

For more information on our work please contact us.

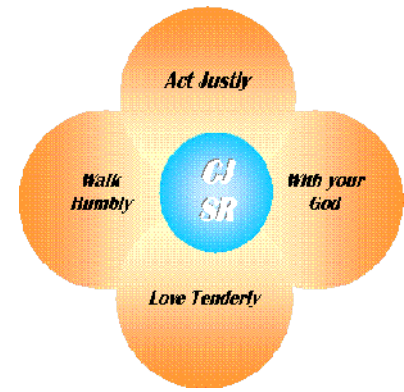
*Commission for Justice and
Social Responsibility
Cathedral House
Ingrave Road
Brentwood
Essex CM15 8AT*

Tel: 01277 265290

Email: cjsr@dioceseofbrentwood.org



Commission for Justice and Social Responsibility



find us online at www.dioceseofbrentwood.net/cjsr

Archbishop Oscar Romero



‘Service, Peace and Social Justice’

**Talks given by
Julian Filochowski
Chair Archbishop Romero Trust**

**and
Bishop Kevin Dowling
Bishop of Rustenburg SA**

Introduction

On May 15th 2009 the Commission for Justice and Social Responsibility and Pax Christi co-hosted an event to commemorate the 29th anniversary of the death of Archbishop Oscar Romero. We had the pleasure of welcoming Julian Filochowski, Chair of the Archbishop Romero Trust, Bishop Kevin Dowling, Bishop of Rustenburg, S A and Pat Gaffney, General Secretary of Pax Christi to Brentwood to talk about Archbishop Oscar Romero. The event was co hosted by Pax Christi and the Archbishop Romero Trust of which Julian Filochowski is the Chair.

Julian Filochowski spoke about Oscar Romero from his own experience as a friend of the Archbishop. Bishop Kevin spoke of the way in which Oscar Romero's life influenced how we can deal with similar situations to those in El Salvador. He talked of South Africa and Zimbabwe and brought in a spiritual element to the evening.

Both the speakers were inspirational and so we have tried to recreate some of the spirit of the event by including their talks in this booklet. We hope you enjoy reading it.

Davina Bolt

Elisabeth Abbott



Bishop Kevin Dowling

Julian Filochowski



Bishop Oscar Romero

way, the Body of Christ which has Aids, the Body of Christ which should eschew all claim to power and privilege because it is unmistakably one with the alienated and dispossessed of the world. When the Church, the whole Church community allows itself to be evangelised by the poor and excluded of our world wherever they are, the Church community and each individual Church member will discover the real truth of the Gospel, the real truth of Jesus the liberator and redeemer who came to transform the lot of all who are alienated, excluded, rejected, left out in the cold and loneliness of hopelessness and despair.

On 17 February, 1980, Oscar Romero gave an address at Louvain. He explained what was happening to the Church in El Salvador what the Church was doing. "First", he said, "we become incarnate among the poor.....As we draw near to the poor, we find we are gradually uncovering the genuine face of the Suffering Servant of Yahweh.....What else does the Church do here? It proclaims the good news to the poor, I said.

I do not mean this in the demagogic sense of shutting the door on others. On the contrary. I do mean that those who have for centuries listened to bad news and lived even worse realities are now hearing from the Church the word of Jesus: 'The reign of God is near; it is yours! Blessed are you poor, for the reign of God is yours.'" I pray: May the Church of today, and every time, proclaim and be this message, this reign of God!

Thank you.

Bishop Kevin Dowling C.Ss.R.

Bishop of Rustenburg S A

It is a great joy to be with you this evening for a little bit of Romero celebration and reflection. The Archbishop Romero Trust believes that Oscar Romero is the patron-saint-in-waiting for our Justice and Peace movement, for our CAFODs, our Pax Christis and our Progressios. We are praying and we are working to see Archbishop Romero formally recognised by the Church, through his beatification and canonisation. In reality he has been canonised already in the hearts of millions of people in Central America who see him as the great gift of God that he was for the whole Latin American continent. We believe that one day he will be seen and recognised by the whole Church as an icon of holiness, as a model bishop committed to justice, peace and human rights, as a man who made an irrevocable commitment to the poor, to Jesus Christ in the poor.

