

ARCHBISHOP OSCAR ROMERO

Voice of the Voiceless

The Four Pastoral Letters and Other Statements

Introductory Essays by
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*Oscar Romero:
Voice of the Downtrodden*

Oscar Arnulfo Romero y Galdámez, archbishop of San Salvador, El Salvador, was born on August 15, 1917, in the town of Ciudad Barrios, in the department of San Miguel, El Salvador. He died from an assassin's bullet on March 24, 1980, in San Salvador while celebrating Mass. One well-aimed shot, fired with professional precision, was enough to bring down the small, wiry archbishop. A last mouthful of blood was the final offering of someone who throughout his sixty-three years, but especially during his last three as an archbishop, had given his entire being over to the service of the people of El Salvador, particularly to the service of the poor and the oppressed.

It is important to trace back in Romero's personal history the ultimate basis of his extraordinary apostolate as archbishop. Had one known Father Romero in the church of San Francisco or in the central parish of San Miguel, or had one known Bishop Romero of Santiago de María, it would have been difficult to foresee the role he was later to play as archbishop of San Salvador. All the signs would have pointed in the opposite direction—to a peaceable, spiritually oriented, morally severe apostolate, to a man more likely to be at ease with the powerful than to act in unshakable solidarity with the poor.

Undoubtedly this was the reason why the government of General Molina, and why others in strong economic positions in the country, promoted his candidature for the office, and it is why curial circles in the Vatican preferred his name to that of Bishop Rivera y Damas. Rivera y Damas was the logical candidate both because of his experience and his position, but powerful people in El Salvador had stigmatized him as a "communist Christian Democrat." To the delight of the poor, however, and to the fury of the powerful, to the amazement of the government of El Salvador, the discomfiture of the Vatican, and the disquiet of the United States State Department, Romero became simply *Monseñor* loved and cherished by the masses.

This was, without doubt, a transformation, a radical change, a true Christian conversion, and one that deepened as the people of El Salvador gradually awakened to the hope of a kingdom of justice and love.

It will be the task of the archbishop's biographers to delve into the historical background of his personality, the clarity of his moral tranquility, the humility of his intelligence, the spontaneous pleasure of his friendship, to find there—if they can—an explanation for his apostolic conversion—or at least to find the human and Christian basis for that process of radical transformation. I am trying here to do no more than outline that conversion and apostolate, above all as they took shape with a prophetic voice, a voice full of suffering and full of hope.

It is impossible to understand the archbishop's words out of context. That is not to say they were either too difficult or too parochial. In the final months of his apostolate the archbishop's words were heard directly, by means of a series of rebroadcasts, throughout Central America, in Colombia and Venezuela, and even as far away as Argentina and Uruguay. The archbishop received innumerable letters and other messages from these distant places. They thanked him for what he said. They drew attention to the impact his words had on persons who were distant both in space and in spirit. His pastoral letters and homilies have been, and are still being, translated into other languages. Persons of diverse cultures and differing histories are finding in his words inspiration and Christian encouragement. But the archbishop's words cannot be fully understood outside their context, because essentially they were words spoken in history. Their universality, their capacity for uplifting hearts so different and so distant, comes about precisely because they were uttered in a particular place and time, in the here and now of the people of El Salvador in the closing years of the 1970s.

It is this context, this close bond between the archbishop's words and the concrete historical situation in which they were spoken, that I am going to try to outline in this introductory essay. It has to be understood, however, that the archbishop's words took the form of a critical dialogue with the *de facto* situation, a dialogue that destroyed death and imparted life, a dialogue in which God made himself evident and real to the people of El Salvador. It was a dialogue that those who know only how to dictate terms from a position of strength, backed up by money or weapons, cannot abide. And so they killed the one who asked the questions. They assassinated the archbishop.

APPOINTMENT AND CONVERSION

On February 3, 1977, Romero, at that time bishop of Santiago de María, was appointed to replace Bishop Chávez y González as archbishop of San Salvador. Both ecclesiastically and politically, the circumstances surrounding the appointment were extremely tense. El Salvador was living through the nightmare of a vain attempt to modify very slightly its traditional agrar-

ian structures. The attempt led the way to a wave of repression that drowned in a bloodbath the hopes that had been raised—a bath that also washed away the anxieties of those who, for a short period, had seen their traditional domination threatened.

Ever since its fraudulent election in 1972, General Molina's government had tried to walk the tightrope of a reformism that was intended, by means of a policy of handouts to the masses, to legitimate the maintenance of some fundamentally oppressive structures.¹ In 1975, by which time Molina had already begun to foresee the end of his period in office as president, the Salvadoran Institute of Agrarian Transformation was created. On June 29, 1976, the legislative assembly approved the First Project for Agrarian Transformation. The project was little more than a very timid attempt to modify certain agrarian structures. Wealthy landowners were directly affected, however, and the Salvadoran oligarchy felt that the reform constituted a dangerous precedent, even though it had been sold to it as a form of "life insurance."²

President Molina swore repeatedly and in public that he was not prepared to go "even one step backward." Scarcely three months later, however, on October 19, 1976, a new decree from the legislative assembly canceled the project for all practical purposes. The failure of this small, reformist attempt came about through an extremely violent campaign by the Salvadoran oligarchy against the government. It was orchestrated both on the propaganda level and at the level of economic pressure coupled with threats of a coup d'état.³ But the disquiet felt by the oligarchy was not completely laid to rest by the simple abandonment of the reformist project. It was necessary to undo the "evil" caused in the country. It was necessary to extirpate entirely the hopes and expectations that had been awakened in certain *campesino* groups. It was necessary to pull out by the roots even the tiniest suspicion that some day the country might change, even in minor ways. So the cancellation of the project for agrarian transformation was followed by a period of violent repression, especially against *campesinos*. The armed forces had publicly committed their honor and prestige to the implementation of the reform. Now they had to turn themselves to carrying out a totally different project: massive repression.

