

Christ Church Cathedral [Anglican]
Montreal, Quebec
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Damian Zynda Th.D.

Apart from the brief Infancy Narratives, the Gospels present us the adult Jesus – a man who in the last three years of his life is psychologically developed and spiritually mature.

We witness a man who was:

- autonomous and integrated
- intellectually gifted and articulate
- compassionate and self-generous
- consciously aware of his political, religious and social environment, and when needed, did not shy away from challenging the integrity of those institutions

We witness:

- a man who had intimate encounters with God, so profound they radically formed his life and set the path for his mission
- a man comfortable on the margins of society who respected the dignity of all human beings
- a man who did not shield himself from the suffering of others; who allowed his heart to be broken by their misery and did what he could to restore healing and freedom, regardless of the consequences to his own life
- a man whose love compelled him to hold nothing back from God, not his dreams, his hopes, indeed, his very life

In who he was and what he did, Jesus revealed the glory of God and set a paradigm for us who take seriously the invitation to discipleship.

Oscar Arnulfo Romero was Archbishop of El Salvador when he was assassinated in 1980. At the time of his death he was a controversial figure regarded by the international community as a prominent advocate for human rights. His courageous defense of the rights of indigenous Salvadorans won him a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979 from members of both the British Parliament and the United States Congress.

In the El Salvador of the 1970's the wealth and power were largely in the hands of the Fourteen Families, the "oligarchs." They and the military and government of El Salvador held him responsible for provoking military action and jeopardizing national security, while the campesinos and victims of the repression acclaimed him a saint. Within ecclesial ranks Romero, while maintaining his objectives, had been encouraged by Paul VI, misunderstood by John Paul II, opposed by four of the six Salvadoran bishops and the Apostolic Nuncio to El Salvador for his pastoral policies and decisions, and revered by some Latin American bishops, priest, religious and laity as a prophet and martyr whose life-time of conversions into the likeness of the Son of God disclosed the imminence of God. Following his death, Romero's vicar general, Ricardo Urioste captured the contentious Romero well: "You must understand, Archbishop Romero was the most loved person in the country. And the most hated."¹

The Vatican's choice of Romero as Archbishop was not well received by the presbyterate because of his well-known ties to certain members of the Fourteen Families and his theological conservatism. Yet, three years later his funeral drew thousands of clergy and laity from all over the country and the globe. To what can we attribute this radical change? What happened to Romero to effect such a pronounced shift in how people perceived him?

Ordained in Rome in April 1942, Romero returned to El Salvador and served in the Diocese of San Miguel where he for the next 24 years. During this time, Romero's style was autocratic – he was incapable of delegation or collaboration. He prided himself on his accomplishments and evolved into a full-blown workaholic who work himself into physical, psychological and spiritual exhaustion. Then his bishop would send him off for months at a time, to recuperate.

In 1966 Romero made important retreat in Mexico. While here he had access to his Opus Dei spiritual director, Fr. Juan Izquierdo, and psychiatrist, Dr. Dárdano, with whom Romero seems to have had an established relationship. This was a seminal retreat for Romero for several reasons. First, at forty-eight years of age, on the threshold of mid-life, repressed issues of sexuality and feelings of lack of intimacy and painful loneliness had emerged. Second, Vatican II had called the church to renewal and it expected the clergy to reframe their identity in accord with the directives of the Council. This was a threatening prospect for Romero who had been secure in his isolated, hierarchical role as a traditional Pre-Vatican II priest. Third, after nearly twenty-five years of active priesthood, Romero felt physically and mentally depleted by the demands of his responsibilities and the consequences of his administrative decisions. Fourth, he acknowledged his rigidity and the demanding attitude that provoked animosity in the priests, together with his frustration regarding his inability to control his temperament. Romero presented these features together with intensified fear, interior tensions, conflict with others, agitation, obsession with perfection, having a grim outlook, and his lack of flexibility to the two men. The psychiatrist diagnosed him as an obsessive-compulsive perfectionist and the spiritual director told him he was scrupulous.

In June 1970 Romero was consecrated an auxiliary bishop. He served in that capacity for three years, then was made bishop of the small diocese of Santiago and on February 2, 1977 Romero was installed as the sixth Archbishop of El Salvador.

Times of transition are times of vulnerability, and times of vulnerability surface deep fears. Grief over personal loss gets tangled in the web of anxieties over what the future holds. Romero was in the thick of transitions. Vatican II changed the secure and only world he knew, geographically he moved from one diocese to another and his ministry shifted from pastor to administrator. Having gained greater insight into the dynamics of his complex psyche he worked to integrate new, healthier behaviors. And Romero was, by virtue of his new office, thrust into the political and ecclesial spotlight – placed in a position he neither desired nor was prepared to undertake. Immersed in a tidal wave of transition, Romero walked into his new future confident this was God's desire for him and well aware of his fragile human condition.