The greatest grace and privilege of my own life was to have known, to have worked with and to have enjoyed the friendship of Oscar Romero between 1977 and his martyrdom in 1980. At the time I was working for CIIR, today Progressio, along with Kathy Piper from this diocese. She and I worked on Latin American issues, in the pursuit of justice, development and human rights across the Americas during a very bad period in Latin America's political history; with military dictatorships virtually everywhere and really horrendous visible repression.

Tiny little El Salvador, in the very heart of Central America, is roughly the size of Wales and it faces onto the Pacific but not the Atlantic Ocean; it had a population of some four million people and was really a text book case of those structures of injustice that weighed down on the *campesinos* and poor people of Latin America. At the time it was a plantation economy. They grew cotton, coffee and sugar cane on colossal *haciendas* and there was very great wealth from the agricultural exports - but that wealth was appropriated by just two per cent of the population, who held sixty per cent of the land. In fact El Salvador was called the country of the fourteen families, who between them seemed to own most of the fertile parts of the country. And yet with four million people on this tiny amount of land, it was a relatively over-populated country. Those landless peasants were desperately poor people earning their living as seasonal day labourers picking coffee or cutting cane and they received a pathetic wage. Some were hungry. And as the country was growing and wealth was accumulating the poor were getting poorer.

Any attempt to change that situation was blocked. There were elections promoted by the US government's 'Alliance for Progress' but there was electoral fraud time after time. Rural trade unions and peasant organisations were banned; they were simply illegal. Any serious attempt at change was met with violent repression. So it was the classic case; we talk about structures of injustice, social sin, institutionalised violence, they were all there, they were apparent, they were palpable in El Salvador.

I used to go there to visit CAFOD projects that were being funded by parishes in England and Wales. There were nutrition programmes for poor families in the countryside where there were levels of malnutrition more usually seen in Africa.

After Medellin (the continental meeting of bishops held in Colombia in 1968) the Church in Latin America, which had been part of these very structures that had survived intact from colonial times, actually changed sides. In the wake of Vatican II the bishops applied its teachings to Latin America and the Church proclaimed the beginnings of an 'option for the poor'. They recognised the social sin, the structural injustice, institutionalised violence and they committed themselves to change; in future the Church was going to take the side of the poor.

In little El Salvador the Archbishop of the capital city, San Salvador, Archbishop Chavez, tried to live that promise very faithfully, to move the Church alongside the poor. They began to organise basic Christian communities, to organise the rural *campesinos*, and to call for land reform. This provoked a tremendous reaction from the wealthy families. But whilst that apostolic work was going on, and we watched it with admiration and tried to give support to the Church, we noticed that there was an auxiliary bishop in San Salvador between 1970 and 1974 who was not sharing this process - that was the first time we came across Oscar Romero. He was rather ill tempered, he was pedantic, he was bookish, he avoided contact with the other clergy. He publically criticised the Jesuit High School, saying that they were pedalling Marxist propaganda dressed up as liberating education. He took charge of the diocesan newspaper, fired everybody with a social commitment and filled it with pious articles which had little relationship with what was going on in the city or more importantly the countryside of the diocese. And he himself was flirting with and was seen to be alongside the Opus Dei movement. He seemed to be rather a reactionary bishop completely out of sympathy with the struggles of the poor.

out her fragile life, and listening as she tells her story of migrating from grinding poverty in her homeland, only to find even greater excruciating poverty in a shack settlement, forcing her into transactional sex with men who can give her just enough money to survive for 24 more hours – a profound injustice; it is only by making careful analysis of the systemic causes of poverty, injustice and marginalisation that we can discern the voice of God in the context and integrate Gospel values in the very action and witness we discern; it is only by looking far deeper into the complex causes of war and violence in a given context that we will be able to weigh up what are the realistic possibilities in the civil society sector, including the Church, for promoting the values central to transitional justice after war and conflict, viz. accountability, truth recovery, reconciliation, institutional reform and reparations to the victims. And finally, it is the poor who can teach us the qualities which are central to the spirituality which must empower all we are and do, above all the spirituality of non-violence and powerlessness which, no matter how long it takes, will allow the presence and power of God alone to shine through our witness, advocacy, solidarity, and ministry of justice and of transforming the suffering of the "little ones" of our world.