Political repression, and especially repression directed against the rural and urban masses, was nothing new in El Salvador. Ever since 1932 the people of El Salvador had become accustomed to paying, in their blood, the quota of violence needed to keep in existence an almost feudal system of exploitation.⁴ But on this occasion the repression unleashed by the government of General Molina, in conjunction with the financiers and the exporters of agricultural produce, included a new element. For the first time it lashed out against the Catholic church.

The persecution campaign against the church, in which both the government and major private businesses were involved, was directed against priests and religious orders, against institutions and organizations linked to

the church, and against all lay persons who were committed to working for the church, particularly catechists and lay "ministers of the word." By the time that Romero became archbishop of San Salvador, the archdiocesan printing press, the St. Paul Bookshop, and the Central American University had already been the target of bombs. The campaign of defamation in the press and on radio and television had reached unimaginable heights. Six priests had been expelled from the country, two of them after being tortured. The house of a diocesan priest had been raided by the security forces.³ Even Archbishop Chávez had been attacked by the media. He was accused of allowing and encouraging "communistic sermons," and of initiating the violence of *campesino* organizations, such as the UTC (*Unión de Trabajadores del Campo*, Farmworkers' Union).

In this climate of generalized repression it was obvious that the naming of a replacement for Archbishop Chávez would have a tremendous political, as well as ecclesiastical, significance. Within church circles the problem came down to fidelity to the pastoral approach outlined by the Second Vatican council, and already applied to Latin America by the Latin American Episcopal Conference in Medellín. This approach implied an understanding of the church as the people of God and, as a consequence, an identification with the sufferings and with the hopes of the people, especially with those of the poor and the oppressed. That made the church's task eminently one of promoting awareness—conscientization—with the aim of forming communities that might begin to make real on earth the salvation proclaimed by Jesus, and to create a society of brothers and sisters, of children of God, in which all injustice, all exploitation, and all oppression would be done away with. This very fact, however, would make the church a subversive influence within a social order that was founded upon the injustice, exploitation, and oppression exercised against the many by the few. Hence, before Chávez's resignation as archbishop of San Salvador, both the government and the Salvadoran oligarchy pressured the Vatican to choose as his successor someone who would have the complete confidence of those in power—someone more concerned to keep the peace than to promote the Christian life of the people of God.

When news came from Rome that Bishop Romero had been chosen to succeed Archbishop Chávez, the Salvadoran government and the oligarchy were jubilant. They were certain they had won a great victory for the conservative cause. As far as right-wing forces were concerned, Bishop Romero was, from every point of view, the ideal candidate. With his penchant for conciliation, his clearly conservative outlook, the links that he had with the Salvadoran oligarchy and with traditionalist groups within the church (with Opus Dei, even!), Romero appeared to be the perfect man to return the church to the sheepfold, the priests to the sacristy, and Catholic teaching back to the Council of Trent and Vatican I. For their part, a good number of the clergy of the archdiocese received the news of his appointment with dejection and apprehension. They regarded it as a sign that Rome seemed

more concerned to maintain good relations with the government than to serve the needs of the Christian community in El Salvador.

On February 22, 1977, Romero took over as archbishop of San Salvador in a simple, private ceremony. It was a small detail, but it made a good impression upon the clergy of the archdiocese, especially because the government was not asked to be present at the ceremony. In keeping with the situation of oppression and repression against the Christian people, there was no sign of triumphalism. Two days before, the people of El Salvador had yet again been defrauded in the voting booths. Violence, and even more blatant fraud, had made General Carlos Humberto Romero the country's new president. This new trickery gave rise to considerable unrest, and to a string of protests in San Salvador, including the threat of a general strike.

Against this background Archbishop Romero began to win hearts when, in the course of his first meeting with the clergy of the archdiocese, he introduced himself with great simplicity and asked for the advice and support of everybody. These first words, like all that were to come, were words of truth: he was always ready to accept advice and help. It enabled him to bring together the feelings of the majority of the population, to discern the Spirit in the community, and to unite the clergy and the laity in the common task of achieving salvation in history.

On February 28, scarcely a week after Romero had taken up his office as archbishop of San Salvador, the security forces together with the military spread death and destruction in the Plaza Libertad, where huge numbers of demonstrators were protesting against the fraudulent presidential elections. According to official figures, six civilians were killed. In fact the number of dead was very much higher, and the government declared a state of siege in order to suppress any manifestation of discontent or popular protest. After that massacre a new popular organization sprang up in the political arena: the Popular Leagues of the 28th of February (*Ligas Populares 28 de Febrero*), a class-based organization characterized by its radicalism and fearsome aggressiveness.

Thus, against the background of deception and calumny, of dead and wounded, of oppression and repression, February 1977 saw the arrival upon the Salvadoran stage of three figures of very different quality, who symbolized to perfection the principal forces in the life of the country: General Romero, who had been minister of defense and public security from 1972 to 1976, and who represented the most reactionary elements, the army and the oligarchy; Bishop Romero, a conservative churchman who took over the leadership of the most important, and the most pastorally advanced, Salvadoran diocese; and the Popular Leagues of the 28th of February, which, following in the steps of other, already flourishing, popular organizations, represented the new courage and new determination of the people of El Salvador to fight in defense of their interests regardless of the sacrifices they would have to make.

In the two weeks between February 21 and March 4 the persecution of the

church seemed to grow in intensity. One priest was arrested and tortured; there was an attempt to capture another priest; a house of lay collaborators was raided; eight priests were prevented from entering the country. On March 12 Jesuit Fr. Rutilio Grande and two companions, a boy and an old man, were killed while they were on their way to celebrate Mass in the village of El Paisnal, where Fr. Grande was a parish priest and where he had been born.⁶

Both nationally and internationally the killing of Fr. Grande had an enormous impact. He was the first of what was to become a great number of priests murdered by the Salvadoran oligarchy and its armed servants. His murder had been prepared for by a continual campaign of insult and detraction in the media. 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. It was an attack against the identification made by priests and religious with the hopes and sufferings of the people of God. Fr. Grande had been one of the key figures in the apostolic renewal in the archdiocese, a pioneer of the application of Vatican II and Medellín to the Salvadoran church, a leader of Christian work for and with the poor and oppressed.

