

The Clash of Transcendence and History: The Conversion of Óscar Arnulfo Romero (Part – II)

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Abstract

Óscar Arnulfo Romero y Galdámez (1917–1980), a Salvadoran bishop, lived during a time of great political and civil turbulence. The local Roman Catholic Church did regrettably little to quell the suffering of its people. Romero, in the earliest part of his episcopacy, and like the bishops around him, fell into this kind of complacency. Yet all of this was to shift radically for Romero as a result of events in 1977, when he changed from an introverted conservative to an outspoken champion of his people. This article is a theological analysis, one of many possible analyses, of how such a change, such a conversion, can be framed within the tradition of Christian spirituality: in the clash of transcendence and history, that is, an understanding that God meets God's people in the events of their lives – even in tragic events, as witnessed in the people of El Salvador – is conversion wrought. What is special about Romero's conversion in the clash of transcendence and history, as suggested by this article, is its similarity to the lives of those whom the Church has come to know as mystics. Romero, in the end, gave his all to become the very face of God for his own people, for the people of Latin America, and now for the whole world. The sign of a mystic, martyr, and saint indeed.

A Theological Analysis of Óscar Romero's Conversion

Religious conversion is a tricky topic to deal with. It shows itself in action, yet hides itself in motivation; it follows certain patterns, but

more often than not surprises (Perrin, 2007). The trickiness lies in the fact that Divine Love is inextricably hidden in people's hearts and thus needs to be mined – showing itself in the circumstances, actions, and choices of everyday life.

All of these dynamics are demonstrated in the life and death of Óscar Arnulfo Romero. Conversion entails the transformation not only of one's personal psyche and deepest interiority, but also of the use of power, material possessions, and even the knowledge out of which we live. Bernard Lonergan, the renowned Jesuit theologian, describes this dynamic well:

Conversion, as lived, affects all of ... [our] conscious and intentional operations. It directs ... [our] gaze, pervades ... [our] imagination, releases the symbols that penetrate to the depths of the psyche. It enriches ... [our] understanding, guides ... [our] judgements, reinforces ... [our] decisions. But as communal and historical, as a movement with its own cultural, institutional, and doctrinal dimensions, conversion calls forth a reflection that makes the movement thematic, that explicitly explores its origins, developments, purposes, achievements, and failures (Lonergan, 1972).

Óscar Romero engaged all of these in the social, political, and ecclesial arenas of life – both the interior and the exterior elements – in his increasing fidelity to the love of God he experienced in his life.

Strictly speaking, conversion – understood broadly as a remaking of one's life at a profound level – may not engage a religious tradition at all. This is to say that it may or may not engage an explicit understanding of a Transcendent Other as the ground of such movements in one's life, but it always engages the radical-possible of human life. Romero's conversion entailed the gradual and incremental "turning over" of his personal disposition – literally, a turning around that allowed him to see life in a radically new way.¹ Such a conversion

1 James Brockman uses the word "radical" to portray the change that occurred in Romero while he was Archbishop of San Salvador. Describing a document Romero wrote in 1976 titled "Three Factors in the Priests' Political Movement in El Salvador," Brockman states: "Like most other bishops of his country, as well as many others in the church, he is blind to his own political stance in support of the government while worrying about the 'politicization' of those who dared to question those in power. ... That only a year and a half later his closest helpers would be those whom he pronounced suspect in this document is proof of a radical shift by then in Romero's viewpoint." Brockman, *The Word Remains*, 49–50.

engages the most profound aspirations, search for meaning, and paradoxes of the human condition – as it did for Romero.²

A journey of conversion is not linear or predictable. It is experienced as a clash of history and transcendence. The unknowns of history, which provide the ever-changing context within which conversion takes place, are the framework or catalyst of the unknown journey of the self. As such, his religious conversion was rooted both within the vast caverns of faith that Romero had nurtured over his lifetime and the intense historicity within which he lived. It is true that his conversion story grew out of his faith-filled and ecclesial moorings, but perhaps more significantly it grew out of public places – the place of the everyman/everywoman of El Salvador. His story of conversion, therefore, can be opened up to engage the experience of the believer and non-believer alike.