Oscar Romero has been such an important presence and inspiration in my own search for integrity and authenticity as a follower of Jesus in situations of oppression, violence, immense poverty and misery in my own country, and on the continent of Africa in particular. I can never tire of truly learning the way of Jesus from him, and the incredible power of his words and witness.....I will never forget the intense experience of sharing in the 5 days of theological reflection and witness in El Salvador which commemorated the 25th anniversary of Oscar Romero's assassination in 2005, seeing and listening to the *campesinos* from Central America as they sang and prayed around the tomb of their saint, the person who remains and will always remain central to their own struggle for dignity, justice and a life which accords with their God-given dreams.

Oscar Romero will always be a disturbing voice in any time and context, because he so clearly cuts to the heart of the issue and the problem.....until we can think and feel with and be converted by the poor of our world, then there is no real redemption for anyone, nor for the planet and its precious resources. And if this is true for the world, it is just as true for the Church as the Body of Christ which suffers in any

– because the Church, and each person of goodwill is challenged to incarnate that mystery of redemption, transformation in the concrete context of wars, atrocities, human rights abuses, oppression, exclusion, misery, and human degradation wherever and whenever it occurs in the unfolding story of humankind and the planet. That indeed is the simple yet profound legacy of Oscar Romero which will be ever new, ever relevant – for the Church, indeed for the world. Just as he did, so we must continue the revelation of Jesus made incarnate and present in the suffering and misery of the poor and oppressed of our world, wherever they are, because they are the only ones called blessed. And they are to *become* blessed because of our witness to their sacred dignity, our advocacy for change in the unjust geo-political structures and policies and practice, our courage in facing down oppression, our faith in speaking truth to power, and our solidarity which finds the creative ways to transform their suffering into a new beginning.

All over the world today, and not least in my own continent of Africa, wars and violence, human rights abuses and appalling atrocities, continue to devastate nations, communities, families and individuals. The environmental exploitation and damage to the land and creation threatens the future sustainability of the resources on which people depend in order to survive; the complexity of the political-economic power structures continues to hold whole nations in the grip and trap of unrelenting poverty, a poverty so severe and unjust that it crushes the hope and dignity of millions; the greed for power and control by the elites of our world seems to go unchallenged since they can seemingly act with impunity; and a sense of helplessness and powerlessness engulfs even the most faith-filled and committed people who believe passionately that there can indeed be another way.

That is why Romero's own journey to conversion and evangelisation by the poor is the model for the Church and its mission in all ages. Church leadership, the whole Body of Christ and especially the hierarchy, all those called to witness and ministry in Church and world, must begin – as did Romero – with the profound awareness that it is only by entering personally into the endless range of suffering, injustice and oppression experienced by the poor, that we can truly encounter the Jesus of the Gospels, and especially the Jesus of Luke 4, who unrolled the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and affirmed his own prophetic calling.

We will only really understand the mystery of the Incarnation by sitting with a poor single mother with Aids defining diseases so quickly snuffing

In 1974 he went on to become bishop of a small rural diocese, Santiago de Maria, and little was heard of him until in February 1977 we woke up to the shocking news that this man who seemed to oppose the whole pastoral strategy of the Salvadoran Church had been made Archbishop. The dismay was widespread. Many priests and religious were heartbroken; they felt that everything they had been working for with the past Archbishop and the basic Christian communities was in peril. What had happened was that Romero had been seen by everyone in this period, 1970 to 1974, as someone who was a reactionary, who was against the process of social change and opposed to ecclesial involvement in it. He had been seen in that light by the right, by the conservatives and by the land owners, and by the Church that was working for social change. He was the candidate then of the coffee barons, the people who owned the land. He was appointed to put the genie back in the bottle; to stop all this dangerous social engagement; to get the Church and the clergy back where they really belonged - in the sacristy - not out working amongst the poor and accompanying them in their struggle for dignity and injustice. Well, that was what we feared and that was what the people who welcomed Romero's appointment with open arms thought they would get. And none of us could have been more wrong. This great God of surprises that we have comes along all the time and we see that the Holy Spirit works in the most mysterious and unexpected ways.