For Romero the assassination of Fr. Grande, as the archbishop was himself to remark many times afterward, was the crucial moment in his conversion: the road from Aguilares was to be his road to Damascus. Fr. Grande had been a great personal friend, a faithful and close collaborator, a man whose stamina and apostolic clarity he had always admired. So for the first time, though it was to become almost a routine, Romero hurried to a distant place to receive the bodies of a priest and two other Christians murdered as witnesses to the faith. With Fr. Grande he began his archiepiscopal way of the cross. "It was my lot to go on claiming dead bodies," he would comment later. "These days I have to walk the roads gathering up dead friends, listening to widows and orphans, and trying to spread hope."⁷

The road to Damascus was, for the archbishop, a road bespattered with the blood of the people, with the blood of his priests, his catechists, of faithful Christians, of so many men and women who were to be sacrificed to the need of the powerful to set up a national security state. Little by little Romero began to change. His voice, more accustomed to proclaiming peace, was now also raised in denunciation of the sinful injustice that brought death. His words, which had hitherto reflected generalities or abstractions, took on the harsh realism of daily life. His voice took over the cry of a crushed people and, in a country where money and power had made a prostitute of words, he gave them back their truth and their force. As the bishops' message of March 5 put it, and as Romero often repeated, "It cannot be denied that the church, and Christians, are passing through a process of conversion, one that is painful but real." This process brought Romero to an integrated, living faith.

THREE YEARS AS ARCHBISHOP

1977: The Persecuted Church

General Romero's formal assumption of power on July 1 marked for the country the consecration of a political program that was purely repressive, one that abandoned even reformist intentions and handed over the country to the most reactionary financial and agro-exporting interests. General Romero's successive cabinets were characterized by a shameful lack of political and technical expertise. Repression would have been even more intensive, had the international situation permitted it. The government's slogan, "For the well-being of all," was a farce that fooled nobody. It did not even convince those of the oligarchy whose power and profits it was trying to preserve and promote.⁸ Coffee, the main staple of El Salvador's economy, fetched the highest prices ever on the international market. The country, however, not only did not benefit from this bonanza; it entered a period of quickening capital decline, both because of the bad public administration of funds and because of the flight of private capital toward less hectic political climes.⁹

The repression of the people that followed the collapse of the program of agrarian reform and, above all, that which followed the fraudulent elections that put General Romero into power as president, was the most notable characteristic of life in El Salvador during the first half of 1977. The massacre of supporters of the opposition coalition on February 28, the massacre of workers in the San Salvador Parque Cuscatlán on May 1, the military operation against the village of Aguilares that resulted in the death or disappearance of a great number of persons, are three monuments of the universal repression to which the government systematically subjected the country.

The Catholic church was a major part of this persecuted people. On May 11 the dead body of Mauricio Borgonovo was found. He had been a prominent member of the Salvadoran oligarchy and a foreign minister, and had been kidnapped by guerrillas. In reprisal, that same day a band made up of persons of the extreme right wing entered the house of a diocesan priest, Fr. Alfonso Navarro, and murdered him in cold blood. There was also killed alongside him a young neighbor, no more than a child, who happened to be visiting him at the time. Over and above the horror of the crime itself, this action indicated that the extreme right wing, protected by the government and using as operational bases the installations of the security forces, and even employing members of the security forces, had identified as their principal political enemies members of the church. Marauders began to work systematically through the country's interior, searching out first and foremost anyone linked with church activities. *Campesinos* whom they came across carrying a Bible, or carrying a copy of the Catholic weekly *Orientación*, or simply having with them a photograph of Fr. Grande were mo-

lested and beaten up; often their belongings were stolen or destroyed.

Three other Jesuit priests working in the martyr zone of Aguilares were expelled from the country. The parish church of Aguilares was brutally profaned by army troops, and even the archbishop was prevented from going to remove the Eucharist. When he was at last allowed to enter, he found the parish house violated and sacked, the church half destroyed, the tabernacle broken open, and the Blessed Sacrament profaned.

Faced with this progressive intensification of the persecution of the people and the Christian community in El Salvador, the archbishop began to grow in stature as someone who held the church together. In his denunciations from the cathedral he began to speak out ever more clearly. The ruling class found this intolerable. They were doubly irritated. He had been their candidate. Now he not only refused to give their actions his blessing, he had become their chief critic. So there began a campaign of detraction against him, a campaign that was to accompany him throughout the three years of his archiepiscopal ministry, a campaign that was orchestrated by government agencies and could count upon the unstinted economic support of the Salvadoran oligarchy. As well as the campaign of detraction, there were more and more attacks on the archdiocesan radio station and printing works, which were broadcasting and making more widely available the archbishop's denunciations.

General Romero came to power on July 1. It is known that he had formally promised the oligarchy to put an end to "troublesome elements" in the church, the Jesuits in particular. An extreme right-wing group had threatened in June that the Jesuits would either leave the country or be subjected to systematic extermination. But the Jesuits had ignored the threat. Romero made it clear in his inaugural address that he was worried about "the country's image" abroad, and intimated that this image was based on the chaotic situation prevailing in El Salvador. He reaffirmed, however, his determination to see "peace, order, and security" reestablished as a basis for any kind of program of reform. So saying, he affirmed and upheld a short-sighted, ad hoc policy, the sole clear objective of which was repression.¹⁰

Breaking with a tradition of many years, and despite extremely strong pressures, Archbishop Romero did not attend General Romero's inauguration. In so doing he was adhering firmly to his decision, made public on the occasion of Fr. Grande's murder, "of not taking part in official ceremonies until this situation is cleared up."¹¹ His absence was the most striking feature of the official ceremonies.¹² No one missed the significance of his symbolic act, which not even the attendance of the papal nuncio and of other prelates could disguise: that there was a fierce conflict between church and state, a conflict that had arisen from the persecution of the church—that is to say, of the people of God. The archbishop explained the reason for his absence in a homily and indicated that the church was open to dialogue—but only under certain conditions. The conditions, basically, were that there

should be a demonstration by deeds, and not merely by words, of openness and sincerity.