However, in the case of Óscar Romero, his conversion did engage a Transcendent Other – the Christian God as Romero understood God to be – while he sought to experience the depth of the historical time within which he and his community lived. What we need to do, as suggested by this article, is tackle this paradox of transcendence and history head on. Is this paradox a *destructive* clash, a juxtaposition of *competing interests* in the God–human relationship? Romero’s life and death clearly answer this question: “No.” In the case of Romero and the many saints who have gone before him, the two movements of transcendence and history coincide without distinction in a life that rattles to the core, or at least ought to, every person who becomes familiar with it. As Damian Zynda states, “What happened in Romero can happen in us (in Pelton, 2015)”

Conversion is not a passive journey, like that of a leaf floating silently upon the calm waters of a lake in the misty moments of the early morning. Rather, conversion is akin to what happens in the depths of those waters. Dangerous currents, predatory creatures, and hidden traps can easily be disguised by the calm of the surface waters. The calm exterior of Romero innocently covered the profound storms playing themselves out within his person. He chose to engage these forces in a journey that led him to a physical martyrdom that struck in a moment, but also, and just as important, a slow martyrdom of dying to a tidy

2 Brockman reports numerous times that Romero or others identified change in Romero’s life: sometimes slow, sometimes more immediately evident. See, for example, Brockman, *Romero: A Life*, 54, 61, 81, 82, 127, 160. However, Romero also at times denied that he had ever experienced a radical or substantive conversion, as is suggested in this article. Instead, Romero described his changes as an “... evolution of the same desire that I have always had to be faithful to what God asks of me.” Brockman, *Romero: A Life*, 128 (cited from *Orientación*, Nov. 20, 1977). It seems to me that both positions accurately reflect Romero’s experience: that is, change-within-continuity. The issue of the change in Romero is further addressed elsewhere in this article.

theological world-view and spirituality that he had so earnestly embraced as a student, young priest, bishop, and initially as archbishop.

To embrace one's history, one's existential reality – especially that of the horrendous situation that existed in El Salvador prior to and since the time of Romero's humble birth in 1917 – is to embrace transcendence: the grace of God as God self-reveals in that history. There is no other way to come to know the Christian God than to insert oneself into the ebb and flow of everyday life – especially the messy moments, the moments that defy logic, and the moments that result in no answers: the story of Job lived in the life of Romero and the people of El Salvador. But, unlike Job,³ Romero was not restored to his former life and did not live well into his senior years. God asked more of Romero than God asked of Job!

As we saw above, socioeconomic inequality reigned in El Salvador throughout Romero's life – a radical inequality focused on land ownership, or the lack thereof (Clarke, 2014). As such, Romero would have witnessed, and felt the chilling effects of, the 1932 revolt of the peasants and Indigenous people who wanted simply to take back their lands – indeed, their very lives – from their own people who had stripped them of both since the nineteenth century.

Romero's story of conversion – his *ascent*, (Brockman, 1999) as he would have understood it, using the terms of ascetical theology of the day – therefore began with a *descent* into the most depraved conditions of humanity we can imagine. Romero's story of conversion “happens in the struggle to be obedient to the grace of conversion manifested in the unique circumstances of our lives,” (Zynda, in Pelton, 2015) as horrible as these may be. What happened in the streets, in the barrios, in the base communities, and in the hearts of those who came to call upon him became the cauldron of learning for Romero – inquiry-based education (Zynda, in Pelton, 2015).

We cannot separate Romero's religious-psychological conversion from his personal encounter with people of all kinds. His response to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, therefore, cannot be separated from his understanding of the Gospel as a story that unfolds in people's lives where history and transcendence are woven together. Faithfulness to the Gospel and Romero's understanding of God, thus understood, are at the foundation of his conversion process.

Romero's conversion was not a radical break with the past, as he himself admitted, (Zynda, in Pelton, 2015) but an ongoing deepening of his understanding of who God is that simultaneously became embodied in his

3 See the Book of Job, 42:10-16. This biblical book, most likely written around 6 BCE, recounts the misfortunes of a man who, despite his love and faithfulness to Yahweh, experienced great calamity personally and in his family. These events, however, did not undermine his faithfulness and trust in God.

own life, his actions, and his decisions. Conversion literally happens on the ground and is woven into the flux and flow of the ordinary circumstances of life – however extraordinary these circumstances may sometimes be.

