to these terrible cases of examples of blood and violence the tragedy of so many poor families in our diocese who mourn the loss of their spouses, parents or children, and the death threats against several priests and religious who remain in the department ...

The conclusion at which we have arrived, in this tragic moment in the history of Guatemala, is that it is no longer possible to offer any kind of spiritual attention in the Diocese of Quiché and, for that reason, a temporary withdrawal is necessary. The bishop, priests, and religious women have decided to leave the Diocese with the hope [of finding] the minimal favorable conditions to return (Gutiérrez, 1999, pp. 64-65).

While this withdrawal of the Church from El Quiché was meant to be temporary, the diocese would remain without a resident bishop until 1985, when Julio Cabrera would be named as the new bishop. Juan Gerardi’s return, however, would be even further delayed. Gerardi was denied entry into Guatemala upon his return from the Vatican in November 1980 and went into exile in Costa Rica for two years. When he did return to Guatemala, he was named Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Guatemala, Vicar General of the Archdiocese, and Director of the Archdiocesan Human Rights Office (ODHAG). Meanwhile, the church of Quiché had been forced to bear witness to its faith in the catacombs:

The Catholic Church has lived through difficult circumstances, persecution, deaths, and misunderstandings throughout its two thousand years of existence. As Catholics, we are aware of this, and we live with hope. Christ has overcome the world, passing through a painful Good Friday to arrive at the glory of the Resurrection. Nothing will undermine the Christian spirit, inspired by the blood of martyrs and saints. We ask Catholics to remain firm in their faith, to keep the light of hope and the flame of the love of God and neighbor lit (Gutiérrez, 1999, p. 66).

Inspiring words, they would be costly ones as well. Of the 422 massacres documented by the Recovery of the Historic Memory (REMHI) project that Bishop Gerardi initiated in 1995, 209 of these occurred in his former diocese during a three-year period (1980 – 1982). While Aguilaes and the death of Rutilio Grande brought Oscar Romero closer to the heart of his people's suffering, the events of El Quiché and the withdrawal of the church meant for Juan Gerardi a long and painful separation from the people of his diocese. He did not return to El Quiché until more than fifteen years later, with the birth of the REMHI project.

### **Justice, Peace, and the Defense of Human Rights**

#### **Oscar Romero: The Voice of the Voiceless**

In a homily given just eight days before his death, Archbishop Romero spoke of the sacredness of life:

Nothing is as important to the Church as human life, the human person, especially the lives of the poor and the oppressed.... Jesus said that whatever is done to the poor is done to Him. This bloodshed, these deaths, are beyond all politics. They touch the very heart of God (Romero, 1980-1989, March 16, 1980 homily).

Romero was also the great defender of the poor, the victims of the repression, and the disappeared. In addition to the 75,000 who were killed during the war, 7,000 people were forcibly detained by the death squads at night and disappeared, dumped in such infamous places as El Playon and La Puerta del Diablo, where vultures ruled over the decaying cadavers.

Romero supported the families of these disappeared, especially the mothers, empowering them to speak out in defense of their loved ones:

No one can understand as well as a mother the value of the person, especially when this person is her own child. Why did they torture him? Why did they make her disappear? The presence of a mother who weeps for the disappeared is a presence that denounces; it is a presence that cries out to heaven for the appearance of her disappeared child.... This is the voice of justice, this is the voice of love, this is the cry that the Church gathers up from so many abandoned homes to say, "This should not be!" (Romero, 1980-1989, March 16, 1980 homily).

Like the cry of the Suffering Servant, the cry of the poor requires an advocate, somebody "who will plead their cause": the cause of the disappeared who were silenced; the refugee women and their children who were fleeing to the mountains for safety; and the cause of an entire people who were struggling for justice and being so cruelly killed.

Already by 1978, with the publication of his third pastoral letter, "The Church and Popular Political Organizations," Romero had formulated a defense of his people's right and obligation to organize and plead their own cause for justice:

The Church has a mission to serve the people.... The Church's role is to defend the cause of the poor, and all that is human in people's struggle. The Church identifies with the poor when they demand their legitimate rights. In our country, the right they are demanding is hardly more than the right to survive, to escape misery (Romero, 1985, p. 97).

Romero's defense of popular organizations and social movements was not only, or even primarily, a political option, but an essential part of evangelization. He quotes Paul VI's Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, to make this point:

The Church has the duty to proclaim the liberation of millions of human beings, many of whom are its own children, the duty of assisting the birth of this liberation, of giving witness to it, or ensuring that it is complete. This is not foreign to evangelization (Paul VI quoted Romero, 1985, p. 97).

This defense of popular organizations in El Salvador meant, "Faith and politics ought to be united in a Christian who has a political vocation, but they are not to be identified.... Faith ought to inspire political action, but not be mistaken for it." Romero's concern, however, was not limited to the Church. True to the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, he found the Spirit active within as well as beyond the visible structures and witness of the Church:

There is a more fundamental connection, based on faith, between the Church and popular organizations, even if they do not profess to be Christian. The Church believes that the action of the Spirit who brings Christ to life in human beings is greater than itself. Far beyond the confines of the Church, Christ's redemption is powerfully at work.... The Church tries to see [the popular organizations] in this way in order to purify them, encourage them, and incorporate them, together with the efforts of Christians, into the overall plan of Christ's redemption (Romero, 1985, p. 105).