Romero followed a completely different path during his three years of ministry in San Salvador. This was not because of some blind flash; we have often talked about a 'Road to Damascus' conversion where Romero was suddenly transformed in his thinking and then went in the opposite direction in his pastoral actions. That's an over-simplification. Nor can the unexpected path Romero followed be blamed on some mental instability - which is what some of the other bishops eventually said - that he'd had a kind of brainstorm and gone mad! What Romero was, and this is what is so especially important for us, was an ordinary man, an ordinary priest of his time, who did quite extraordinary things. His process of conversion was a process that grew and developed throughout his life and surprisingly there was a great continuity in it.

So let me tell you a little bit about what we might call his hidden life before we first came across this rather irritable and difficult auxiliary bishop. Oscar Arnulfo Romero was born in 1917 in the rural countryside. His father, the postmaster in the town, was a man of modest means but not desperately poor. A pious boy, he was eventually allowed to go to the

seminary. He was bright and he was quickly sent in 1937 to Rome - where all the bright students for the priesthood went. He studied at the Pio Latino College and the Gregorian University. This was a classical orthodox training. He was ordained in 1942 in the middle of the Second World War. Interestingly he was going to go on and do a doctorate in ascetics, but with the war everybody was shipped out and he was sent back to El Salvador.

In 1943 he began his priestly career in the diocese of San Miguel and for twenty five years he was what would be described as a zealous pastor. He was hard working; he was diligent; he was the best of his priestly generation. A really well trained, sincere, intelligent, orthodox priest with a robust spirituality. He said the rosary daily; he wore the scapular and all kinds of traditional spirituality and devotions were his. He lived very frugally that's also very important. He lived simply; he ate only one meal a day and, according to the testimony of his housekeeper at that time, whenever people gave him things he used to accept them graciously and then he would say to her, 'Give them away to those in need.' He had a really awful old bed: twice people tried to give him a new mattress but he told his housekeeper to hand them to the poor.

He was a noted preacher and he preached brilliantly and eloquently - and people asked for him to preach perhaps because his preaching was challenging. He challenged the military government of the time not in the way we would talk today, he challenged their arrogance. He was an administrator within the diocese, and he became Administrator of the Cathedral. He was the Chancellor of the diocese. He rebuilt the shrine of Our Lady, Queen of Peace, which was his favourite Marian devotion. He promoted lay organisations. He fostered the equivalent to the Catholic Women's League. He set up the SVP society and he used to bring all the shoeshine boys, the poorest kids in the town, together on a Friday for breakfast. He was really inserted among the people and despite all this work that he was doing he also edited the diocesan newspaper. He was really quite a journalist we discovered in the end. He had a real sympathy and empathy with his people. Everything he was doing was a service - a ministry of compassionate service.

That went on for twenty five years. In 1967 he celebrated the Silver Jubilee of his priesthood and he left the diocese. A new bishop had come from the USA and Romero couldn't get on with him - and it seemed as if he was beginning to have a mid-life crisis

He was sent up to the capital city of San Salvador, a fish out of water,

on earth is to call on all, on the rich as well, to be converted and to be saved alongside the poor, for they are the only ones called blessed."

Monsignor Oscar Romero spoke thus on 17 February, 1980, 29 years ago – just a short time before he was assassinated.

When we look with honesty at the Church of today, can we answer truthfully the questions raised by Oscar Romero: Does the Church of today suffer "the fate of the poor, which is persecution"? Does our Church today glory in the fact that "it has mingled the blood of its priests, its catechists, and its communities with that of the massacred people, and continually born the mark of persecution"? Does the Church truly "disquiet" the powers of the world, and as a result experience being "slandered"? Does the Church of today articulate clearly a "voice crying against injustice" and, because of this, is "disregarded"? Do the poor of the world "regard the Church as their own"? Does the Church's message challenge, invite, the people of our world, including the rich and powerful, "to be saved alongside the poor"? Do we as Church actually believe that the poor "are the only ones called blessed"?

