

The Martyrs of our Modern Church

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Next week, the 31st anniversary of the death of Archbishop Oscar Romero will be marked by people around the world to whom he remains an inspiration – in his life and death – as they strive for justice. His country of El Salvador saw many other lives lost as members of the Church were targeted by the authorities as a result of their protestations against an oppressive regime. Michael Campbell-Johnston SJ, who worked with many of these martyrs, tells their stories and gives an insight into the Church teaching that lay behind their deep commitment to justice.

In recent decades, Christianity in general and the Catholic Church in particular have rediscovered what should always have been an essential dimension of faith and practice: the social dimension. This is an understanding that Christianity is not a purely individual and personal matter, nor is it, as the writer, Ernest Renan put it somewhat sarcastically, ‘a religion made for the interior consolation of a few chosen souls.’ As the great French theologian, Henri de Lubac stated so clearly, ‘Catholicism is essentially social. It is social in the deepest sense of the word, not merely in its applications in the field of natural institutions but first and foremost in itself, in the heart of its mystery, in the essence of its dogma.’¹

This rediscovery is expressed in what is usually called the Social Teaching of the Church or Catholic Social Teaching. It was initiated formally over one hundred years ago with the publication in 1891 of Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical letter, *Rerum Novarum*. Before this, the corporal works of mercy were and had always been the principal way for a Christian to express love of neighbour. They remain essential and constitute the chief criterion by which, according to the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Last Judgement, the Lord will call each one of us to account. *Rerum Novarum*, however, recognised that in the modern world we have the knowledge and capability to build



the type of society we want. The encyclical therefore stated that love of neighbour ought to extend to action to remedy the wrongs of the new industrial society, tackling their causes and advocating changes in regimes themselves which would bring them to affirm among other things the dignity of human work, the right to a just wage and the right of the worker to form professional associations.

This was followed by nine social encyclicals from all but two of the succeeding popes. The latest of these is Pope Benedict XVI’s *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), which calls for ‘integral human development’ and the need for a new world order to direct globalisation. These encyclicals can be considered as blueprints for building a society based on the principles of the Gospel. There are also two extremely important general Church declarations supporting them. First, the Second Vatican Council’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the modern world, *Gaudium et Spes*, with its beautiful opening words: ‘The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.’² Secondly, the 1971 Synod of Bishops’ statement on Justice in the World, which proclaimed that: ‘Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a

constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel.³ Our religious faith must go hand in glove with our active promotion of justice.

Unfortunately this wealth of social teaching is either neglected by or even unknown to the majority of Catholics today. This is because, as a recent book puts it, 'it remains outside the mainstream of ordinary parish life, is seldom referred to in the pulpit, almost never mentioned in the RCIA programmes for people becoming Catholics, and very unlikely ever to be taught as part of catechesis and formation programmes.'⁴ In other words, it lives up to its description in a well-known collection: 'our best kept secret'.

And this in spite of the fact that all of the documents mentioned above are not only deeply concerned with the Church's Social Teaching but call on Catholics to study it and put it into practice as part of their faith. This charge was repeated by the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales in their 1996 statement, *The Common Good*: 'All members of the Catholic Church must accept their full share of responsibility for the welfare of society. We should regard the discharge of these responsibilities as no less important than fulfilling our religious duties and indeed as part of them.'⁵

One of the reasons for the urgency of this appeal is that there has never been so much injustice in the world as there is today. One UN Human Development Report after another stresses the fact that never has there been so much wealth in the world, yet never has it been so unequally divided. A 2002 report of the International Forum on Globalisation sums up the situation as follows: 'In a world in which a few enjoy unimaginable wealth, two hundred million children under the age of five are under weight because of a lack of food. Some fourteen million children each year die from hunger related disease. A hundred million children are living or working on the streets... Eight hundred million people go to bed hungry each night.'⁶

Forty years ago in his great letter on 'The Development of Peoples', *Populorum Progressio*, Pope Paul VI described the 'scandal of development' as an 'outrage against humanity'. Pope John Paul II spoke of pervading 'structures of sin', particularly characterised by 'the all-consuming desire for profit

and the thirst for power' in all cultures. As the Antilles Bishops put it: 'Any society in which a few control most of the wealth and the masses are left in want is a sinful society.'⁷