In his fourth and final pastoral letter, "The Church's Mission amid the National Crisis," written in 1979, Romero reminds us that the mission of the church is:

To be the voice of the voiceless, a defender of the rights of the poor, a promoter of every just aspiration for liberation, a guide, an empowerer, a humanizer of every legitimate struggle to achieve a more just society, a society that prepares the way for the true Kingdom of God in history.

This demands of the Church a greater presence among the poor. It ought to be in solidarity with them, running the risks they run, enduring the persecution that is their fate, ready to give the greatest possible testimony to its love by defending and promoting those who were first in Jesus' love (Romero, 1985, p. 138).

Romero was willing to run the risks required to defend the poor. In the end, he, too, became a martyr. But his word has not been silenced; on the contrary, like the blood of the martyrs, his witness is his most eloquent word. Seven weeks before his death, Archbishop Romero was invited to give an address at the University of Louvain, in Belgium. There he gave in a concise manner what we have described as the four marks of his spirituality: the centrality of the poor, the Gospel as Good News to the poor, the defense of life amid a conflictual history, and the testimony of martyrdom.

Romero entitled his address at Louvain, "The Political Dimension of Faith." It may be well to note that Romero speaks of a political "dimension" of faith. There is a political dimension to spirituality, just as there is a political dimension to the Gospel that cannot be ignored without truncating either.

He began his address at Louvain by differentiating between the world of most people living in developed countries like Belgium and the United States, and “the world of the poor” living in Third World countries like El Salvador, or in pockets of misery in the First World:

Our Salvadoran world is no abstraction.... It is a world made up mostly of men and women who are poor and oppressed. And we say of that world of the poor that it is the key to understanding the activity of the Church and the political dimension of that faith. It is the poor who tell us what the world is, and what the Church’s service to the world should be....

Experiencing these realities and letting ourselves be affected by them, far from separating us from our faith, has sent us back to the world of the poor as to our true home.... It is there that we have found the real faces of the poor.... There we have met farmworkers [sic] without land and without steady employment, without running water or electricity in their homes, without medical assistance when mothers give birth, and without schools for their children.... There we have met the mothers and the wives of those who have disappeared, or who are political prisoners. There we have met the shantytown dwellers, whose wretchedness defies imagination, suffering the permanent mockery of the mansions nearby (Romero, 1985, pp. 179-180).

Romero’s spirituality is characterized, then, in the first instance, by the centrality of the poor to our faith. And this encounter with the poor of El Salvador revealed both the structural dimension of their poverty, as well as the conflictual nature of their oppression.

Romero’s spirituality was profoundly marked by the Gospel that he proclaimed every Sunday from the Cathedral of San Salvador:

This is my greatest concern: to try to build with Christ a Church according to his heart.... For that reason, I ask you to focus not only on the weekly events that the prophetic mission of the Church obliges me to illuminate, but also on the light that illuminates, on the attempt of this poor pastor to build a Church according to the heart of God (Romero, 1980-1989, September 3, 1978 homily).

Here we come to the second sign of Romero’s spirituality: his fidelity in proclaiming the Gospel as Good News to the poor. The key to his proclamation, again, is the centrality of the poor, but especially the poor as seen from the compassionate heart of God. He proclaimed the Gospel as one who knew the world of the poor, saw the world from their eyes, and shared their sufferings and hopes; and as one who knew the heart of God and God’s compassion for the poor, as one who spoke on their behalf and defended their lives:

The Church has to proclaim the good news to the poor. Those who, in this-worldly terms, have heard bad news, and who have lived out even worse realities, are now listening through the Church to the word of Jesus: “The kingdom of God is at hand; blessed are you who are poor, for the kingdom of God is yours.” And hence they also have good news to proclaim to the rich: that they, too, become poor in order to share the benefits of the kingdom with the poor (Romero, 1985, p. 180).

Moreover, “the encounter with the poor has enabled us to recover the central truth of the Gospel: The Word of God urges us to a conversion,” a conversion to the poor. The poor are the key to “what the world is,” and “what the Church’s service to the world should be.”

Conversion to the poor means, then, to see the world from the eyes of the poor, and to work so that the poor have dignity and life. And it means to see the Church from the eyes of the poor, and to work so that the glory of God may be made visible in the poor. Rephrasing the words of St. Irenaeus, Romero said, “The glory of God is the poor fully alive.”

The spirituality of Oscar Romero cannot be understood apart from the life-and-death struggle of the poor for justice, and the context of conflicting interests in Salvadoran society. Consequently, the Gospel that Romero proclaimed to the poor was never “an opium of the people,” but “the very heart of God in a heartless world.” His heart, in turn, was profoundly moved by the sufferings of the poor:

The Church has not only incarnated itself in the world of the poor, giving them hope; it has also firmly committed itself to their defense. The majority of the poor in our country are oppressed and repressed daily by economic and political structures. The terrible words spoken by the prophets of Israel continue to be verified among us. Among us there are those who sell others for money, who sell a poor person for a pair of sandals; those who, in their mansions, pile up violence and plunder; those who crush the poor (Romero, 1985, p. 181).

