

Pastoral Letter for the 28th Sunday of the Year

(Read or made available at all Masses during the weekend of the 13/14th October 2018)

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

This weekend the Holy Father will canonise Archbishop Oscar Romero and Pope Paul VI – they, and four others, will become Saints of our Church.

Oscar Romero, the Archbishop of San Salvador, was assassinated whilst celebrating Mass in a hospital in March 1980. Despite threats he had become an outspoken voice for the poor in defence of truth and justice. He achieved much by his life and even more by his martyrdom. In the weeks before he died he spoke to a journalist about the threats to his life and told him: “You can say, if they come to kill me, that I forgive and bless those who do it. Hopefully they may realise that they will be wasting their time. A bishop will die but the Church of God, which is the people, will never perish.”

Pope Paul VI can also be remembered for his courageous proclamation of the Gospel. He reminded us that faith is often caught rather than taught, and he wrote: “Above all the Gospel must be proclaimed by witness...Through this wordless witness these Christians stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how they live: Why are they like this? Why do they live in this way? Such a witness is already a silent proclamation of the Good News and a very powerful and effective one.” [*Evangelii Nuntiandi* n21]

The witness of Oscar Romero is a model for each of us, and in a particular way for bishops. As he visited the towns and villages of El Salvador, and saw the violence against the people, Romero said: “The ones who have a voice must speak for those who are voiceless.” How true this is for children, and vulnerable adults, yet in recent months we have been shocked and saddened by the example of bishops who have covered up the truth and therefore allowed injustice to flourish. We have heard stories of survivors of sexual abuse whose most basic rights have been violated by Catholic clergy or other members of the Church. The lives of survivors have been violated and in some cases destroyed by the crimes of the abusers. Those in authority in the Church have often failed to act.

In Brentwood Diocese, the safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults has developed significantly over the last twenty years, and now involves many staff and volunteers at diocesan and parish level, and in our schools. Our Diocesan Safeguarding Commission includes representatives from the Metropolitan Police, the legal profession and social workers, together with clergy and lay people who have extensive experience in education and youth ministry. With all my heart, I urge any survivor of abuse to speak out. I know that this can be very difficult, and so I promise, as your Bishop, that every allegation of abuse will be met with a response that is both pastoral and professional. I thank our parish safeguarding representatives for the work that they do, and I affirm that safeguarding must be the concern of all of us who are able to give a “voice to the voiceless”. It is one of the ways in which, in the words of Pope Paul VI, we “proclaim the Gospel by our witness”.

So we are now going further: during our recent visit to Rome the Bishops’ Conference decided to commission an independent and comprehensive review of safeguarding structures that currently operate within the Catholic Church of England and Wales. Our children and vulnerable adults must be safe in the Church of Christ. We need to respond to survivors as we heed the words of Pope Francis, “no effort must be spared to create a culture able to prevent such situations from happening”.

The martyrdom of Saint Oscar Romero points to hope rather than despair, to a kingdom of truth and justice. His time as Archbishop was full of great trials – five of the priests of his diocese were shot in just three years, and many hundreds of parishioners were tortured and killed by the military dictatorship. Through all of this, he preached peace and he preached love. He said: “Let us not tire of preaching love, even when we see waves of violence succeed in drowning the fire of Christian love. Love must win out. It is the only force that will overcome the world. Always preach love.”

We may feel overwhelmed or inadequate to this task, and we may be utterly disheartened by the news of recent months. Oscar Romero said each one of us should be “God’s microphone”, tirelessly proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ as friend of the poor, crucified Lord and risen Saviour, even in the most difficult times - especially in the most difficult times. So let us take heart from the example of Oscar Romero and Pope Paul VI, and let us be strengthened by the words of today’s Gospel: “Many things seem impossible – but not for God; for everything is possible for God”.

With an assurance of continued prayers,
Yours in Christ and Mary,

+Alan Williams sm
Bishop of Brentwood