Yes, there were moments of turning that can be identified in a moment of time – such as the assassination of Rutilio Grande and Romero’s seeking out psychotherapeutic assistance in the late 1960s from Dr. Dárdano. When Romero became archbishop of San Salvador, he saw the importance of consulting regularly with others, especially the laity who lived the harsh consequences of the military junta’s oppressive regime (Sobrino, 1990). However, these moments and conversations also served to coalesce what was already happening in the depths of his own relationship with God, his deep union with that Transcendent Other that escapes all of our namings, all of our attempts to trap and tame. God, the Wholly Other of the mystics, yet the Innermost Core of all, cannot be pinned down. Constant attention to this Wholly Other and to the dynamics of everyday life were essential if Romero was to succeed in coming to the assistance of his people.

In all of this, choices had to be continually made – on the ground, in the trenches of the daily. We choose to, or choose not to, respond to God’s grace in our lives. Romero consistently chose to respond, to risk, not knowing exactly where he was going or where he would end up. Again, transcendence and history meet in the fired cauldron of life. For Romero, “... the transcendent pressures were the will of God and the suffering of the people” (Sobrino, 1990). He would set everything that was happening in his life, in his people, in his Church in the context of prayer. From this experience of faith-based discernment and decisions he would decide and then set forth.

Within this dynamic of decision-making, where transcendence is stirred into the deep pot of history, it must be acknowledged that multiple conceptions of reality are possible. But Romero was not alive to this point earlier in his life. Romero, who was trained in classic scholastic theology at the core of the curriculum at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome (and in most if not all seminaries around the world at the time), learned about a very predictable God and an orthodoxy that focused on doctrinal consistency and hierarchical correctness.

Classical theology, as it developed in the shadow of the scientific method and rationalism of the mid-nineteenth century, and building on the scholasticism of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and later, expounded on a God of clear and concise *attributes*. Furthermore, it taught of a God that had clear and concise *expectations*, whether these be, for example, with respect to prayer, sin, personal-spiritual development, or grace. This approach had the risk of diminishing awareness of the experience of transcendence in one’s daily

life as well as diminishing the value of the personal experience of Mystery encountered in faith in the everyday when it was inconsistent with what was already known or believed.

The consequence of this doctrinal approach is the reduction of the historicity of Romero and his people to predetermined conceptual frameworks that limit probing questions in order to uncover a new perspective on life, on faith, and on God. All this led to complacency within and outside the Church. After Romero's awakening, his episcopal colleagues (Brockman, 1999) and government officials alike would have been content to snuff the clash of history and transcendence felt in the deepest caverns of Romero's heart and the hearts of his people. A purely subjectivist approach to Christian conversion and life needs to be avoided, but, at the same time, historicity needs to be freely considered and examined within its own parameters. It is within the qualitative dimension that the deepest questions of human life are brought to the fore. Such was the experience of Romero and his people.

Romero, in the experience of his daily life following his embrace of a new way, was constantly bumping up against alternative ways of describing the Wholly Other, named God in the lives of his people. Romero had to choose amid the multiple conceptions of reality, not so much as they were informed by his years of study (Sheldrake, 1992), from the minor seminary through to ordination and eventual post-graduate study, but based on his and his people's experience of Transcendence in history. Bit by bit, Romero's vision of God, God's grace for the world, and the way God suffered along with God's people changed and was expressed in the decisions he made. What Romero had to learn, in the words of Michael Downey, was that:

action and contemplation do not pertain to separate spheres: the sacred and the secular, church and world, spiritual life and the domain of the mundane and profane. The one God who is constantly "adventing" is not only for us but for the whole world (Downey, 1994).

In this ongoing dialectic of conversion – choosing and not choosing – a paradox arises. As Romero became closer to God, he was at a loss to identify and register this closeness himself. His scrupulosity continued. He felt his faults personally and deeply. His tendency toward obsessive-compulsive behaviours continued. Stated briefly, the constraints of his spiritual and psychological wounds did not disappear entirely as God's grace embraced him ever more closely. God's conversion at play in our lives does not depend on how clearly we name the human condition (in disease or in health), or even on how we name God. Such was the experience of many saints who have gone before Romero.