In his address at the University of Louvain, Oscar Romero spoke of defending the poor as a necessary consequence of incarnating the Church in the world of the poor and proclaiming the Gospel as Good News to them. This option, which came to be characterized as the Church’s “preferential option for the poor,” was not merely a political option devoid of any content of faith. It is at the heart of the Church’s mission, and comprises the political dimension of our faith:

Incarnation in the sociopolitical world [of the poor] is the locus for deepening faith in God and in His Christ. We believe in Jesus who came to bring the fullness of life, and we believe in a living God who gives life to men and women and wants them truly to live. These radical truths of the faith become really true and truly radical when the Church enters into the heart of the life and death of its people. Then there is put before the faith of the Church, as it is put before the faith of every individual, the most fundamental choice: to be in favor of life or to be in favor of death (Romero, 1985, pp. 184-85).

Romero had a keen sense of the demonic power of sin that permeated the dominant economic and political structures of Salvadoran society. These structures, like the “principalities and powers” cited by St. Paul in his Epistles, demanded absolute obedience:

I insist once again on the existence in our country of structures of sin. They are sin because they produce the fruits of sin: the deaths of Salvadorans – the swift death brought by repression or the long, drawn out, but no less real, death from structural oppression. That is why we have denounced what in our country has become the idolatry of wealth, of the absolute right, within the capitalist system, of private property, of political power in national security regimes, in the name of which person [in]security is itself institutionalized (Romero, 1985, p. 183).

What was at stake was not only the life and death of the poor, but also the very credibility of the Church:

We see, with great clarity, that here neutrality is impossible. Either we serve the life of Salvadorans, or we are accomplices in their death. And here what is most fundamental about the faith is given expression in history: either we believe in a God of life, or we serve the idols of death (Romero, 1985, p. 185).

That meant that the proclamation of the Word had to be accompanied by both words and deeds, by annunciation and denunciation, by pastoral response and prophetic action, by personal compassion and structural transformation. What was at stake was nothing less than the life and death of the poor:

[We are dealing with] an authentic option for the poor, of becoming incarnate in their world, of proclaiming the good news to them, of giving them hope, of encouraging them to engage in a liberating praxis, of defending their cause and of sharing their fate (Romero, 1985, p. 182).

For Romero, then, the world of the poor is, above all, the very place in which God is revealed. In the face of the poor, he saw the face of Christ; in the crucified and tortured bodies of his people, he saw the crucified body of Christ. But also, in the signs of life and aspiration for liberation, he found signs of Christ's resurrection and signs of the Spirit, Lord and Giver of Life:

Where the poor begin to really live, where the poor begin to free themselves, where persons are able to sit around a common table to share with one another – the God of life is there. When the Church inserts itself into the sociopolitical world it does so in order to work with it so that from such cooperation life may be given to the poor. In doing so, therefore, it is not distancing itself from its mission ... but giving testimony to its faith in God; it is being an instrument of the Spirit, the Lord and giver of Life (Romero, 1985, p. 185).

The poor are not only central to the spirituality of Romero and the mission of the Church; they are the key to what the world is like and what the mission of the Church should be:

The world of the poor teaches us what the nature of Christian love is, a love that certainly seeks peace but also unmasks false pacifisms – the pacifism of resignation and inactivity. It should certainly seek peace, but unmask false pacifisms, resignation, and inactivity. It is a love that should certainly be freely offered, but that seeks to be effective in history.... Liberation will arrive only when the poor ... are the [authors] of, and protagonists in, their own struggle and liberation.

The real world of the poor also teaches us about Christian hope. The Church preaches a new heaven and a new earth.... That transcendent hope must be preserved by signs of hope in history, no matter how simple they may apparently be – such as those proclaimed by Trito-Isaiah when he says, “they will build houses and inhabit them, plant vineyards and eat their fruit” (Is 65:21) (Romero, 1985, p. 184).

In the final part of his address at the University of Louvain, Oscar Romero bore witness to that which first brought El Salvador to the world's attention: the testimony of the martyrs and the reality of persecution. Here we come full circle to the last of the signs of Romero's spirituality: the testimony of the martyrs. Like the other signs – the centrality of the poor, the Gospel proclaimed

as Good News to the poor, and a faith that defends the right of the poor to organize in defense of life amid history's conflicts – the witness of the martyrs is intimately linked to the poor:

In this situation of conflict and antagonism, in which just a few persons control economic and political power, the Church has placed itself at the side of the poor and has undertaken their defense.... By defending the poor, it has entered into serious conflict with the powerful who belong to the monied oligarchies and with the political and military authorities of the state. This defense of the poor in a world deep in conflict has occasioned something new in the recent history of our Church: persecution (Romero, 1985, p. 181).

The testimony of martyrdom is, in one sense, the tragic consequence of the conflict in El Salvador, and the cost paid by those who were faithful to the demands of the Gospel, taking sides with the poor, and offering their lives out of a fundamental option of love. But behind the death of the six priests killed in El Salvador during his lifetime, Romero saw the vulnerability of the poor:

If all this has happened to persons who are the most evident representatives of the Church, you can guess what has happened to ordinary Christians.... There have been threats, arrests, tortures, murders, numbering in the hundreds and thousands. As always, even in persecution, it has been the poor among the Christians who have suffered most (Romero, 1985, p. 182)..

