Column: Year of Mercy

Blessed Romero and the Principle of Mercy

by Jose Torres

On December 8th we celebrated the Feast of the Immaculate Conception and began the Year of Mercy. At Our Lady of Mercy, where I am a youth minister, our pastor invited parishioners to fill out a pledge card and commit to specifics works of mercy. The Priest for Justice for Immigrants (PJI) organized several posadas (reenactments of Joseph and Mary seeking shelter) with the purpose of reflecting on the issue of immigration and praying for refugees from Syria. In this Year of Mercy we have the opportunity to stop, reflect on the meaning of Mercy, and think of the needs of the “other” in our midst. What is mercy? What are the components of mercy? What can I do in the year of Mercy? I will answer these questions with the assistance of the scriptures, the writing of liberation theologian Jon Sobrino, and the life of Archbishop Oscar Romero.

In 1997 I was to give an advent reflection on the meaning of mercy to Notre Dame parishioners visiting Chicago. I did not know where to start. After praying for a few minutes, I opened the Bible with my eyes closed and placed my finger at random on a page. The text was Mark 10:46. I began reading the story of Bartimeo, a blind man who is begging in the street. When Bartimeo hears Jesus is nearby, he implores, “Have mercy on me.” The disciples respond negatively, but Jesus does not reject Bartimeo. He cures him and tells him, “Your faith has saved you.” I explained in my reflection that mercy is healing and forgiveness. At the time I did not see its greater relationship with justice, structural change, and sacrifice.

Mark tells us that upon being healed, Bartimeo throws away his garment and walks towards Jesus. Here, the garment might be understood to represent personal and social sin. It is this sin that keeps us from seeing the reality and living the gospel, particularly in the context of the oppressed. Archbishop Romero does something similar when his dear friend Father Rutilio Grande is martyred. Before the martyrdom Monseñor Romero was a dutiful priest, obedient and committed to upholding the social order into which he was educated. He was familiar with a society ruled by three powers: the State, the Military, and the Church. Submerged in religious life and academics, he served the Church according to his education and socioeconomic position, blinded to the larger Salvadorian picture. Romero came from a poor family, but he had been adopted by the Church and studied in Rome, and soon after returning to El Salvador he became the Secretary of the College of Bishops. This and future promotions reflected his dedication, theological formation, and obedience to his superiors.

Romero was a conservative priest. He traveled to Rome with the purpose of denouncing radical formation practices by the Seminary administered by the Society of Jesus in El Salvador. He served for many years as General

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1 José Torres is youth minister at Our Lady of Mercy and he is the partnerships coordinator for Pastoral Migratoria in Chicago. In this position he learns about the needs of parish communities and connects them with resources and community organizations such as Catholic Charities. José graduated with a BA in Theology and Philosophy from Loyola University. He is finishing his MA degree in Justice Ministry at Catholic Theological Union.
Secretary of the Conference of Bishops in El Salvador. Fr. Salvador Carranza notes that during this time Romero was hardly involved in pastoral activities and would not even attend local meetings of priests. Romero was appointed rector of the seminary in El Salvador, and appointed auxiliary bishop in 1970. He continued serving the institutional Church with great dedication and was named Bishop of the Diocese in St. Maria. In 1976 he was nominated to the Pontifical Commission in Latin America. Months later he traveled to Rome and delivered a memorandum denouncing the political involvement of many priests and the sociopolitical orientation of the Justice and Peace Commission in El Salvador. Fr. Carranza explains that Fr. Romero was still out of touch with reality, living in his own world. But things would change soon. Romero was about to throw off his garment as Bartimeo did.

In February 23, 1977, Romero became Archbishop of El Salvador. Those in power looked to him as someone who would appease the peasants and assist the government and military in maintaining order. But more than maintaining social order, El Salvador was in need of mercy, healing, justice, and structural changes that would build a better society.

**The Context of Mercy in El Salvador**

The economic situation in El Salvador was very precarious when Romero became Archbishop. The economy revolved around the coffee sector, which accounted for more than 50% of the country’s total export revenue. Most of the land in El Salvador was owned by 14 families, who also held positions in the government and military. When Romero became Archbishop, these families thought he was going to be an important and unconditional ally. The socioeconomic situation in El Salvador was so terrible that “The 14” needed the help of the Church to maintain order and the status quo.

But El Salvador was already on its way to a civil war. People were being oppressed, and most Salvadorans lived in poverty. The unemployment rate was over 20%. There were hundreds of “desaparecidos” (missing persons). Many activists were being persecuted just for struggling for justice. Throughout the conflict, over 75,000 people were murdered and 7,000 disappeared.