However, the call to Christians to express their faith by struggling for justice, when an increasing number of societies or regimes in the world are fundamentally unjust and oppressive, can seem like an invitation to persecution, if not martyrdom. Aware of this, John Paul II exhorted Catholics to acknowledge and pay special honour their modern martyrs of the 20th century. What perhaps characterises someone as a 'modern' martyr is the nature of the truth to which they are called to give witness. As Karl Rahner has argued, the classical concept of martyrdom, which is fundamentally conditioned by an *odium fidei* (hatred of the faith), needs to be widened to include those who have been killed by an *odium iustitiae* (hatred of justice). He cites Archbishop Oscar Romero as an obvious example of this.

It was Father Pedro Arrupe who led the Society of Jesus, in its 32nd General Congregation in 1975, to declare the promotion of justice to be an indispensable condition for the service of the faith and that this 'should be a concern of our whole life and a dimension of all our apostolic endeavours'. At the same time he added:

It is necessary that our Congregation be truly conscious that the justice of the Gospel should be preached through the cross and from the cross. If we intend seriously to work for justice, the cross will immediately appear, frequently accompanied by bitter pain. For, although we be faithful to our priestly and religious charism and work prudently, we shall see those rise up against us who perpetuate injustice in today's industrial society, who otherwise are sometimes considered very fine Christians and often are our benefactors or friends or even relatives, who accuse us of Marxism and subversion, eventually cease to be our friends, and consequently take away their former backing and financial assistance.

This prophetic remark has been amply fulfilled and is borne out by numerous examples. 'This is a courageous decree: some Jesuits will have to die', said João Burnier, a Brazilian Jesuit, speaking at the time about the Congregation's Decree Four, which commits the Society to promote justice. Shortly

afterwards he was punched and then shot in the presence of his bishop, Dom Pedro Casadliga, as both men were interceding to release two women who had been arrested and tortured by the police. In anticipation of the anniversary of the death of Archbishop Romero, I would like to tell the stories of some other modern martyrs, people that have made a great impression on me.

Octavio Ortiz and four youths in El Despertar

At 6.00am on 20 January 1979, a heavy army vehicle crashed through the iron gates of the retreat centre, El Despertar in El Salvador, where Fr Octavio Ortiz and some 20 youths were asleep. They were attending a weekend leadership training course dedicated to Christian formation. When Fr Octavio went out to see what the noise was, the soldiers shot him and then ran their vehicle over his face. Some of the youths had escaped over a wall at the back of the centre, but the soldiers captured four, whom they also shot and ran over. Others were taken prisoner and questioned for 28 hours.

As this was happening, Archbishop Oscar Romero was preparing to leave for the meeting of Latin American bishops at Puebla in Mexico. Instead, he came immediately to El Despertar and was horrified by the condition of the corpses. The following day, a Sunday, he celebrated their funeral Mass in the Cathedral. He preached a powerful sermon in which, after expressing his condolences to the parents of Fr Ortiz and the four young men, he said: 'I cannot omit the news about the event that brings us here today: the bloody and painful case of Octavio Ortiz Luna. Concerning this matter the Diocese states that the official statement published by the media is filled with lies from beginning to end... Thanks to God we are able to reconstruct the truth through the testimony of many survivors who were brought to the prison of the National Guard.'

Romero then presented this evidence in detail, making it quite clear that El Despertar was a centre dedicated to Christian formation and not to training *guerrilleros*; that 28 young men aged between 13 and 21 were attending a course of Christian Initiation for Young People and that the only arms they had were hymnals and guitars. He ended by drawing several conclusions:

First. Our Security Forces are incapable of recognising their errors but make things worse by falsifying the truth with slander.....Second. The purification of the corrupt system of our nation's security is urgent... Third. Once again the evil and the danger of the Law of Public Order is proven... Fourth. Enough! We say this not with pessimism but with great optimism in the strength of our noble people.... Finally, I want to remind you that the material and intellectual authors of the assassination of Father Octavio Cruz have incurred canonical excommunication, which in this case means excommunication from the Church.

