Archbishop Oscar Romero: A Model of Reading the Signs of the Times

Angela Senander

After Archbishop Oscar Romero finished preaching the Word of God at Mass on March 24, 1980, he was gunned down at the altar. After nearly twenty-five years, a justice system outside his country recognized the assassination as a “crime against humanity,” which America reported as a “Sign of the Times” in September 2004. A U.S. district court found Álvaro Saravia liable for compensatory and punitive damages because of his involvement in Romero’s assassination. The assassination was a reaction to Romero’s witness to God’s love for the poor, from his reading the signs of his times in the repressive violence and oppressive poverty in El Salvador. In anticipation of the twenty-fifth anniversary of Romero’s martyrdom, let us examine the growth in Romero’s capacity to read the signs of the times, particularly noting the significance of his desire to be a good pastor. With Romero as a model, we will examine a sign of our times, “the war on terrorism,” in light of the Gospel.

Romero’s concern for the poor was transformed into solidarity with the poor through the witness of pastoral workers in the archdiocese of San Salvador. Most strikingly, the witness that Fr. Rutilio Grande gave to God’s love for the poor through his life and death invited Archbishop Romero not simply to respond to the particular needs of deprived individuals but also to enter into greater solidarity with the needy and challenge the unjust structures that keep them poor. A comparison of his response to particular incidents of repression and oppression when he was bishop of Santiago de María with his response to similar incidents when he was archbishop of San Salvador will illustrate growth in Romero’s ability to read and respond to the signs of the times.

Repressive Violence as a Sign of Romero’s Times

In June 1975, when Romero was bishop of Santiago de María, the National Guard killed five peasants in his diocese during a raid. Romero consoled the families and condemned the massacre as a violation of human rights during his homily at a Mass for these victims. Romero, then, protested this human rights violation to the local commander of the National Guard, who dismissed Romero’s concern on the grounds that the individuals deserved death. Following this, Romero wrote a letter to President Molina about this incident. Romero,

Angela Senander is assistant professor of moral theology at the Washington Theological Union in Washington, D.C.
however, did not protest publicly for three reasons: (1) he thought it was better to communicate directly with the authorities, (2) the church was not directly involved in the incident, and (3) he did not know the motives behind the killings or the prior conduct of the victims (Brockman, 54).

In March 1977, Fr. Rutilio Grande and two peasants were shot and killed as they traveled from Aguilares to El Paisnal. In this case Romero, who was archbishop of San Salvador, knew Grande. Grande, and the other Jesuits with whom he worked, had encouraged the peasants to gather together and reflect on the implications of the Bible for their lives. In his homilies, Grande also denounced the injustice of the few wealthy landowners exploiting the peasants for the sake of profits. Not only did Romero know the conduct of one of the victims but this victim was also a priest whose murder was a reaction to his pastoral work. This made the church’s direct involvement in the incident clear to Romero. In addition to direct communication with authorities about this matter, Romero engaged in a public protest by not participating in any official government functions so long as the government did not seriously seek justice in this case. The clergy encouraged Romero to protest this persecution of the church by closing the Catholic schools for several days and having a single Mass for the archdiocese at the cathedral the following Sunday, which he did.

As both the repression and Romero’s solidarity with those who suffered from the repression increased, the strength of his public protest increased, culminating in his final nationally broadcast homily in which he told the soldiers to stop the repression. The violent repression reflects the attempts of those in power to maintain the status quo by discouraging the peasants from organizing and changing the oppressive conditions in which they live.

Oppressive Poverty as a Sign of Romero’s Times

The contrast between Romero’s responses to the government’s repression parallels the differences between his responses to the peasants’ experience of oppression. As bishop of Santiago de María, Romero used church buildings to provide shelter for peasants working in the fields who would otherwise have had to sleep outdoors in the cold. The pastoral response to these people’s need for shelter and food was an expression of love for the poor, but not one that recognized and challenged the source of the injustices. In contrast, the pastoral response to the poor in Aguilares, which Archbishop Romero endorsed, encouraged the peasants to reflect on the injustices critically and work together to change their oppressive situation. This solidarity with the poor caused the church to share in the experience of repression. The military evicted peasants from the land they rented and used the church in Aguilares as military barracks. In this case, the church could not provide shelter for the homeless but rather shared in the experience of homelessness. This reflects a transformation from a love for the poor that maintained the status quo to a love engaged in solidarity with the poor that challenged the status quo.