The vision and message of Oscar Romero will be ever new, ever relevant, for the Church in any age. Jesus said once: "the poor you will have with you always". For me that was not in any sense a resigned abandonment to the stark reality that "the poor" will always and for ever feature strongly on the landscape of history, much less were those words of the Lord a condemnation of the poor to a hopeless and irredeemable future. Jesus became incarnate in the very reality of humankind, and especially in the reality of suffering, injustice, misery and marginalisation which condemned, and still condemns the vast majority of humankind to a future without hope. His message, his response was one which brought hope, opened doors, and pronounced with a clarity which could not be doubted, that such injustice, poverty, misery and marginalisation was an affront to human dignity which could only have one outcome – that it be totally transformed so that these "little ones" of the world would experience the dignity of being created in God's image and that their destiny was and is that they are preferentially called to "have life and life in abundance" (John 10:10). Nothing less than this is worthy of the mystery of the Incarnation of Jesus the Redeemer.

And that mystery is played out in every moment of subsequent history

outraged, and I began with the words: "What Government can call itself legitimate when it does this to its citizens?" I then proceeded to denounce the Mugabe regime, to reflect with the people that God was unmistakably with them when they suffered in this way, that their just cause was bound to succeed one day because God was with them – never doubt this! And then I addressed the Central Intelligence personnel present there and told them in an icy calm voice: "Your cause is lost. Make no mistake....when you do this to your people, your cause is lost. And never forget this: we will remember you when the change comes." For my pains, I was detained at Bulawayo airport on my way out by two Central Intelligence Organisation operatives and declared persona non grata. But this was so little in my eyes. That poor torture victim, when we tried to spirit him away after the service, faced yet again the terrible fear of being taken in. Someone ran up and told us: "The CIO men are outside the church and in the street searching for him". He said in total despair to us: "Let them take me and kill me". But our people got him away. I do not know what has become of this man.

Twenty-nine years ago a voice cried out: "The poor masses of our land find in the church the voice of Israel's prophets. There are among us those who sell the just for money and the poor for a pair of sandals, as the prophets said. There are those who pile up spoils and plunder in their palaces, who crush the poor, who bring on a reign of violence while reclining on beds of ivory, who join house to house and field to field so as to take up all there is and remain alone in the land (cf. Amos 6:3-4; Isaiah 5:8).

These texts of the prophets are not distant voices that we read with reverence in our liturgy. They are daily realities, whose cruelty and vehemence we live each day.

And therefore.....the church suffers the fate of the poor, which is persecution. Our church glories that it has mingled the blood of its priests, its catechists, and its communities with that of the massacred people and has continually born the mark of persecution. Because it disquiets, it is slandered, and its voice crying against injustice is disregarded.

The church's good name is not a matter of being on good terms with the powerful. The church's good name is a matter of knowing that the poor regard the church as their own, of knowing that the church's life

and he became an ecclesiastical bureaucrat with no pastoral responsibilities, quite isolated from the people. And if this was a mid-life crisis it developed very well. He was separated from his roots without a support system. He seemed to have few friends at that time. The clergy began to meet in the capital, and in the light of Medellin many acted in, what seemed to Romero, a very politicised way. Some of the things they said and did Romero found quite threatening to the traditional norms and the truths that he had held of how priests should behave and operate in their ministry.

He went into his shell and he did not communicate at all well with other clergy. He used to avoid them and they thought him incredibly unfriendly and aloof. That was the picture that we had of Romero at that time.

