The Impact of Blessed Oscar Romero on Faith Formation

by Marco A. López

From the time that Oscar Romero was ordained a bishop, he, like all bishops assumed the roles of shepherd and teacher for the church. We know that his role as shepherd culminated with laying down his life for those whom he deeply loved. While that will most likely be the defining action for which he will be known throughout the rest of history, his role as teacher will be the context from which I will draw this reflection and from which we might consider the impact of his legacy to catechesis and faith formation. Given the limited space, I’d like for us to simply focus on Romero’s own journey, his pedagogy, and his messaging.

The General Directory for Catechesis (GDC) positions catechesis within evangelization as the more in-depth function of informing and forming Christian identity. Although the GDC is post-Romero period, his preaching and teaching responded to the reality of a people who clearly knew God and had encountered Jesus Christ, but who also had unanswered questions particularly about the reasons and the meaning of their suffering; an experience that undoubtedly marked their Christian identity.

A Journey of Transformation

About two years before assuming the archbishop’s seat in San Salvador and while he was bishop of Santiago de Maria, Romero was called upon to accompany a family and a community where several campesinos (farmworkers) were massacred. He never found the right words while he was with them, at times he simply remained silent, and at one point he even pronounced words that rather than give comfort caused more pain. It has often been said that two years later, he underwent a conversion when his good friend Fr. Rutilio Grande was murdered and then he did find the right words to say, and he spoke clearly and acted decisively. Whether using the word “conversion” is accurate or not to describe what was happening to Romero in the days that followed Grande’s death, those around

---


---

Marco A. López, is currently the Director of the Archbishop Oscar Romero Scholars Program at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. He has been in ministry in the Archdiocese of Chicago for nearly thirty years.
him and including himself recognized that something in him was changing; others called it transformation.³ It was ultimately a transformation in his understanding of the role of the church and in his role as archbishop.

Educator Parker Palmer suggests that “transformation must begin in the transformed heart of the teacher. Only in the heart searched and transformed by truth will new teaching techniques and strategies for institutional change find sure grounding.”⁴ Romero was transformed because he allowed himself to do so in his search for truth. More so because he was transformed by his love of and for the people who started to trust in him. Romero developed a gift for making the Word come alive in ways that touched the experiences of people were living at that time. “The Word of God,” he said, “has to be a word which springs forth from the eternal, ancient Word of God, but which touches today’s wound, today’s injustices, today’s victims.” (Dec. 12, 1977).⁵ For years as a priest and bishop, Romero taught and preached on different occasions but as he experienced this transformation, a new technique for delivering the Word emerged.

**Romero’s Pedagogy**

In analyzing Romero’s teaching through his homilies, it is not too difficult to identify three primary moments that reflect the methodology of see, judge, and act that had emerged throughout Latin America in those years. We often talk about seizing teachable moments in faith formation to spontaneously teach. Romero’s homilies became teachable moments, though perhaps not in the spontaneous way we often think of. Romero’s weekly homilies became the catalyst for gathering the entire archdiocese around the events of the previous week. This was a time for the community to hear about the disappearances of individuals or the brutal deaths that occurred that week and other unjust acts that often targeted catechists or other innocent civilians. These became moments to talk about the injustices of unlivable wages, poor sanitary conditions, and public policies that further marginalized the poor. Because this was the experience of the masses, it was not difficult to join in solidarity and for the community to be more disposed to hearing the Word and having it touch their lives and heal their wounds. This was the first moment.

After having pointed out the sin that was around them, Romero moved into the second moment in which he would introduce the Word: God’s promise of salvation and fullness of life—not in the afterlife but in the present. On one occasion, Romero reminded the faithful that “historical moments will change, but God’s design will ever be the same: to save human beings in history.”⁶ Of course we know that the central message of the Christian faith is Jesus Christ himself and the mystery of his dying and rising, but for Romero, it was also important to preach the reign of God as something attainable. By introducing God’s reign as something that God wants for us, it allowed Romero and ultimately the people themselves to question any structure, law, public policy, institution, and individual who stood in the way of bringing about the reign of God. As teacher, he pointed the way to God; taught the way to salvation and denounced those things that stood in the way of attaining salvation for his people and the country of El Salvador. He preached and taught what he believed would allow the Salvadoran people to assume their rightful place in the reign of God.