**Rutilio Grande and Romero’s Conversion**

People in El Salvador were imploring their leaders for mercy. Fr. Rutilio Grande responded to their call by forming small communities of faith. In these faith communities farmers read the scriptures and interpreted them in a practical manner. They opened their eyes and discovered that God did not intend for them to live in poverty and oppression. Many of them joined Fr. Rutilio in a struggle to improve their lives. During my visit to El Salvador (for the Beatification of Romero) we had the opportunity to speak with a cousin of Rutilio Grande. He explained how Fr. Rutilio negotiated better wages for farmers from Aguilares and Suchitoto, as well as asking for better lunch and other benefits. These small changes were not well received by other landowners, and Fr. Rutilio Grande was murdered on March 22, 1977.

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3 Wright, *Oscar Romero*, 81.
6 Wright, *Oscar Romero*, 27.
The Conversion of Archbishop Romero

This event changed Monseñor Romero’s life. The pain of losing his dear friend allowed him to put himself in the place of mothers who had lost their children. He was forced to take down the poor from the cross, and in doing so the veil came down completely and enabled him to see a different reality.

Components of the Principle of Mercy in the Ministry of Archbishop Romero

Blessed Romero reminds us of Bartimeo, and of the Blind Man in the gospel of Mark (8:22-25). He now sees the connection between mercy and justice. He sees the crucified people and starts taking them down from the Cross. The next step is to heal them. Once a person is healed, Romero invites us to ask, what is the root cause of such sickness? With the help of his people he discovers the answer in an inhumane socioeconomic system. Once we have identified the root cause, he shows us, it is necessary to make structural changes so that other people will not suffer from the same illness. Healing is a good work of mercy, but the principle of mercy compels us to make structural changes and prevent sickness. As Jon Sobrino writes, “Mercy can connote the alleviation of individual needs but entail the risk of abandoning the transformation of structures.”

Romero took Fr. Rutilio down from the Cross (burial: a corporal work of mercy). He consoled Fr. Rutillo's family, friends, and parishioners (a spiritual work of mercy). He offered them comfort with the word of God (healing process). But that was not enough. There had been many killings of civilians and priests who were accused of being communists. Bishop Romero was aware that the United States was providing weapons and training soldiers from El Salvador. The conservative and obedient priest became the voice of the voiceless and asked President Carter to stop supplying weapons that were being used to oppress and kill Salvadoran people. In doing this, Romero attacked one of the root causes of violence and death in his country. He went on to offer a homily in which he told the Salvadoran Army they were not obligated to follow orders that were contrary to the law of God. He ordered them “to stop killing your own brothers, stop the repression.”

During his time as Archbishop, Romero showed his mercy by seeking justice. This connection of mercy and justice was only possible after his conversion. Before this Romero would do works of mercy and spiritual works of mercy. After the killing of Fr. Rutilio, Romero gained empathy for the people and embarked on a conversion process which led him to embrace the principle of mercy exemplified by Jesus Christ in the offering of his life during the celebration of the Eucharist.

Archbishop Romero's conversion made him aware of the difference between social and personal sin. He realized that his mission was to save the souls of everyone, poor and rich. Salvation is only possible with the participation of everyone.

In my pilgrimage to the beatification of Blessed Romero, I realized the socioeconomic situation in El Salvador is still very difficult. Thousands of children from El Salvador are escaping poverty and violence, seeking refuge in Mexico and the United States. In the beginning of 2016, the Obama administration deported children and their mothers back to El Salvador. The purpose of such deportations is likely to send a strong message to people who might be thinking of coming to the United States. However, we must ask ourselves, why are they coming? Once we know the root cause, we might seek alternatives designed to improve the situation in El Salvador.

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8 Romero was disturbed by the news that President Carter was planning to send military aid to El Salvador. In his letter to President Carter, Romero made the clear point that these American contributions will “only sharpen the injustice and repression.” This point is developed in Wright, 236.
9 Wright, Oscar Romero, 257.
10 Jon Sobrino argues throughout The Principle of Mercy that enduring mercy leads to the greatest love, which is manifested in the acceptance of death in being one with the crucified people.
It has been a long time since I offered a reflection on mercy, and since then, I have come to see a bigger picture. I have moved from an individualistic and personal spirituality to spirituality in relationship with the “other,” with those who live in the margins. I now see the connection between mercy, justice, forgiveness, and reconciliation. I am fully aware that mercy requires us to bring structural changes. We need to support policies that will benefit all children of God.

I hope the testimony of Blessed Romero will remove the veil that keeps us from living the Gospel in a merciful way—even if that means losing our lives. In the Year of Mercy we are called to follow the example of Blessed Romero and all the Central American martyrs who gave their lives embracing the principle of mercy. Can we imitate Blessed Romero? What can we do in the Year of Mercy to help refugee children from El Salvador and Syria? Let us reflect on the life of Blessed Romero and show mercy by seeking justice.