During this time Romero experienced two significant events that changed the course of his life: The first, from November 1971-February 1972 he underwent three months of psychoanalysis. Romero came to three key insights regarding himself. (1) his immaturity when he vowed celibacy and his lack of understanding of the full ramifications of this commitment; (2) a fear of intimacy which prevented him from establishing wholesome and nurturing friendships, based upon an unconscious transference from his family; (3) the manner in which his fear unconsciously dominated his life and contributed to his rigidity, immaturity, stubbornness, irrational behavior, harshness and demanding attitude. The dream analysis included in the psychoanalysis confirmed the immediate changes needed to take place in his life.

Of all the discoveries Romero made in those three months, the most important was that he saw clinical psychology as a supplement to theology and morality to define and explain his

personality disorder and its consequences. Psychoanalysis gave him a new context for understanding his complex personality and accepting his humanity, and an opportunity to put his uncertainties and fears into perspective. The experience helped clarify the dimensions of his personality and his soul, which, though distinct, intersected and affected each other. The psychoanalysis played a significant role to further advance his maturing spirituality and the evolution of his theology.

The second event was the assassination of Rutilio Grande. Jesuit Rutilio Grande was a friend whom Romero respected and admired. A former teacher and rector of the national seminary, Grande was responsible for the spiritual formation of two generations of Salvadoran priests and was perhaps the most respected Salvadoran priest in the archdiocese. Grande “was partially responsible for changing the entire Jesuit philosophy in Central America with his ‘primary and fundamental option’ for the poor which envisaged ‘a pastoral team working in either rural areas or in a slum to promote Christian conscientization’.”ⁱⁱ

Oscar Romero came to recognize the poor, suffering Christ in the faces, lives, and circumstances of the people he called “my brothers and sisters.”

At his Academic Investiture as a Doctor of Humanities, *Honoris Causa*, given by the University of Louvain, Belgium, Romero articulated this development in his Christology, a shift that inspired the mission of the church in El Salvador:

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 would 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; those who make the kingdom of violence come closer as they lie upon their beds of ivory; those who join house to house, and field to field, until they occupy the whole land, and are the only ones there.

This defense of the poor in a world deep in conflict has occasioned something new in the recent history of our church: persecution.

Real persecution has been directed against the poor, the body of Christ in history today. They, like Jesus, are the crucified, the persecuted servants of Yahweh. They are the ones who make up in their own bodies that which is lacking in the passion of Christ. And for that reason when the church has organized and united itself around the hopes and the anxieties of the poor it has incurred the same fate as that of Jesus and of the poor: persecution.ⁱⁱⁱ

Romero’s compassion increased as he struggled to listen to heart-breaking stories of widows, mothers and daughters as they described episodes of fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons taken from their homes, tortured, mutilated or killed in front of them, or abducted in the middle of the night, never to be heard from again. He also listened to accounts of women brutally gang raped by soldiers and pregnant women whose breasts were cut off or whose bellies were cut open and the infants ripped from their bodies, then used as target practice. He listened to campesinos tell how the military decimated their entire village with fire to terrify them, displacing them in the mountains. In Jon Sobrino’s view, people came to Romero when lands

were taken from them; their only recourse was Romero in whom they trusted to advocate for them. “It was not that they came to him simply as a friend, seeking consolation. They came to him as a protector who was in duty bound to put the full weight of his episcopal authority at the service of the poor and oppressed.”^{iv}

In 1943 Romero had asked himself the provocative question, “how far can a soul ascend if it lets itself be entirely possessed by God?” I believe this question animated and directed his spiritual life and led him to accept, in this final phase, God’s call to prophetic leadership and martyrdom.

Oscar Arnulfo Romero, sixth Archbishop of El Salvador, was assassinated while celebrating the Paschal Sacrifice, on March 24, 1980.

Decades later, contemporary Christians are left to ponder what Romero’s amazing life and generous death teaches us about contemporary discipleship. One way to understand discipleship and explain what happened to Romero is through developing a conception of conversion as a response to grace; a rich and real process which generates growth into the likeness of the Son of God. Such transformation is two pronged: growth toward human authenticity and growth toward deeper intimacy with the Triune God.

Romero embraced his call to discipleship. It is no wonder, that at the end of his life, we witness a man who was:

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- intellectually gifted and articulate
- compassionate and self-generous
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In who he was and what he did, Oscar Romero revealed the glory of God and inspires us to take seriously the invitation to discipleship.

ⁱ Kenneth Woodward, *Making Saints: How the Catholic Church Determines Who Becomes A Saint, Who Doesn't and Why* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 37.

ⁱⁱ Dermot Keogh, *Romero: El Salvador's Martyr* (Dublin, Ireland: Dominican Publications, 1981), 59.

ⁱⁱⁱ “La dimensión política de la fe desde la opción por los pobres,” *La voz de los sin voz: La parábola viva de Monseñor Romero*, (San Salvador: UCA Editores, 1980), 187.

^{iv} *Memories and Reflections*, 72.