After the inaugural address given by General Romero, the archbishop put before the Christian community, and before the whole country, his second pastoral letter. In this he spoke of the reality, and of the life, of the church as the people of God. The letter is a deep theological reflection upon what the country had been living through: the awakening of the people to the realization that it was a community of faith and, therefore, a living community called upon to take charge of its own history in a process of salvation that had to begin with its own liberation. The words and the person of the archbishop became a catalyst. He fired consciences and united spirits. As never before in the history of the archdiocese—and, indeed, in the history of El Salvador—the masses began to form a tight-knit ring around their archbishop. They made him their leader and their spokesman.

On November 25 the repressive program of the ruling class took on the force of law with the promulgation of the Law of Defense and Guarantee of Public Order.¹³ This law was a miscarriage of justice. Under the camouflage of democratic principles and the defense of human rights, it empowered the government to eliminate any voice, any person or group, that it found troublesome.¹⁴ The law legitimized the arbitrary imprisonment of individuals or groups, it legitimized systematic torture, the suppression of the right to hold meetings, to spread ideas, even to think. It was the perfect symbol of all that the government of General Romero and his right-wing patrons stood for. From the very moment of its promulgation the Law of Defense was roundly condemned by a whole sweep of national and international agencies as juridically aberrant, politically ineffective, and ethically immoral.¹⁵

The archbishop not only attacked the law and all the abuses protected under it by what he said, he began also to take practical measures to protect—physically, morally, and legally—the growing number of persons who were fleeing from repression and seeking assistance against legalized abuses. From then on the archbishop's house became a haven to which would come, as if to their last hope of safety, those whom oppression was denying even the most elemental of human rights. The constant stream of these afflicted and derided victims became a source of inspiration that fed the archbishop's prophetic words. He saw in them the living countenance of Jesus, crucified anew. From them came the encouragement for him to step forward as the imperturbable defender of a justice that the economically, politically, and militarily powerful were busy daily trampling underfoot.

1978: Organization of the People

The year 1978 began in the same key in which 1977 had ended—that is to say, with complete political ineffectiveness, with the absence of programs for promoting the common good, with the accelerating deterioration of the

economic situation (scarcely alleviated by the windfall from world coffee prices), and with the systemization of repression against the people under the shelter of the Law of Defense and Guarantee of Public Order.

The events of March 17 may serve to show what kind of repression it was. On that day a delegation of about one hundred *campesinos* went to the Banco de Fomento Agropecuario to discuss their needs. When they arrived at the bank, they found it closed and guarded by security forces. The *campesinos* staged a nonviolent demonstration, but were then machine-gunned by the soldiers, leaving several dead and wounded.

This event had a twofold significance. The government and the oligarchy were already beginning to concentrate their activities in the countryside, and more specifically in those areas where strong rural organizations had begun to arise. Huge operations were mounted by the army and national guard against selected villages. Operations in the zones of San Pedro Perulapán and San Marcos Lempa, and the military occupation of Cinquera, were particularly bloody.¹⁶ A clearer picture of the size of those repressive military operations is had when one reflects that, by the end of 1978, it was documented that 1,063 persons had been arrested—violently—for political reasons; 147 had been murdered by the security forces; a further 23 had disappeared—and all for political reasons.¹⁷ Among those murdered in 1978 was another priest, Fr. Ernesto Barrera. The policy of repression became even more widely known when a political prisoner, Reynaldo Cruz Menjívar, gave evidence before a notary of his kidnapping and imprisonment by the security forces, and of the savage tortures to which he had been submitted.¹⁸ The systematic practice of torture was also confirmed by a commission from the Organization of American States that visited the country. Its report filtered down to the people toward the end of the year, much to the government's embarrassment and anger.¹⁹

All this repression was taking place against a background of hastening economic decline. The government's inability to revive the national economy was manifest. Not even the sectors of the oligarchy most closely committed to General Romero hid their unease and dissatisfaction. Private capital fled the country in massive proportions, proving yet again that money knows neither frontiers nor "patriotism." The fabulous coffee prices had no positive effect upon the national economy: profits either did not come back into the country, or they were squandered on luxury goods.

The institutional decline that accompanied the economic crisis and the growth of repressive violence only served to encourage and to speed up the growth of popular organizations. Because of their size, energy, and ability to bring persons together, they began to emerge as a real political alternative for the country's future. This frightened the oligarchy, which saw with increasing clarity the challenge that the people and their representative organizations were posing. Hence its clamor for repression and its connivance with the government despite the fact that it stigmatized the government as "soft" and "not firm enough" in confronting "subversion."

In this socio-political context two events can be seen as characteristic of the archbishop's stance: his public denunciation of the Salvadoran judiciary, and his third pastoral letter, in which he examined, from a Christian perspective, the phenomenon of the popular organizations.

In his homily of April 30 Romero publicly praised a group of lawyers who were battling to win an amnesty for political prisoners and trying to ensure that the law be carried out and justice done despite the corruption in the security forces, despite venal judges, and despite the Supreme Court itself, blind and indifferent as it was to the constant abuse of, and deviation from, the judicial system.²⁰ This accusation brought a response from the Supreme Court. The archbishop was challenged publicly to name the "venal judges" to whom he had referred in his homily. This was obviously a simplistic maneuver to try either to debunk the archbishop or, at best, to cloak a serious problem of corruption inherent in the system with an accidental failing due to a few faulty individuals. Romero did not step into the trap. His homily of May 14 was a full reply to the Supreme Court. He pointed out that not only was there a series of cases of venality or corruption, but moreover "the fundamental rights of the people of El Salvador day by day are being trodden underfoot, while no [government] agency denounces the outrages or acts sincerely and effectively to improve the situation."²¹ He expressly denounced illegal detentions, the impossibility of applying writs of habeas corpus, the increasingly frequent political "disappearances," the exile—against the express provisions of the Constitution—of members of the opposition, the ignoring of demands and denunciations, the violation of the right of association and of the right to strike. "Where," he asked, "is that transcendental role of this authority which, in a democracy, has to be vigilant and demand justice against all who violate it?" Faced with this brave, well-documented riposte, the Supreme Court was silent, thus tacitly conceding the truth of all that the archbishop had charged.