And while martyrdom is a sign of the Church's fidelity to the Gospel, its deepest significance is that it reveals precisely what being faithful to the Gospel means in a world in which the life of the poor is so much at risk:

It is, then, an indisputable fact that ... our Church has been persecuted. But it is important to note why it has been persecuted. Not any and every priest has been persecuted, not any and every institution has been attacked. That part of the Church has been attacked and persecuted that put itself on the side of the people and went to the people's defense (Romero, 1985, p. 182).

The testimony of the martyrs, then, is intimately linked to the poor, to proclaiming the Gospel as Good News to those who have only known bad news, and to defending the life of those whose lives are most at risk. Because the Church in El Salvador placed the poor at the heart of its identity and its mission, it was persecuted. That is its glory. That is the way Romero saw it. In the end, he became the Good News that he proclaimed to the poor:

As a pastor, I am obligated by divine commandment to give my life for those I love ... even for those who would assassinate me.... For that reason, I offer God my blood for the redemption and resurrection of El Salvador.... Martyrdom is a grace that I don't believe I merit. But if God accepts the sacrifice of my life, may my blood be the seed of liberty and sign that this hope will soon become a reality. May my death, if it is accepted by God, be for the liberation of my people and a testimony of hope in the future (Romero, 1987, p. 461, author's translation).

In his life and in his death, Oscar Romero bore witness to the ancient wisdom of the Church, expressed by Tertullian: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of new Christians."

### **Juan Gerardi: Faithful Witness to God**

When we turn to the witness of Bishop Gerardi, we find a social and ecclesial context in Guatemala very similar to the one in which Romero lived. In both countries, social structures marked by injustice had oppressed the poor and increased the disparities between a rich elite and a poor majority; when the poor organized and demanded changes, the response in both countries was a cruel and systematic repression. This in turn provoked a popular rebellion against the government in El Salvador and Guatemala, and an all-out war by the government against the civilian population characterized by massacres and, in the case of Guatemala, genocide against the Indigenous population.

In both countries, too, the Church played a prophetic role in denouncing violations of human rights and calling for negotiations leading to peace and structural changes in the political, social, and economic structures of the nation. Though deprived of the diocese in El Quiché, Gerardi returned to Guatemala in 1982 and was named Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Guatemala where he served as Vicar General, Vicar of Pastoral Work, and eventually the Director of a newly created Archdiocesan Human Rights Office out of which was born the Recovery of the Historic Memory (REMHI) project in 1995.

Like Romero, Gerardi was before all, a pastor. In 1989, when he was invited to speak on the topic of “The Response of the Catholic Church in Guatemala to the Processes of Social and Political Change,” he introduced his remarks as follows:

I am sure in my exposition that you do not want to hear the voice of a politician or social scientist, neither of which I am, but the voice of a pastor, which is what I am; and in some measure, throughout my pastoral mission, it has fallen to me to share the pain and sorrow of an oppressed and mistreated people, such as my own. (Gerardi, 1999, p. 70)

Gerardi went on to characterize the period of greatest violence in Guatemala (1979-1982) as “the most cruel and bloody repression that has been seen in Latin America.” Faced with such a challenging context, Gerardi characterized the mission of the church in Guatemala in this way:

The Church took up a prophetic attitude of denunciation and condemnation of human rights violations, especially against the poorest and marginalized who, given the characteristics of insurgency and counterinsurgency at play, were the ones who were punished the most, condemned to pay a social and human cost and to bear the bitter and painful consequences of the conflict. (Gerardi, 1999, p. 71)

The Church, however, did not simply limit itself to denouncing violations of human rights; it also accompanied the victims in the hour of their agony:

Sectors of the Church most in contact with the oppressed and persecuted people opted, together with their bishop, with a truly ecclesial and Gospel attitude, to put into practice a pastoral work of accompaniment and solidarity with this same people, willing to risk the same fate. Inspired by their faith in the word of Jesus, they understood that the Lord called them to serve God in the poor and indigent, the persecuted and tortured. In this way ... the Church opted for the God of life and committed itself to combat death. (Gerardi, 1999, pp. 72-73)



By the end of the decade of the 1980s, however, signs appeared on the horizon of limited democratic openings and potential opportunities for a negotiated solution to the conflict in Guatemala. This in turn, opened the way for a pastoral reflection on the obligation of the Church to work to lay the foundations of peace based on justice:

We considered that the only solution to the spiral of violence was the installation of a regime of law that guaranteed respect for human rights and a climate of participation of all citizens upon whom the enormous responsibility of building peace fell. For Christians, to build peace is a Gospel demand that we cannot refuse if we want to be known as children of God (Matthew 5:9). (Gerardi, 1999, p. 76)

Among the dimensions of peace, Gerardi mentioned “the preferential option for the poor” as that which gives a concrete identity to its pastoral work; specific attention to the urgent needs of hundreds of thousands of refugees, widows and orphans displaced by the violence; “respect for and promotion of indigenous cultures,” as the foundation for a just, participatory, and pluralistic society; and “the transformation of the social and economic structures that sustain the injustice, the discrimination, and the exploitation of people into new structures of justice, equality, and participation” as the foundation of a genuine democracy:

If we want to build a genuine and participatory democracy, we have to recognize that the actual situation of injustice and violence has its origin ... in the land ownership patterns that exist in this country.... The Guatemalan bishops denounce this situation of injustice that gives rise to the harmful and profound inequalities that exist in our society, and that opposes the integral development of our people and provokes the social conflicts that we continue to live. (Gerardi, 1999, p. 79)

In April 1995, the Human Rights Office of the Archdiocese of Guatemala (ODHAG), under the direction of Bishop Gerardi, created the Inter-diocesan Recovery of the Historic Memory (REMHI) project as a way to contribute to the United Nations Historical Clarification Commission set in motion by mutual agreement of the Guatemalan government and the URNG guerrillas the year before. The latter commission was not formally established until July 1997, and rendered its final report, *Guatemala: Memory of Silence*, on February 25, 1999 – nearly a year after the publication of the REMHI report and the assassination of Bishop Gerardi.