Six Jesuits, their housekeeper and her daughter

Ignacio Ellacuría, Segundo Montes, Ignacio Martín-Baró, Joaquín López y López, Juan Ramón Moreno and Amando López, all Jesuit priests, and their housekeeper, Elba Ramos with her 15-year-old daughter, Celina, were dragged out of their beds on the campus of the Universidad Centroamericana in El Salvador on the night of 16 November 1989. Soldiers from the crack Atlacatl Battalion, which had been trained in and was funded by the United States, made them lie on the ground and were then ordered to shoot them in cold blood by Lieutenant José Ricardo Espinosa, who had been a student of one of the priests at the Jesuit school, the Externado San José. They cut out the brains of Ignacio Ellacuría, Rector of the University, and spread them on the grass to demonstrate why they were killing him.

Why were they killing them? I tried to answer this in an article written at the time with the title, 'My brave "subversive" friends':

I knew each of them well and worked alongside them in El Salvador for three years. In the Catholic University, where they taught, they did their utmost to make students aware of their Christian duty to promote justice as part of their practice of the faith... But the peace they longed for was not peace at any price. They were one with Archbishop Oscar Romero who, shortly before his assassination in 1980, declared: 'Let it be quite clear that if we are being asked to collaborate with a pseudo-peace, a false order, based on repression and fear, we must recall that the only order and the only peace that God wants is one based on truth and justice.'

The Jesuits made this choice once before in El Salvador when, in the late 1970s, they were told to leave the country within thirty days or be ready to face death at the hand of right-wing death squads. It was then that the slogan 'Be a patriot, kill a priest' was daubed on buildings all over the capital. The Jesuits decided to stay and, as a result, some were banished, others tortured and Rutilio Grande was assassinated as he was on his way to celebrate Mass. The six Jesuits who died on Thursday made the same choice, knowing full well the dangers they ran. Earlier this year the Catholic University was one of the principal partners in a national debate on peace which was sponsored by the Archbishop of San Salvador. After ten years of bitter civil war, which has cost the lives of more than 70,000 people, mostly civilians, women and children, the overwhelming conclusion was that the only hope for peace lay, not in military victory by either side, but in talks and negotiations. The UCA, and Father Ellacuría in particular, played a leading role in helping to promote these negotiations. Hopefully their deaths will now open the eyes of those who are supporting a brutal and corrupt regime and preventing serious negotiations from taking place... If the death of the six Jesuits achieves this goal, they will not have died in vain.

Shortly after the assassination, I was visited by three Scotland Yard detectives on their way to El Salvador to investigate the murder of the Jesuits at the request of El Salvador's President Cristiani. They promised to get to the bottom of the crime and report back on their return. But it was the last I saw of them, and the colonel directly responsible for organising the assassination (Colonel Guillermo Benavides), though arrested and charged, was 'confined' in a luxury hotel near a beach and then released. The judge who tried him and found him guilty had to flee the country with his family after an assassination attempt in his own house. One of the better-known death squads threatened that they would 'physically eliminate all persons, lay or religious, in or out of the government, who are involved in this case.' The reason they gave was: 'Never before in the history of El Salvador has a military man been brought to trial... No military man has been or should be subject to any law of the Republic.'

The assassinations of all these modern martyrs, my colleagues and friends, affected me deeply. I lived and worked in El Despertar for over 11 years. My room and office were next to the spot where the martyrs were shot and where we erected a small shrine in their memory. I passed it every time I entered or came out of my room and was deeply conscious I was treading on holy ground. Next week we will remember the most famous of modern martyrs, Archbishop Romero, but we remember too the lives of these priests, their companions, and all others who have given their lives in the pursuit of justice.

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¹ Henri De Lubac, *Catholicisme* (1938)

² Pope Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), 1

³ World Synod of Catholic Bishops, *Justice in the World* (1971), 6

⁴ Austen Ivereigh, *Faithful Citizens: A Practical Guide to Catholic Social Teaching and Community Organising* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2010), p.17

⁵ Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, *The Common Good* (1996), 15

⁶ See: http://www.ifg.org/alt_eng.pdf

⁷ Roman Catholic Bishops of the Antilles, *Justice and Peace in a New Caribbean* (1975), 34