On August 6, El Salvador's national patronal feast, Archbishop Romero and Bishop Rivera y Damas of Santiago de María published a joint pastoral letter on the church and popular organizations. This letter, once again, was a pastoral response to the historical problems and to the unrest of the people of El Salvador, this time focused on the impressive phenomenon of the popular organizations. In the letter the two bishops analyzed the relationship between the popular organizations and the church. The church was not to be identified with them: their formal purposes, and their mode of operation, were, to a great extent, different from those of the church. The church, on the other hand, defended the need for such organizations because they constituted, in the present history of the country, a much-needed channel for building up the kingdom of God as Christianity preached it.²²

The pastoral reflections of the two bishops were seen to be all the more enlightening when some days later, on August 28, there appeared a declaration from the other four Salvadoran bishops on the same topic.²³ Theirs was a total, simplistic condemnation of the popular organizations. It failed

totally to understand their nature and their historical significance. It misrepresented their theological significance by bandying doctrinaire slogans that had more to do with the ideology of social control than with the Christian search for faith, love, and justice within the Salvadoran community. The magazine *ECA* in an editorial note summed up the contrast between the two documents:

The bishops who signed the declaration have a pre-Vatican II ecclesiology, regarding the church as an institution that ought, before all else, to defend itself. But the bishops who signed the pastoral letter have a post-Vatican II ecclesiology, regarding the church not as something turned in upon itself but as proclaiming that the kingdom of God should come into being among the people. The bishops of the declaration fail to assess adequately the importance of the promotion of justice for the proclamation of the faith, but the bishops of the pastoral letter make of the promotion of justice a fundamental part of their mission of evangelization. The bishops of the declaration have not yet come to understand either what a church of the poor is, or what it requires, but the bishops of the pastoral letter are striving to create—out of the primacy that is due to the poor within the church—a church for everybody.²⁴

On February 14, Georgetown University bestowed on Archbishop Romero an honorary doctorate because of his resolute defense of human rights. Toward the end of 1978 various groups in several parts of the world, including 118 British parliamentarians, put him forward as a candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize. Both events were symbolic recognition of the worldwide resonance of the archbishop's words and of his struggle for justice. It is interesting that the Salvadoran press and its journalists, instead of taking pride in these distinctions, unique in the history of El Salvador, chose to interpret them as part of a "Jesuit-communist" conspiracy against the country's prestige. That gives some indication of the depth of the abyss between himself and those established in positions of economic and political power in El Salvador.

1979: Persecution of the People on the Grounds of National Security

The year 1979 falls into two clearly distinct parts: before and after October 15. Before that date the most characteristic aspect of the country was a sharpening of repression and the absolute enthronement of "national security" as the sole policy of General Romero. In its Salvadoran version, the North American doctrine of national security meant the systematic elimination of any person or group that even indirectly represented any sort of opposition to the total power of the oligarchy and to their system of economic exploitation.²⁵ The number of persons arrested for political reasons prior to October came to 460; the number of those murdered during

the same period was 580.²⁶ In other terms, in the first nine months of 1979, the Salvadoran security forces illegally arrested an average of three persons every two days and, on the average, killed another four. Not even these chilling figures, however, demonstrate adequately the full, inhuman brutality that disguised itself under the cover of a policy of "national security."

The first significant "baptism of blood" in 1979 took place on January 20. A large contingent of national guardsmen, together with other members of the security forces, launched a military operation against El Despertar, a retreat house belonging to the parish of San Antonio Abad, on the outskirts of San Salvador. The operation ended with the shameless murder of Fr. Octavio Cruz, whose head was crushed by an armored car, the deaths of four young persons, the imprisonment of a nun, a teacher, and thirty-three other young persons, some of them not yet fifteen years old, who had been at the house making a retreat. So absurd and so shameful was the assault that even the National Guard tried to hide its embarrassment by putting out a defamatory statement to the effect that the group had been holding a subversive meeting, and that the guardsmen had been shot at while approaching the house. Archbishop Romero immediately contradicted the blatant lie.²⁷

Indignation within the church and among the people at large reached such a pitch that a procession of priests and religious marched in silence through the streets of San Salvador carrying an enormous placard declaring "Enough!" The people of the capital city spontaneously gathered about this demonstration, showing their repulsion at, and condemnation of, the national security policy pursued by the Salvadoran government. Such a condemnation, however, was not enough to change the demands of the ruling system, and so two other priests were assassinated in the course of the year, Fr. Rafael Palacios on June 20 and Fr. Alirio Napoleón Macías on August 4. The Catholic clergy continued to pay its quota of blood alongside the people, whose cause, under the leadership of the archbishop, they had embraced.

Internationally, the image of the Salvadoran government went on declining. More and more groups of all kinds and persuasions publicly condemned the lack of respect for human rights in El Salvador, a lack of respect bolstered by the law itself. International indignation forced the legislative assembly to repeal the Law of Defense and Guarantee of Public Order.²⁸ This gave rise to a brief period of hope, but it was soon negated by the unchanged continuance of repression, by the corruption within the judiciary, and by the permanent lack of respect for the human rights of the majority of Salvadorans.