Learning to Read the Signs of the Times

The witness of the pastoral workers of the archdiocese of San Salvador transformed Romero’s love for the poor into a deeper solidarity with the poor. In 1977, when Oscar Romero became archbishop, he came to lead a diocese in which the pastoral practices of bringing the Word of God to the poor threatened the unjust structures that kept the majority of Salvadorans in that condition. This solidarity
with the needy and protest against poverty was both reflected in and inspired by Medellin’s teaching about poverty. In an effort to foster unity in his new diocese, Romero listened to and learned from the pastoral workers there. Their witness increased his awareness of structural injustices that were oppressing the people. This is particularly true in the case of Rutilio Grande whose life and death witnessed to God’s love for the poor. In “Oscar Romero: Voice of the Downtrodden,” Ignacio Martin-Baro, who was one of the Jesuits later killed at the University of Central America, states:

The murder of Fr. Grande clearly represented more than the elimination of a priest. It represented an attack against the pastoral approach made its own by the Catholic Church, against the church’s preferential option for the poor. . . . For Romero the assassination of Fr. Grande, as the archbishop was himself to remark many times afterward, was the crucial moment. . . . (Romero 1985, 6).

Romero’s identification with God’s love for the poor can be heard in his nationally broadcast homilies that evaluated the repression and oppression, the signs of his times, in the light of the Gospel. Romero’s call for the conversion of the wealthy and powerful from the idols of wealth and national security to a God who loves the poor challenged their way of life. This challenge was not only addressed to the wealthy of El Salvador but also to the wealthy nation to the north, the United States. The United States supported the repression in El Salvador with military aid, in an attempt to protect U.S. capitalism and national security from the threat of communism during the Cold War.

“War on Terrorism” as a Contemporary Sign of the Times

Looking back at Romero’s times suggests that we consider the contemporary “war on terrorism” as a sign of the times. The repressive violence that the United States supported in El Salvador during the Cold War was not an isolated event. The United States has a history of supporting repressive regimes when it is judged to be in the United States’ self-interest to do so. Both the “disappeared” of Chile during the Pinochet regime and the Palestinians suffering from the actions of the Israeli army embody human rights violations perpetrated by repressive governments supported by the United States.

Remembering the United States’ history of maintaining national security and capitalism at the expense of others provides a context for interpreting the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001. The United States was not merely the innocent victim, as oversimplified political rhetoric suggests, but rather an actor in the cycle of violence. The images of Palestinians cheering after the terrorist attack of September 11 were particularly shocking in the United States because of the nation’s perception of itself as an innocent victim that was unjustly attacked. Without denying the unjust death of so many innocent civilians, one might try to understand how Palestinians could cheer at the destruction of so many lives.

When the state of Israel was formed after the Jewish people experienced the violence of the Nazi concentration camps, many Palestinians were displaced from their land to refugee camps. They have lived in oppressive conditions for decades, and the Israeli military has used violence to maintain the status quo. The Israeli army has benefited greatly from the United States’ foreign-aid policy. The images of Palestinians cheering after the September 11 attack challenge the United

SIGNS OF THE TIMES
States to recognize its complicity in the oppression and repression of the Palestinians. They are by no means the only group in the Middle East that has experienced the United States' foreign policy as maintaining a status quo of oppressive and repressive conditions. I would suggest that the attack against the World Trade Center was, at least in part, a statement against such conditions associated with the capitalist system, and that the attack against the Pentagon was, at least in part, a statement against the U.S. military's global efforts, which include the support of repressive regimes, so as to maintain stability for the global capitalist economy.

The United States suffered an attack on two of its most significant symbols: one of capitalism (the World Trade Center) and the other of national security (the Pentagon). The devastating loss of life during the September 11 terrorist attack has fueled both fear and a corresponding determination to fight terrorism, which has resulted in war in Afghanistan and Iraq. Rhetoric has been used to dehumanize the enemy, and national security and capitalism often function as idols or absolute values in this context. The teaching of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount challenges this failure to love one's enemy, and the Gospel message that we cannot serve two masters (Luke 16:13) challenges Christians in the United States to reevaluate and relativize national security and capitalism when they function as absolutes.

References


“Romero Hearing Seen as Curbing Impunity.” *America.* 191/7 (September 20, 2004) 5.