When he left San Salvador for the rural diocese for those three years he was back in pastoral work, back among the rural poor. He saw the poverty that was being suffered. He found that there were hundreds of people in the square outside his cathedral, shivering through the night waiting to be taken on as day labourers. He had never seen that before. He opened the cathedral and his own house so that they could come in. He used to go out all around the diocese preaching and talking and he began to discover the level of suffering. He thought that everybody got the minimum wage. He had wanted to throw out of the diocese the progressive team of Passionist Fathers, but he could not do so because there was no one to replace them and he eventually came to terms with them and their Medellin pastoral approach. And they took him to see how people were really being paid and he found that they were paid about two thirds of the minimum wage, which itself was utterly inadequate. He couldn't believe this. These were Catholic landowners, Catholic coffee planters who were paying their people less than a pittance of a wage. He was truly shocked.

Then there was a massacre in the diocese in a place called Tres Calles. To begin with, he believed the propaganda that the government had said that they were organising terrorism and then he went to see the families and saw that they were catechists. They had had their bibles with them as they were coming home from a bible circle when they were killed. This was beginning to change him.

He came to San Salvador in 1977. He had not looked for the job. He was actually very frightened of it. In his hand-written diary note for that day I have seen the entry which reads, 'It was announced today that Oscar Romero will be the next Archbishop of San Salvador.' He was

certainly not welcomed by his clergy or the basic communities.

Within a month of his inauguration there was an unprecedented dramatic event - the killing of Father Rutilio Grande, a Jesuit priest. He was a rural parish priest, who was shot dead on the way to celebrate Mass along with two others - an old man who was the sacristan and a young boy who was going to help serve the Mass. Up to then there had been repression, killings and torture; priests expelled, yes; priests beaten up, yes; but priests killed, no! This then was quite extraordinary. Rutilio Grande was one of the few priests who had been a close friend of Romero. When Romero had been the difficult prelate, he had lived in the national seminary where Rutilio was teaching at the time; and when Romero sat at a table on his own away from all the other priests Rutilio would go over to him and try to incorporate him into the community and so became his friend. When Romero was consecrated auxiliary bishop Rutilio was the Master of Ceremonies and organised a great national celebratory event. Romero didn't agree with all that Rutilio did but they were good friends and Romero certainly knew that Rutilio was a sincere and authentic pastor.

So on the night of Rutilio's assassination the President of the Republic phoned Romero, offered his condolences for the killing of a priest and said it was the guerrillas that had done it and that it was an appalling act. But Romero knew the President was lying because two young children survived the shooting and they had seen the men who had been firing at them; one of them was a relative. The children were shooed away. The bullets that killed Rutilio and his companions were shown to be police bullets.

That night was a Gethsemane experience for Romero; he went and he prayed through the night over the body of Rutilio. This was a moment when he could reflect that if they could do this to a Catholic priest in a Catholic country; what were they doing to simple campesinos without friends in high places? And what would this mean for him if he followed this through to its logical conclusion? He could see where it would take him - and he said yes. He wrote a letter to a Latin American bishop soon afterwards, which I have seen in his files, in which he said, 'My new ministry seems to have put me on the road to Calvary.'

Sometimes we talk about making a fundamental option in our lives; this was the moment when Archbishop Romero confirmed his fundamental option, the option for the poor. Thereafter there was no turning back. There were no more hesitations, no more failing courage that had

Talk: Oscar Romero – a Witness and Model for our Time

In June 2007 I travelled to Bulawayo in Zimbabwe – it was to commemorate the United Nations Day against Torture. In the preceding years I had been to the Catholic Cathedral in Bulawayo to witness against the brutal torture and injustices heaped on civilians by the demonic regime of Robert Mugabe. Each time, the Solidarity Peace Trust, on which I served as a Trustee, continued its revelation of atrocities and human rights abuses by bringing together the various Christian Churches in prayer and solidarity with the many hundreds who suffered so much. The Trust leadership in Bulawayo had spirited in a torture victim, well aware that the infamous Central Intelligence Organisation would be there to listen to and observe everything that went on during the ecumenical service. At a previous such service I addressed the CIO operatives in the Cathedral directly. I said: "To the security police from the Central Intelligence Organisation who are present here this evening, I bid you all a 'very good evening'. You have learnt well from the South African apartheid regime secret police. Whenever we met at Church or NGO gatherings in the apartheid times, we knew very well that the security police and informers were there. 'So, once again, good evening, you are welcome, and listen well'". People told me afterwards that several of the CIO men were actually taking down what I was saying in notebooks, and when I said this and people looked at them, they sheepishly put their notebooks inside their jackets.