The year 1979 also saw the worsening, to almost insupportable levels, of the economic, political, and institutional crisis that afflicted the country. Demands for their just rights increased throughout the working-class population. Repressive action was no longer capable of containing the opposition, especially the opposition of the politico-military groups, or of offering

even a modicum of security to the ruling class. First individuals, then whole groups, began to leave the country. Their money, of course, had preceded them. The banks went into ill-disguised collapse. Many businesses closed their doors, thus adding to the already intolerably high rate of unemployment. The country was emptied of foreigners. In a few days, for example, the Japanese community declined from 2,400 to 200 persons. Some embassies shut. Others reduced their staffs to the minimum. Skirmishes, occupations of buildings, confrontations on the streets began to be normal occurrences. The rich who had not gone to Miami began to turn their houses into fortresses and organized what amounted to private armies for their personal defense. Bands of extreme right-wing terrorists began to proliferate. Under the shelter both of darkness and of official protection, they spent nights eliminating supposed members of the opposition. El Salvador slid swiftly down the slope of social disintegration. Increasingly there was talk of "civil war."²⁹

Out of all these events, two in particular received worldwide coverage. On May 8 troops mercilessly machine-gunned a huge demonstration in front of the cathedral doors. The toll was at least twenty-five dead and several hundred wounded. This macabre spectacle was filmed by several foreign television companies and the world saw, with incredulous astonishment, the *inhuman savagery of the Salvadoran security forces*. A few days later, May 22, the spectacle was repeated when the security forces machine-gunned a group of students in front of the Venezuelan embassy. The toll this time was fourteen dead, with many others wounded.³⁰

Faced with this disintegration, with this crumbling of the social order, Romero raised his prophetic voice not only to denounce the outrages and the injustices, but also to point the way to conversion, to a change in, and reorganization of, the country. With ever increasing clarity the archbishop saw that in some way this road led through the popular organizations, perhaps even through popular insurrection. He faced up to the country's crisis with great honesty in his fourth pastoral letter. Fundamentally, the *problem arose out of the complete collapse of the national security policy, a policy that was antipeople and anti-Christian*. In this letter the archbishop treated the difficult question of violence. He did so without simplistically condemning it "wheresoever it may come from." He analyzed its specific character, its concrete, historical form, its origins and its consequences. "The church cannot simply state that it condemns every kind of violence," for there are situations, such as that of legitimate defense, in which the use of violence is both necessary and justified. And the archbishop hinted that this might be so in the particular case of El Salvador's popular organizations.

The Sandinista triumph in Nicaragua over the dictatorship of President Somoza was a tremendous confutation of the belief that a people is incapable of overthrowing established authority when that authority is well armed and supported by the United States.³¹ The military defeat of Somoza's na-

tional guard attracted the attention of the Salvadoran army. It was something they could understand. So despite last-minute efforts by General Romero to redirect his running of the country and of the armed forces, he was deposed on October 15 in a bloodless military coup, led by a large group of reform-minded, democratically-inclined young officers, who could count on the support of the United States. These young officers wanted to break with the corrupt past and with subjugation to the interests of capital, and to begin a new epoch with political and economic reforms.³²

The young officers, however, had miscalculated their own strength. Above all they had miscalculated the deep-seated, corrupt force of Salvadoran capital. Little by little its devotees came to take over vital positions until they had practically won over control.

The officers set up a government with the aid of sincerely reform-minded politicians, men who were honest and capable, and even open to the popular movements. But it was not enough:

From the first there was a desire to forget the past without breaking with it. Those who had spread terror were neither imprisoned nor put on trial. From the first there was imposed what was called "order," and to that end high levels of barbarity were reached. From the first there was a desire to maintain, as the fundamental legal instrument, the same Constitution that had been maintained throughout the worst outrages perpetrated under previous administrations. . . . Right-wing interests were still at work within the government, and from their positions they began to undermine what was being undertaken.³³

After the coup of October 15, in fact, the degree of repression took a new, qualitative leap to even higher levels of mass killings by the security forces, to levels reminiscent of the genocide of 1932. The increasing *militancy of the popular organizations*—acting as they did as a channel for the people's utter desperation—found expression in an unending series of strikes, in the occupation of buildings, factories, and land, all of which gave the security forces an excuse to behave with a savagery that caused the sincere members of the government considerable disquiet and embarrassment. Military operations were carried out, for example, in Berlín and Opico, and when the *campesinos* were driven out of the farms they had taken over, more than seventy of them were killed. The right wing began to demonstrate against the government in public. The number of demonstrators was small, but they were supplemented by an extraordinary display of luxury cars, of every kind of weaponry, and by very expensive publicity. The political ferment increased daily. Faced with the polarization of the different sectors and social classes, the government showed itself incapable of mediating, or of implementing any sort of sensible policy.

Faced with these events in the political arena, Archbishop Romero's stance was one of critical hopefulness and unshakable demands. At first,

though not without hesitation, he called publicly for a kind of truce between the different social groups so that the government might have time to show by its actions that it really meant to carry out what it said. In this context the archbishop clearly called for justice for both sides: that those who had yielded to corruption or carried out murders be punished; that the machinery of repression, torture, and institutionalized assassination be dismantled; that organizations or other bodies opposed to the people's good be disbanded; that political prisoners be freed; that the "disappearances" be investigated, and responsibility for them determined; that those who had been defamed and unjustly persecuted have their property, and their good name, restored to them. Because the government, despite its excellent statements of intentions, showed itself incapable of carrying out these basic demands, and because repression came once more to dominate, reaching hitherto unimaginable levels, the archbishop became yet again highly critical of the new rulers.

"The year ended in a nightmare of chaos, with a sense of betrayal and disillusionment, with the hope that the armed forces might find a way out. It ended with the rumor that the left wing was unifying. The year closed, as it had opened, in darkness. One does not know if there will be a dawn."³⁴

THE HOLOCAUST

The year 1980 opened with an extremely serious government crisis in El Salvador. In the space of one week most of the ministers and chief officials presented their resignations, as did the civilian members of the junta. They *resigned fundamentally because it was impossible in practice to put through the changes necessary—changes that the young officers had themselves proposed. They also resigned because of the impossibility of controlling the repressive activities of the security forces. They were obeying another chain of command, one that was independent of the government.*³⁵

The crisis in the government served to draw attention to the increasing unity of the popular revolutionary forces. In the second week of January the popular organizations announced that they were to be united under the CRM (*Coordinadora Revolucionaria de Masas*, Mass Revolutionary Coordinating Committee). The politico-military groups formed a similar united front. This unity of the people was made manifest on January 22 in a gigantic demonstration, the largest in the entire history of El Salvador. Impartial observers estimated that some two hundred thousand persons marched through the streets of San Salvador that day, despite the efforts of the security forces to prevent nonresidents of the capital from entering the city, and despite a disgraceful publicity campaign intended to deter residents from joining the demonstration. Unfortunately, threats were carried out. The security forces fired on the demonstrators from several buildings. They left at least forty dead and several hundred wounded.³⁶