What Romero was experiencing is that the more brightly the love and light of Divine Goodness shines in our lives, the more our weaknesses and sin are exposed. How tortured through Love Romero must have felt in his last years! John of the Cross (1542–1591), a sixteenth-century Spanish mystic, describes this exposure of sin as a “loving cautery” that is produced by the intense presence of the Holy Spirit in the spirit of the pilgrim. According to John, the “fire of God ... does not consume and destroy the soul in which it so burns ... commensurate with the strength of love, it divinizes and delights it, burning gently within it.” (F 2, 3; Kavanagh, 1991, 658–59). John of the Cross describes God’s presence in the soul as “an infinite fire of love.” (F 2, 2; Kav 658). But this fire of love always leaves a loving wound wherever it is applied:

And it [God’s cautery of love] ... If applied to a wound not made by fire, it converts it into a wound caused by fire. Whether a soul is wounded by other wounds of miseries and sins or whether it is healthy, this cautery of love immediately effects a wound of love in the one it touches, and those wounds deriving from other causes become wounds of love. (F 2, 7; Kav 660)

Divine Love, strangely, turns us on our heads! Rather than thrusting us into a whimsical life of blissful, disincarnated joy, it opens up our wounds and thrusts them deep into the Divine Fire, inserting us ever more securely into the life of the Incarnation of God. Romero, awash daily in the atrocious sins of those who oppressed him and his people, became God’s “cautery of love” for all and became God’s love for all. Paul Wadell, in his brief but excellent introduction to the ethics of Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), describes God’s love in a similar way:

There is a strategy to love, and it is to open us increasingly to the Love by whom all things are. If we are brought to life by God and others, then our love perfects not because it develops some innate capacity within us, but because it further avails us to those who can make us whole. Love is the openness we need to live. It is precisely the vulnerability that does not destroy us, but brings us more fully to life, because it is in love that we stand in relationship to all that can heal and restore (Wadell, 2008).

Romero’s conversion was not to serve him directly (although it did, but concomitantly) but was principally at the service of his people and the Church he so dearly loved. Such is the life of a mystic, as Romero would come to live it. Wadell, again drawing from Aquinas, goes on to describe what I will call the “paradox of Love and life” in the following way:

The paradox is that the stronger we are in charity's virtues, the more defenseless we grow before God. ... The more charity grows in us, the harder God is to resist, because if we grow in such passionate love for God we cannot help but suffer God's love more completely. To increase charity is to grow weaker in the ways we can resist God, stronger in the ways we can receive God (Wadell, 2008).

Rather than dragging Romero down into the cesspool of human depression, ambivalence, and cynicism, his faith was fuelled with the greatest strength possible: an eruption of the life of the Spirit of God in his own life, which became an outpouring of God's love for others. "The soul is re-created, the Incarnation continues, and God once again becomes flesh in an ongoing way" (Perrin, 1997)" As a result of God's life in his life, Romero was a joy-filled man, even in the midst of existential ruin all around him (Pelton, 2006).

Through the clash of history and transcendence in his life, he took on the attributes of God in this world. Again, in the words of John of the Cross,

As a result the shadow that the lamp of God's beauty casts over the soul will be another beauty according to the measure and property of God's beauty, ... and the shadow of God's wisdom on it will be another wisdom corresponding to God's wisdom; and so on To express it better: We have the very wisdom and the very beauty and the very fortitude of God. (F 3, 14; Kav 679).

Through this passage, John is telling us that those who have passed through the purifying fires of divine Love, as did Romero (Dennis, Golden, and Wright, 2000), become the very presence of God in this world. God takes on flesh again in the clash of history and transcendence; God becomes human again. John of the Cross notes that in this way, God crowns the human person with the loftiest of vocations: to be God in this world. Incarnation repeats itself in history. No higher dignity could God bestow upon the human person and the created world. In giving the world a human face, Romero was giving it the Face of God.

For the soul, like a true daughter of God, is moved in all by the Spirit of God, as St. Paul teaches in saying that those who are moved by the Spirit of God are children of God himself [Rom. 8:14]. Accordingly, the intellect of this soul is God's intellect; its will is God's will; its memory is the memory of God; and its delight is God's delight; and although the substance of this soul is not the substance of God, since it cannot undergo a substantial conversion into him, *it has become God* through participation in God, being united to and absorbed in him, as it is in

this state. ... The soul will repeat the words of St. Paul: *I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me* [Gal. 2:20]. (F 2, 34; Kav 671; emphasis mine)

This depiction of God seizing hold of the soul could well apply to Romero, as has been affirmed above in other ways. Jon Sobrino, a colleague and close friend of Romero's, observed the following after Rutilio Grande's assassination in 1977:

If Archbishop Romero set out on new paths, at his age, in his place at the pinnacle of the institution, and against such odds, then his conversion must have been very real. It must have reached the deepest corners of his being, shaping him for good and all, and leading him to the sacrifice of his life. His external change in behavior – an undeniable change, acknowledged by all – must have been the result of a very deep, very real interior change (Sobrino, 1990).