I will never forget the experience of a yet another torture victim telling his story in that June month of 2007. He limped up, a totally broken human being. He had been taken in by the CIO security police and beaten to a pulp – his only crime that he was Ndebele, a perceived opponent of Mugabe and a perceived supporter of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change. After beating him mercilessly he was taken out and thrown in the bush, because he was not expected to survive. But he was found, and taken away to be nursed back to some semblance of health. But the savagery had severely damaged this man physically and mentally. He spoke in halting phrases of his torture, several times breaking down – and then limped away off the altar to be hidden again by our people.

I was asked to speak after his testimony. Again, I was incensed,

reminded them that it was their fellow *campesinos* being killed and he said finally 'I beg you, I beseech you, I order you in the name of God and the name of this suffering people whose clamours rise up to heaven, stop the repression now.' That sentence was his death sentence. It was seen as incitement to rise, to revolt. And a deadly plan prepared beforehand was put into operation. It led to his assassination the next evening.

So he sought justice for the poor, he offered service to the poor. He articulated their struggle. The poor were called terrorists, he called them martyrs. He worked tirelessly for reconciliation and for peace. He is a credible witness in our times to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He speaks to people of our times. He was the antithesis of the materialistic spin. He was a 'Gaudium et Spes' bishop. He was a Vatican II bishop through and through and he was a martyr for the option for the poor and the Magisterium of the Church.

One of Pope John Paul's lesser known encyclicals, which I commend always to bishops is 'Pastores Gregis'. Pastors of the flock'. It is a beautiful encyclical and it really offers a model of a bishop which could almost be taken from Romero's autobiography. When people shouted in San Salvador 'We want bishops like Oscar Romero', some thought they were being disrespectful to Romero's successor as archbishop but they were simply calling for what John Paul had directed them towards.

This man was utterly orthodox and utterly radical. He is for us today a source of great hope, a source of inspiration; somebody who, as we learn about him and see him, can energise us - and that is what saints are all about. We hope very much, pray very much and work in every possible way that Oscar Romero will be recognised as he is in every continent all over the world as a saint for the 21st century.

Julian Filochowski
Chair
Archbishop Romero Trust.

sometimes manifested itself in the past. Compassionate service became bound up with prophetic witness; a justice-seeking witness as Archbishop; a witness to faith and the promotion of justice.

In the three years that followed we saw confrontation. He took the side of the poor; he became the voice of the voiceless. He was a great evangeliser throughout all this time. The decisions he made after the killing of Rutilio showed that a red line had been crossed with the killing of a priest. His own decisions were dramatic too. He closed all the churches on the following Sunday and said that there was to be just a single Mass in the square in front of the Cathedral - and he would preach. He gave everybody who couldn't make it a dispensation. Over 100,000 people came to hear him make a terrific tribute to Rutilio. He also closed the high schools for a week. He sent the children home with a questionnaire for their parents asking 'How could it be in a country named after Jesus Christ, the Saviour, they are killing priests?'

He set up a new office to provide legal aid for all those people who were being harassed, tortured, killed or who had disappeared so that their cases could be brought together. They would be offered pastoral support; there would be denunciation of the crimes committed after all the facts had been checked out. From then on he broke off relations with the government in terms of any kind of ceremonial occasion. Until the authors of Rutilio's killing were brought to justice he would not resume normal relations - and they were never resumed!

The place from which he spoke was the altar and the pulpit of the Cathedral on Sunday morning; and that became the place where he evangelised; he preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ in season and out of season and he made it a reality in among the horrible suffering of El Salvador. He would weave the gospel into what was happening in the country. They were not short sermons; people could be seen listening intently to what he said for more than an hour with the only interruption being applause. The final Sunday homily, the day before he died, was over an hour and a half. These occasions were a kind of giant catechetical workshop when he was making this gospel relevant and they were listening and taking it in. At the end of this 'bible study' he offered the good news of the week and the bad news of the week. This was his way of telling the truth when everything else was censored, when nobody was speaking the truth. This was put on the diocesan radio and printed in the diocesan newspaper. The good news included all the Masses he had celebrated, all the visits he had made, the fiestas, the

visitors from overseas he had met. Then there was the bad news, and he would list item by item, incident by incident, atrocity by atrocity, everything that had happened, the time and the place. Instead of saying 'and thirteen people were beaten up in such and such a village'. He would list all the victims by name one by one. Then he called for the matter to be put right, for recompense for those that had been harmed and wronged and he offered pastoral support.