This slaughter was only a small token of the dragnet operation, with hu-

man beings as quarry, that was becoming part of Salvadoran life. The assassination statistics under the governments of Molina and Romero, which had hitherto been regarded as extremely high, seemed suddenly very small by comparison. The security forces, now acting with the government's more or less open connivance, and certainly with the blessing of the United States, which was alarmed by the turn events were taking, launched a massive campaign of repression and of systematic terror. Extreme right-wing death squads carried out at night the job of "cleaning up." The figures speak for themselves: 265 persons killed in January by the security forces, 236 in February, 514 in March.³⁷ Many of the murders bore evidence of systematic planning such as the hunting down of teachers. They were being murdered on a systematic basis, averaging one every three days.

The involvement of the Christian Democrats in the second junta and the beginning of some of the reforms that had been promised (agrarian reform and the nationalization of the banking) did not relieve the almost total isolation of the group in power. Nor did it alleviate the absurdity of a policy that could not be carried out except at the cost of a torrent of blood. The greatest irony was that the government claimed to be carrying out the reforms for the benefit of precisely that segment of the population it was daily persecuting, rounding up, and murdering. The isolation of the government was made complete by the abandonment of its ministers as they resigned one by one, as did also other top officials and even some members of the junta. This point was finally reached in the course of the first three months of 1980.

The archbishop faced up to this situation of chaos and of national disintegration by what he did and by what he said in his homilies. He had approved of the resignation of the civilian members of the junta because it brought clarity to the political scene, and because it brought moral pressure to bear to bring the crisis to an end and start afresh. But the opportunism of the Christian Democrats prevented this from happening. This distressed the archbishop, who had a great appreciation of, and friendship with, some Christian Democrat politicians. He did not let this friendship and high regard get in the way of his critical attitude as he looked on events from the people's point of view. He did not reject the reforms proposed by the second junta, but he bitterly criticized its basic inhumanity. He regarded it as mistaken to undertake reforms on the people's behalf in opposition to the people and its organizations. It was worse still to put "reforms" into operation at the cost of the people's blood. He believed that the criterion for the validity of reform was to be looked for in an openness to, and sincere concern for, the people. And the new junta, for all that it said and promised, could not pass this test. The archbishop therefore stepped up his criticism of the proposed "reforms"—their only obvious consequences being the military occupation of the countryside and the continued murder of rural and urban workers, of teachers and trade unionists, of students and even of professional persons.

But along with his growing disillusionment with the new rulers, the archbishop could look hopefully toward the growing unity of the popular groups and of left-wing political organizations. He thought the appearance of the Independent Movement of Professional and Technical Personnel a great step forward, in that it made possible the involvement of different sections of the middle class in the popular struggle. He had great hopes for the Programatic Platform of a Revolutionary Democratic Government, put out by a combination of popular groups. Although he was critical of some of its specific activities and plans for government, he had a high regard for the increasing reasonableness and openness of the CRM.

The scale of the repression caused Archbishop Romero very real suffering. Daily he received dozens of persons who had been harassed by violence perpetrated either by the military or by paramilitary forces. They came to him looking for help or protection. They came to complain about harassment or murders, or simply to find some spiritual and human counsel. The archbishop received, and listened to, every one of them. As he learned of the ever increasing torrent of pain, and of the people's blood, his prophetic voice took an angrier tone. His famous letter to President Carter, in which he asked, in the name of the rights of the people of El Salvador, that the president not send armaments, or support any kind of repressive action by the armed forces, is a symbol of his courageous attitude. This letter gained worldwide publicity. It annoyed and embarrassed not only the governments of El Salvador and the United States, but the Vatican as well, which did not seem at all pleased with the archbishop's Christian sincerity, or his disregard of "diplomatic niceties."

His opposition to the repressive violence came to a climax in his Sunday homily on March 23. He called firmly upon the troops and the national guardsmen to obey the law of God and therefore not to obey the orders of officers who might instruct them to kill their brothers and sisters: "In the name of God, then, and in the name of this suffering people whose cries rise daily more loudly to heaven, I plead with you, I beg you, I order you in the name of God: put an end to this repression!"³⁷

This call was, it now seems, the last straw. His enemies' anger could tolerate no more. On Monday, March 24, Romero fell victim of an assassin as he was standing at the altar. He had just preached that a life offered for others is a sure token of resurrection and of victory.

Archbishop Romero's funeral was celebrated on March 30. It took place in the square known as Barrios of San Salvador, in front of the cathedral doors. There was an enormous gathering of some one hundred fifty thousand persons, most of them ordinary citizens. It was attended by dozens of prelates, bishops, priests, religious, and other dignitaries from around the world. They wanted to bear witness to the universal appeal of the prophet from El Salvador. Also present was a huge delegation from the popular organizations. Silently, though to the cheers of the crowd, they paid posthumous homage to the archbishop and laid a wreath of flowers before his coffin.

In the middle of the ceremony, just when the papal representative, Cardinal Corripio of Mexico, was preaching, the religious service was blotted out by the fearful noise of a series of enormous explosions. A great number of those present agree that several bombs were thrown into the crowd by persons hidden within the government's National Palace. Snipers, also stationed in the palace, opened fire. The panic and confusion that followed were indescribable. Persons ran in terror, trying to find refuge in the cathedral or to escape as best they could from what was a death trap. The day closed with thirty dead, innumerable wounded, and the profound moral ignominy of the Salvadoran government manifest to the whole world.

In the midst of bombs, shooting, blood, and horror, the archbishop was hurriedly buried. He was interred in the cathedral, the cathedral where the people had listened to his words, the seat of his Christian leadership, and the place of refuge for a persecuted people. He was buried in the midst of the wounded and the dead, the shuddering walls of the cathedral protecting the defenseless from the bullets of the powerful. He was buried as he had lived, in the midst of a downtrodden people, whose cause he had made his own, and to whose aspirations he had given voice.