Bishop Gerardi and the members of the Human Rights Office were concerned that the mandate of the United Nations Commission of Historical Clarification – Guatemala’s “Truth Commission” – was too narrow, even narrower than the Salvadoran Truth Commission, because it did not allow for the mention by name of the perpetrators of the violence in Guatemala. The REMHI project was established with a specific interest in ensuring that the truth about the violence be told in as complete a form as possible.

According to Edgar Gutiérrez, the coordinator of the REMHI project, the first challenge faced by the REMHI team was to come up with a methodology adapted both to the specific characteristics of violence in Guatemala, as well as the cultural needs of its Indigenous people. Much of the violence could not be characterized simply as “summary executions”: in many cases civilians were forced to perpetrate violence on their own or neighboring community members, or risk losing their own lives or the lives of their family members:

Faced with this reality, we decided to employ a more open methodology that allowed us to draw near to the global experience of the people.... It was not just a difference in methodology; it took on profounder implications. In the first place, we committed ourselves to the history of the people. Within a pastoral context, this meant that we were concerned with the survivors, with their destiny, and with life-giving projects, and not first with the data that they could give us....

This was our methodological lesson: the reconstruction of recent history, whose actors are still alive, has meaning when we link it to a social project of human reconstruction. History, then, is at the service of men and women, of the community, and not vice versa. (Gutierrez, 1999a, p. 267)

A second distinguishing characteristic of the REMHI project was the decision to involve and train local people from the communities affected by the violence in the process of collecting the testimonies of the victims. More than eight hundred leaders, most of them from Indigenous communities, underwent an intensive training to understand the history of the conflict, something about mental health, and a technique to interview the victims. Most of the testimonies were taken in one of fifteen Mayan dialects, and in some cases entire communities participated in a collective interview. The questions themselves were equally significant:

Tell us what happened? What reasons could there be for what happened? How did you confront the situation? What do you think about this experience now? What could be done so that never happens again? These questions concluded – once the witness had finished their testimony – with a form that asked for data concerning the identification of the victim – name, age, civil state, home, etc. ... as well as details of the abuse suffered: what, how, when, where. Data about those responsible, individuals or institutions. And data that identified the witness. (Gerardi, 1999b, p. 268)

More than 6,500 testimonies were taken, providing data on 55,023 cases of human rights violations, including 422 massacres. Two-thirds of these testimonies were taken in one of fifteen Mayan dialects. All the testimonies were recorded on cassette tapes, of which about 15 per cent were written out. Finally, the testimonies were submitted to a team who analyzed them statistically and drew conclusions from them regarding “the strategies of the war and the actors,” “the mechanisms of the horror,” “the experiences of the people,” “the effects on specific sectors” (individual, family, community), and “the demands and recommendations.”

This analysis formed the basis for the four volumes of the REMHI report, which was formally released by the Guatemalan Church on April 24, 1998, in a ceremony presided over by Bishop Gerardi. Two days later the bishop was assassinated. The REMHI project concluded its fourth and final stage by returning the results of the project back to the communities from which the testimonies were taken, by means of programs of peace education, and commemorative ceremonies.

In the words of Edgar Gutiérrez:

The survivors are recovering their right to speak and to affirm their sense of dignity; a right [the military] tried to take away from them. We want to contribute to the recovery of the memory of the conflict by encouraging a process of internal healing and social construction

of the communities. This process complements the models of pacification that the United Nations has promoted in many countries. We think of ourselves as instruments in search of reconciliation, beginning from the very base of society that was so destroyed. (Gutierrez, 1999c, p. 270)

What role did Bishop Gerardi play in all this? According to those who worked with him, Gerardi played a key role in the direction of the REMHI project from its conception to the day of his death – and perhaps now an even greater role in the impact that his martyrdom has had on the Guatemalan Church. According to his friends, Gerardi “committed himself to REMHI, he lived it, he immersed himself in it and allowed what had been his own initiative to enter into his bones” (Gerardi, 1999, p. 259).

The REMHI project was deeply important to Gerardi. In the words of Edgar Gutiérrez, Gerardi had “a debt to pay with respect to his own history” (Gerardi, 1999, p. 259), and that was to return to the diocese of El Quiché that he had abandoned in 1980. The REMHI project gave him the opportunity to do that, both in person – which he did in 1997 – and in the Gospel sense of conversion. According to a friend who accompanied him on his return to El Quiché, “you could see a happy face, content, just like the faces we saw of many witnesses after they had given us their testimony” (Gutiérrez, 1999d, p. 260).