These sermons went on week by week and everybody listened to them. If you walked down the street in San Salvador or any other town on a Sunday morning between eight and nine o'clock you didn't need a radio. Everybody had it on. You knew everyone was listening. On one occasion he had a message for the President. He said, 'Mr President, if you are listening to me, and I know you are listening to me.....' then followed his demands. He spoke the truth irrespective of the cost. The costs were very high. He took on the Law of National Security, which was the equivalent of our Habeas Corpus, the Guantanamo Bay of the time. He took on the corrupt judiciary and demanded that they end the impunity of the death squads and give justice to the poor. He told the rich landowners to share their wealth and good fortune and on one occasion said, 'Take off your rings and give them to the poor before your fingers are cut off.' He was very clear that he was a man who listened intently to the poor and in the end he took their side.

The 'option for the poor' is something we talk a lot about. Romero once told a story when he was asked to explain what the option for the poor really was. He said, 'I offer you this by way of example. A building is on fire and you are watching it burn, standing, talking and wondering if it is safe. Then someone comes along and tells you that your mother and your sister are inside that building. Your attitude changes completely. You're frantic, your mother and sister are burning and you would do anything at all to rescue them even at the cost of getting charred. That's what it means to be truly committed. If we look at poverty from the outside, as if we were looking at a fire, that is not to opt for the poor no matter how concerned or well meaning we may be. We should get inside as if it were our own mother and sister who are burning. Indeed it is Christ who is there, hungry and suffering.'

That contrast between concern for the poor on the one hand and taking the side and making the option for the poor is really a tough one for us today.

Romero embodied the social teaching of the Church. He lived it and

preached it and he could quote it without looking it all up. He was the incarnation of the option for the poor. A lot of people say this option for the poor is no more than a fashionable and empty phrase from the last part of the twentieth century. Romero shows it was not that. It is something that is real and he lived it.

He had a profound and a deep spirituality that was also very visible and very palpable. He wouldn't make big decisions without going to the altar and praying. He spent long nights preparing his homilies, reflecting and praying.

He was utterly orthodox and he was utterly radical. But in all of this his courage showed through. He could take all that they threw at him through the propaganda and in the newspapers, the truth and lies they told about him, the rich threatening him, the disrespectful way the military treated him. All of this he could cope with. What he found most difficult was that he was absolutely opposed by the Papal Nuncio and by four out of his six fellow bishops; and that was his crown of thorns because his love for the Church and his orthodoxy were unquestionable. His motto was 'Sentire cum ecclesia' which comes from St Ignatius' exercises - to breathe with, to feel with the Church - and his loyalty to the Magisterium was absolutely clear.

After three years of this process the country was heading towards civil war. Romero had had death threats from the right and from the left and in the last six months he was almost single-handedly keeping the political right and the political left from beginning hostilities. His message was continually 'No' to the killings of the right; 'No' to the violence and kidnappings of the left; 'Yes' to political organisation; 'Yes' to dialogue; social justice for the poor; human rights for all. And this was based not on some ideology, not on some party political programme but on the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

He preached against three idolatries, the idolatry of wealth and economic power which was making some people colossally rich at the same time as making others hungry, malnourished and poor. He railed against the idolatry of national security and political power and against the idolatry of the 'party'; those who put their left wing Marxist party above the lives of human beings.

On March 23rd 1980 the Sunday before he was killed Romero gave a sermon in which he tried to answer the question that was put to him many times. 'What should an ordinary rank and file soldier do in this situation of massive repression?' It is a most beautiful homily. He