The archbishop has died. The people of El Salvador, however, the Christian community, men and women throughout the world who love life, know that the archbishop still lives. His word of truth speaks in all who carry on the struggle for justice, in all who strive to unite all human beings before the common Father, in all those who give their lives to bring about here on earth the kingdom of justice, love, and peace proclaimed by Jesus of Nazareth. There were many forces opposed to the archbishop during his life. Many of them today celebrate his death by distorting his message, falsifying his work, prostituting his word. There are many in comfortable living rooms or government offices where English and Spanish are spoken who want the archbishop to be utterly dead and buried. They have money to carry out their wish. They have power, they have weapons. They can make use of authority, pressure, dissuasion, lies, bribery, and blackmail. For them, any means can be regarded as good so long as it buries, once and for all, that for which the archbishop always fought: the seeds of liberation, the only path toward the God of Jesus.

The purpose of this book is to keep alive the words and memory of Archbishop Romero, to prevent, so far as possible, his enemies from burying him in silence and oblivion.³⁸

NOTES

1. See J. Hernández-Pico, C. Jerez, I. Ellacuría, E. Baltodano, and R. Mayorga, *El Salvador: año político 1971-72* (San Salvador: UCA José Simeón Cañas, 1973).

2. R. Zamora, "¿Seguro de vida o despojo? Análisis político de la Transformación Agraria," *Estudios Centroamericanos* (San Salvador; hereafter: *ECA*), 335-36 (1977) 511-34.

3. See "A sus ordenes, mi capital," *ECA*, 337 (1976) 637-43.
4. See T. P. Anderson, *Matanza: El Salvador's Communist Revolt of 1932* (University of Nebraska Press, 1971).
5. See Secretariado Social Interdiocesano, *Persecución de la Iglesia en El Salvador* (San Salvador, 1977).
6. See Martin Lange and Reinhold Iblacker, eds., *Witnesses of Hope: The Persecution of Christians in Latin America* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1981), pp. 27-36.
7. Plácido Erdozain, *Archbishop Romero: Martyr of Salvador* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1980), p. 28.
8. See "El plan bienestar para todos," *Boletín de Ciencias Económicas y Sociales*, 1 (San Salvador: UCA, 1978) 1-3.
9. See L. de Sebastián, "Panorama monetario en 1978," *ECA*, 369-70 (1979) 1037-42.
10. See "Mensaje al pueblo salvadoreño del Señor Presidente de la República, General Carlos Humberto Romero (1 de julio de 1977)," *ECA*, 345 (1977) 515-19.
11. "Comunicados del Arzobispo de San Salvador a raíz de la muerte del Padre Rutilio Grande," *ECA*, 341 (1977) 254-57.
12. See G. L., "La presencia de Monseñor Romero el primero de julio," *ECA*, 345 (1977) 495-98.
13. See "Ley de defensa y garantía del orden público," *ECA*, 350 (1977) 935-37.
14. See R. Lara Velado, "Comentarios a la 'Ley de defensa y garantía del orden público,'" *ECA*, 350 (1977) 911-16.
15. See, e.g., "Reporte de la Comisión Internacional de Juristas sobre la 'Ley de defensa y garantía del orden público,'" *ECA*, 359 (1978) 779-86.
16. See "Los sucesos de San Pedro Perulapán," *ECA*, 354 (1978) 223-47.
17. See Secretaría de Comunicación Social del Arzobispado de San Salvador, "Informe sobre la represión en El Salvador," *Boletín Informativo*, 10 (Dec. 12, 1979).
18. See "Testimonio del reo político Reynaldo Cruz Menjivar," *ECA*, 360 (1978) 850-58.
19. See I. E., "La O.E.A. y los derechos humanos en El Salvador," *ECA*, 363-64 (1979) 53-54.
20. See "Las homilias de Monseñor Romero y el poder judicial en El Salvador," *ECA*, 355 (1978) 330-32.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 331.
22. See T. R. Campos, "La Iglesia y las organizaciones populares en El Salvador," *ECA*, 359 (1978) 692-702.
23. "Declaración de cuatro obispos de la Conferencia Episcopal de El Salvador," *ECA*, 359 (1978) 774-75.
24. "División y conflicto en el episcopado salvadoreño," *ECA*, 359 (1978) 687-89.
25. See T. R. Campos, "La seguridad nacional y la Constitución salvadoreña," *ECA*, 369-70 (1979) 477-88.
26. See note 17, above.
27. See "Terror en El Salvador," *ECA*, 363-64 (1979) 85-88.
28. See G.M.U., "La derogatoria de la 'Ley de defensa y garantía del orden público,'" *ECA*, 366 (1979) 277-78.
29. "Al borde de la guerra civil," *ECA*, 371 (1979) 735-40.
30. See E. C. Anaya, "Crónica del mes: mayo, 1979," *ECA*, 368 (1979) 450-52.

31. See L. E. del Cid, "¿Por qué cayó la dinastía somocista?," *ECA*, 369-70 (1979) 699-708.
32. See "La insurrección militar del 15 de octubre," *ECA*, 371 (1979) 741-44.
33. "1979: El fracaso de dos modelos," *ECA*, 374 (1979) 1037-42; the quotation is from p. 1038.
34. E. C. Anaya, "Crónica del mes: noviembre-diciembre, 1979," *ECA*, 374 (1979) 1088-93; the quotation is from p. 1093.
35. See "Pronunciamiento de la UCA ante la nueva situación del país (febrero/80)," *Los Obispos Latinoamericanos entre Medellín y Puebla: Documentos episcopales 1968-1978* (San Salvador: UCA, 1978).
36. F. A. Escobar, "En la línea de la muerte (La manifestación del 22 de enero de 1980)," *ECA*, 375-76 (1980) 21-35.
37. "Comisión de Derechos Humanos de El Salvador, Reporte estadístico," *Orientación* (San Salvador), May 11, 1980, p. 4.
38. See also *A Martyr's Message of Hope: Six Homilies by Archbishop Oscar Romero* (Kansas City: Celebration Books, 1981).