On the night of the public presentation of the REMHI report, Bishop Gerardi presided over the event held in the cathedral in Guatemala City. There he pronounced his final public address, and he publicly gave a copy of the report to Nobel Peace Laureate Rigoberta Menchú. The context of his words, spoken as they were just a short time before his assassination, call to mind Archbishop Romero’s words to the Salvadoran military to “stop the repression.” A brief selection of his remarks, however, now sealed in blood, illuminates in a way that no one else could, the spirit and prophetic power of the REMHI project:

God is inflexibly opposed to evil in any form. The root of the downfall and the disgrace of humanity comes from the deliberate opposition to truth that is the radical reality of God and of human beings. This reality is the radical reality of God and of human beings. This reality has been intentionally deformed in our century through thirty-six years of war against the people....

As a church, we do not have any doubt that the work we have carried out in these past few years has been part of a story of grace and of salvation, a real step toward peace as a result of justice. It has been a soft scattering of seeds of life and dignity throughout the country – and the advocates and participants in the work have been the suffering people themselves. It has been a beautiful service of veneration for the martyrs and a dignification of the victims that were the targets of the plans for destruction and death....

Peace is possible – a peace that is born from the truth that comes from each one of us and from all of us. It is a painful truth, full of memories of the deep and bloody wounds for the country. It is a liberating and humanizing truth that makes it possible for all men and women to come to terms with themselves and their life stories. It is a truth that challenges each one of us to recognize our individual and collective responsibility and to commit ourselves to action so that those abominable acts never happen again....

This project has made a commitment to the people that gave their testimonies, to gather their experiences in this report, and to support all of the demands of the victims. But our commitment is also to return the collected memory to the people. The search for truth does not end here. It must return from where it was born and it must support the role of memory as an instrument for social reconstruction through the creation of materials, ceremonies, monuments, and so forth. (REMHI, 1999, pp. xxiii-xxv)

These words are powerful, knowing the context in which they were spoken. But it was Gerardi's closing remarks, perhaps, that provoked such a violent response and joined his blood with the blood of so many martyrs in Guatemala. First, he returned to the biblical image of the Suffering Servant, drawing a comparison between the servant's fate and the fate of his people:

The thousands of testimonies of the victims and the recounting of the horrific crimes are the current manifestations of the figure of the "suffering servant of Yahweh," who is incarnated in the people of Guatemala. "Behold my spirit," says Isaiah, "Many were afraid of him. He was so disfigured, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the sons of men. He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows, yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted" (Isaiah 52:13 and 53:4). (REMHI, 1999, xxv)

Only in hindsight do we know the significance of these words to the manner in which Gerardi was assassinated – a concrete block crushing and disfiguring his face. The image of another martyr, Oscar Romero, comes to mind, as a single bullet penetrated his heart while celebrating Mass; or that of Father Ignacio Ellacuría, the Salvadoran Jesuit martyr, whose skull, like Gerardi's, was crushed, not by a concrete block but by the impact of a single bullet fired at close range. All three martyrs joined in a compact of blood with the thousands of Salvadoran and Guatemalan martyrs.

But it was his final words that sealed Gerardi's fate. The publication of the REMHI report was not, as some had hoped, perhaps, the closing of a wound. Rather, it was the display of an open wound for the world to see, in the hope that once seen and recognized, a process of genuine reconciliation – based on the truth, admission of the crime and a plea for pardon from the perpetrators, a willingness to forgive on the part of the victims, reparations for their families, and justice in the form of transforming the structures of society – would follow:

Bringing the memory of these painful events into the present leads us to confront some of the first words of our faith: "Cain, where is your brother Abel?"

"I don't know," he answered. "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Yahweh replied, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground" (Genesis 4:9-10). (REMHI, 1999, xxv)

The echo of that cry still resounds in the legacy left by Bishop Gerardi. In the words of his friend, Edgar Gutiérrez, "His legacy is a dream still to be discovered, a fertile land to sow, a happiness to win, a country to build" (Gerardi, 1999, p. 263).

### **The Legacy of Romero and Gerardi**

#### **Oscar Romero: You Have Risen in the People!**

Those who worked closely with Archbishop Romero regard his memory as both Good News and challenge. Five years after Romero's death, on the occasion of receiving an honorary doctorate

from the University of Louvain, where Romero had given his last address, “The Political Dimension of the Faith from the Perspective of the Option for the Poor,” Jon Sobrino said:

To those who ignore the tragedy of the poor, Monseñor Romero keeps saying, “Don’t forget the millions of children of God who continue to suffer in this world.” To those who offer solidarity to the poor, he gives encouragement and thanks. To all of us, Monseñor Romero continues to offer both Good News and challenge. (Sobrino, 1985).

The first public procession in San Salvador, on the occasion of Archbishop Romero’s martyrdom, occurred five years after his death. By then, the repression in the streets had subsided sufficiently for the people to process through the heart of San Salvador to the celebration of the Mass at the cathedral where Romero’s tomb is located. Once again, Romero’s spirit and his words continued to give life to the poor whose lives were at risk. The very symbols of the procession spoke to the heart of his spirituality.