Romero’s preferential option for the poor was not limited to the economic poor. He also prayed for those in spiritual poverty; he prayed for those who declared themselves his enemies. Ultimately this is what cost him his life—in addressing the armed forces in his final Sunday homily on March 24, 1980, he was not as much condemning them or threatening them with excommunication as much as he was exhorting them to exercise their God-given free

---

³ Wright, *Oscar Romero and the Communion of Saints*, 52–53.
will to disobey an order contrary to God’s will—not only because it would save innocent lives but also to save their own souls.

A third moment in his homilies revolved around what we might refer to as missioning. One can almost hear Romero posing the question: “What is the Good News calling us to do?” Romero was very clear in preaching that God acted on behalf of those who did for themselves and that the Church had a unique role as an instrument of God. On one occasion he said, “I said once and I repeat today that if, unhappily, some day they silence our radio and don’t let us write our newspaper, each of you who believe must become a microphone, a radio station, a loudspeaker, not to talk, but to call for faith.” On a different occasion he said, “You have the key to the solution. But the Church gives you what you cannot have by yourselves: hope, the optimism to struggle, the joy of knowing that there is a solution, that God is our Father and keeps urging us.”

Here he not only exhorted the individual but the entire church. If he was acting out of how he believed, he ought to live his episcopacy he was also calling the church to a higher moral ground. To this he said, “A Church that does not provoke any crises, a gospel that does not unsettle, a Word of God that does not get under anyone’s skin, a Word of God that does not touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed—what gospel is that?”

Messaging

With hundreds of homilies, speeches, and writings available that were spoken or written by Blessed Oscar Romero, it is difficult to be inclusive of all, but perhaps we can paint some broad strokes and intermingle the General Directory for Catechesis to help us harvest some kernels of truth and inspiration that might impact our catechetical ministries today.

In reflecting upon Romero’s journey of transformation and as we might contemplate our own, it is worth taking note that the GDC says that “the Church usually desires that the first stage in the catechetical process be dedicated to ensuring conversion.” Perhaps because of his own journey, Romero constantly invited his faithful to conversion and implored them to transform their country. We might each ask ourselves, “How might I first be transformed if I am to be an agent of change and if I am to invite others into a catechetical process?”

Secondly, I would invite us to consider what might be some teachable moments, or perhaps we might call these “teachable situations” or the social realities of the people with whom we are engaged in a catechetical process. The GDC reminds us that “the study of the social teaching of the Church is indispensable, since its main aim is to interpret these realities, determining their conformity with or divergence from the lines of the Gospel teaching.” We might ask, “What are some of the realities lived today that need to be interpreted for the sake of helping the poor and the marginalized find meaning and find the presence of God?” Perhaps it’s unemployment, discrimination, homelessness, street or domestic violence, or the undocumented status of immigrants just to name a few. What message do we preach and how does the Word made flesh through us touch their lives and heal their wounds.

To conclude, let us consider as an inspiration, Romero’s message of hope and his belief in the reign of God spoken in his final homily just moments before his assassination. Drawing from *Gaudium et Spes* (no. 39) he states, “On this earth that Kingdom is already present in mystery. When the Lord returns it will be brought into full flower.”

---

7 Pierce, “Romero as Preacher.”
8 Wright, *Oscar Romero and the Communion of Saints*, 95.
and he continues in his own words, “That is the hope that inspires Christians. We know that every effort to better society, especially when injustice and sin are so ingrained, is an effort that God blesses, that God wants, that God demands of us.  