A huge banner was carried at the beginning of the procession: “If they kill me, I will rise in the Salvadoran people.” Behind the banner was an immense photograph of Monseñor Romero, ten feet high ... and behind the photograph a river of people overflowing the streets of San Salvador – streets filled with the echoes of popular protests and bathed in blood... People sang and repeated his words: “We must demand at the very least respect for what is of greatest value: life.” “In the name of God, I ask you, stop the repression!” (*Carta a las Iglesias*, 1985, No. 88)

Throughout the years of the war and since, the memory of Oscar Romero and his spirit in the people continues to bring light and salvation to the poor of El Salvador. Every anniversary of his martyrdom, every feast day of the Church, is an opportunity to bear witness to his resurrection in the people and recall signs of his spirituality. “What happened to Jesus, happened to Monseñor Romero. That’s why he lives in our people” (*Carta a las Iglesias*, 1985, No. 89).

Not only do the passion and death of Jesus illuminate the martyrdom of Oscar Romero; Romero’s life and death, in no small measure, has deepened the faith of the poor in Jesus Christ and led them back to the source of their life. The spirit of Romero, as the spirit of the martyrs before him, brings us back to the heart of the paschal mystery: “When they killed Monseñor Romero, we were very sad because we thought everything had ended. But later we saw that his spirit gave us strength to resist oppression. For that reason, we also believe more now in Jesus Christ” (*Carta a las Iglesias*, 1985, No. 89).

What is the legacy of Oscar Romero today? In many respects – even though the war in El Salvador has ended – the following words offered by Jon Sobrino on the tenth anniversary of Romero’s martyrdom continue to ring true today:

In El Salvador, as well as in the entire Third World ... an alarming situation still exists: inhumane poverty, cruel injustice, conflict and war, repression and the violation of human rights, disillusionment with the failures of the people, and all the suffering and darkness that this brings to the majority of the people who are poor. We all know this, but unless we are willing to deepen our awareness of it, we will not be able to understand the importance of Monseñor Romero and his presence among us today.

On the other hand, we continue to find creativity and hope in the struggle for liberation and the generous self-sacrifice of the martyrs, brought home to us in the ... martyrdom of the Jesuits and the commemoration of Rutilio Grande, the proto martyr of El Salvador. The poor still have the intuition and fundamental hope that Jesus is Good News for them, and that a Church that resembles Jesus and responds as Jesus did is also Good News. Long before the Church made an option for the poor, the poor made an option for the Church (Sobrino, 1990).

And while it is certainly true that the spirit of Oscar Romero and the remembrance of his words continue to be an effective and urgent voice for transformation in El Salvador, his presence extends beyond the borders of his country. He has become, again in the words of Jon Sobrino, “the most universal Christian at the end of the twentieth century.” Certainly, his canonization as a saint on October 14, 2018, nearly forty years later lends credibility to that statement:

Monseñor Romero inspires peasants and Indigenous people, African Americans and oppressed, but also intellectuals, university professors, professionals, bishops, and humble catechists. Despite the passing of years, the commemoration of Romero’s life has not diminished. In times of war and in times of peace, countless human beings continue to celebrate him. In Romero, that which is Christian and that which is human is very present.

If this is true, then it is not at all rhetorical to affirm that Monseñor Romero has become a “universal Christian,” and perhaps the universal Christian of our time.... We don’t say this out of any triumphalism, but with the same humility and simplicity with which Monseñor himself spoke.... How we wish that there were more Romeros in the world! (Sobrino, 1990).

The spirit of Oscar Romero, then, through his memory and through his word, continues to be a prophetic presence in El Salvador, offering the poor the comfort that they are not alone, and the promise that things can change. His memory is a “subversive” one, in the sense that the Beatitudes are subversive: they remind us that the world is not meant to be as it currently is, where the poor are excluded, the hungry forgotten, those who grieve hidden from view, and the victims blamed for their own persecution. Rather, the poor are blessed because theirs is the Reign of God. Life, not death, will have the last word.

On the fifteenth anniversary of Romero’s death, Gustavo Gutiérrez recalled this deeper truth of Romero’s martyrdom as he preached in the chapel of the Jesuit martyrs in San Salvador:

We come to this Eucharist to give thanks for Monseñor Romero, and for so many who have already been resurrected with Jesus, and who will continue to be resurrected.... The martyrs remind us of Jesus’ resurrection; they recall for us the center of our faith and of our hope ... [and remind us that] death does not put an end to our hopes and joys; life is the heart of the Christian message (Gutierrez, 1995).

Oscar Romero is important, not only because his prophetic word continues to illuminate and judge the current social reality from the perspective of God’s plan of salvation; his spirit is essential today for the sake of our Christian faith. If it were not for the testimony of the martyrs – if it were not for the witness of Oscar Romero – and the power of Jesus’ resurrection to which the martyrs bear witness, so much suffering and death among the poor in El Salvador would have been in vain.

For that reason, the memory and the spirit of Romero, like the memory and the spirit of the martyrs, strengthens our faith in Jesus Christ, and in the power of the Gospel to bring Good News to the poor. This is the heart of the message that Gutiérrez proclaimed in his homily to the people of El Salvador:

Today we celebrate a Eucharist, we recall a death, but we also know that for Christians – and Monseñor Romero and so many others have told us this with great clarity – death is not the last word of human existence; life has the last word.... They can silence our voices – and here I am thinking of Romero’s own words – but “they cannot silence the voice of hope and joy that we feel,” this paschal joy that passes through death (Gutierrez, 1995).

Nor has the memory of Romero among his people faded with the years. Each year, on the anniversary of his martyrdom, tens of thousands of people process through the streets of San Salvador, their hands bearing candles that light up the night, symbolizing the harvest of dreams and promise of a better life that Romero had sown through his words and the witness of his life.

In conclusion, we may say that the force of the resurrection continues to be present in El Salvador, indeed, throughout the world, even amid the crucifixion of the poor. That resurrection continues to judge the current historical reality from the perspective of God’s plan of salvation, and to give hope to the poor that the last word will be life.

Because Oscar Romero was faithful to the poor, he joined his life to theirs and shared the same fate as the poor. Their passion became his passion, their crucifixion his cross. But because Romero was also faithful to the Gospel, he joined the passion of the poor to Christ’s passion, and thus to Christ’s resurrection. Just as God vindicated Jesus, and raised him from the dead, so God has vindicated the martyrs – and Oscar Romero with them – and joined their resurrection to the resurrection of Christ.

In El Salvador, a crucified people continue to announce resurrection. At moments, there seem to be more shadows than light, more poverty and violence than hope for transformation, more death than life, more cross than resurrection. But the spirit of Oscar Romero – made present in the communal act of remembrance – has marked the poor forever, binding their passion and death to the passion and death of Jesus Christ, and raising them to new life. While the present is at moments dark, the victory is assured: life, not death, has the last word.

### **Juan Gerardi – Guatemala: Never Again!**

And what about the legacy of Juan Gerardi? I was privileged to be present in Guatemala at the first commemoration of his martyrdom, April 26, 1999. One hundred thousand people had gathered in the main plaza in front of the Metropolitan Cathedral, mostly Indigenous people in their colorful traditional dress, survivors of more than three decades of military terror and cruelty in the countryside. From El Quiché and Chimaltenango, from Verapaz and Huehuetenango, the people approached the center of the city from four different directions, bearing four different colors of the Mayan cross. We joined one of the columns of people, joining our voices to theirs to cry: “*Guatemala: Nunca Mas!*”

And while the Guatemalan government, under international pressure, has taken steps to investigate the case, impunity continues to reign. The people who lived through the worst of the violence are convinced that those who murdered Bishop Gerardi are the same ones that murdered hundreds of thousands of their family members.

As we joined the sea of Indigenous people in the plaza to commemorate Bishop Gerardi's martyrdom, we could hear the loud cry to put an end to this kind of impunity. The Central American bishops made it very clear that Bishop Gerardi had been killed because of his work with the REMHI project, unmasking the cruelty of the military violence and genocide during the war.

In fact, Gerardi's murder was a reason for the United Nations to present a stronger, not a weaker report. Just two months before the first anniversary of Gerardi's death, in February 1999, the UN Commission of Historical Clarification stunned the Guatemalan government and military with the bluntness of its conclusions. What occurred in Guatemala during the four decades of war, and most especially during the years of General Efraín Ríos Montt (1982 - 1983) was nothing less than genocide, a crime against humanity.

Today, however, the faces and the physical presence of so many Indigenous people affirmed the conclusions of both the REMHI report and the Commission for Historical Clarification. It was inspiring to see that sea of faces in the plaza the day of Bishop Gerardi's commemoration. As we processed to the central plaza, the memory of those dark years of repression mingled with the cries of "*Guatemala: Nunca Mas!*" that broke the silence of decades. The victims had become protagonists and were taking back the streets, taking back their history, taking back their dreams and hopes and laying claim to their future, to a new Guatemala that would be "different."

In his homily before the 100,000 people gathered, Bishop Flores, the Bishop of Alta and Baja Verapaz, asked:

What reasons did they have to destroy his face and skull with such incredible brutality and hatred? Surely, it was because he was someone who loved justice and hated impunity, someone who was never insensitive to the suffering of his poor, humiliated, and massacred people. It was because he looked for light amid the darkness. Those who act with evil hate the light, and so they tried to extinguish the brightly shining torch of his life. It was because he endeavored to build peace, to build a different country in which the people would no longer be the victims of the terror sown by a few. (EPICA, *Challenge*, Spring 1999, pp. 3-5)

In a country where truth has been another casualty of the war, the words spoken this day brought hope, and the Gospel phrase, "All that has been hidden will be revealed," took on a new vitality, as people joined in shouting "*Guatemala: Nunca Mas!*" "Guatemala: Never Again!" The plaza shook with the sound.

While the violence continues in Guatemala, and the military continue to enjoy impunity, the 100,000 Indigenous survivors of the repression who gathered on this day in the central plaza were very clear about the authors of this violence. The people who killed Bishop Gerardi were the very same military who killed their loved ones, burned their villages, and created a reign of terror in Guatemala for four decades. Bishop Gerardi's assassination was an attempt to silence the people



who had begun to speak up through their testimonies in the REMHI report, but their attempt backfired.

Much work remains to be done. But the foundation for a new Guatemala, based on the truth presented by the Recovery of the Historic Memory (REMHI) report and the United Nations Commission on Historical Clarification, cannot be silenced. The reports recommend a series of reforms to be carried out, from reparations to the victims to a radical reform of the judicial system, as well as a strict definition and limitation of the role of the military and police. And while it is quite uncertain how or if these reforms will take place, the silence has been broken: “Guatemala: Never Again!”

\* All of the translations from Spanish were done by the author.

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