No pious sentimentality was present in Romero's last courageous act – an act that lasted not a few hours, not a few days, not even a few weeks. His final courageous act lasted months – those months in late 1979 and the early part of 1980 when he was acutely aware that his death could be imminent. Yet he consistently chose to remain “the voice of the voiceless.” Despite the awareness that he might be the next to receive the wrath of the oppressor – based on credible reports – he did not allow himself to be relieved of his engagement in the world around him.

Although we live in a different history, a different time, than Romero, the Christian call to conversion requires a like engagement in the day-to-day. It is here that the Transcendent Other will ultimately be revealed. What the life and death of Óscar Arnulfo Romero have exposed for us is the deceit that some theologians and spiritual professionals would have us believe: that there is an economy of salvation at play in the world that is based on action and just proportionate response based on doctrinal orthodoxy. Any suggestion that there is a “profane” reality and a “sacred” reality separated by mundane “worldly” activities such as commerce, love-making, play, governing, and childbearing on one hand, and “holy” activities such as prayer, asceticism, church-going, and almsgiving on the other, is equally false. It is deceitful. Doctrinal orthodoxy is only orthodox inasmuch as it meets the test of orthopraxy that conforms to the witness laid down by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Anything else leads to a false belief that it is doctrine and theological correctness that save. To hold this latter position risks jettisoning the most fundamental truths of Christian life: salvation is wrought in and through a relationship with God, as

that relationship was and is shared with us in our relationship to Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Another way of saying this is that we tend to cling to a trust in an exchange of goods that ultimately assures an appropriate and proportionate outcome to both our woes and the woes of the world. No: like Jesus, Romero did not have to die to assuage the plight of his people. Romero, like Jesus, died because of his faithfulness to a relationship with God as lived in and through his relationship with his people – God’s people, in the end. Love conquers all, even the alienation thrust upon an entire people as a result of severe unjust socio-economic factors and brutal physical violence. Romero’s conversion bears witness to the fact that the Holy Spirit does not need humanly constructed religious methods of asceticism to bring about profound human transformation. Asceticism enough is served up in the marketplace of life.

As already mentioned, Romero, in his years as archbishop, had to let go of the neat and tidy theological systems he learned as a seminarian in El Salvador and when pursuing doctoral studies in Rome. Not that these systems are bad or destructive in themselves. It is taking shelter in them and using them as a shield to protect oneself from the onslaught of the reality of life and the practice of justice that is evil and deceitful.

Óscar Romero the Mystic⁴

To characterize Óscar Romero as a “mystic” might fall well outside the usual norms for designating a man or woman as such. He doesn’t fall into the typical descriptions of an “ecstatic” mystic – an experience described as “being-outside-oneself” – evident in the life and writings, for example, of a Teresa of Avila or a John of the Cross. However, there is good reason to think of Romero in this category.

Robert Pelton characterizes Romero as an “ecclesial mystic.” He states: “By the term *mystic* I mean someone who experiences both the transcendence and immanence of God in the movements of his or her life in ways that allow human consciousness to be drawn into loving union with the consciousness of the Divine. By qualifying the term with the adjective *ecclesial* I am referring to an orientation to life that

4 There is much work to be done on the mysticism of Óscar Romero, work that ought to be taken up as soon as possible. A full-length study may unveil a new and more accessible approach to mysticism, one that might fit our contemporary times, in contrast to the focus on “other-worldly” mysticism that continues to characterize much popular belief about the nature of mysticism. I believe that the concept of “non-duality” would be essential in this undertaking.

is centered in the mystery and history of the church that belongs to Jesus Christ" (Pelton, 2006). Although the term "ecclesial mystic" is useful to describe Romero's mysticism it is not evident to me that such a qualification is necessary, nor does it describe the whole picture. The "non-duality" that Romero experienced and expressed in his homilies, his pastoral outreach, and his total self-giving reveals, it seems to me, an expression of ecstatic mysticism as profound as any in the Christian traditions. Romero's conversion, in the end, is a strong example of ecstatic mysticism. "The congruence of being and doing and being-with-oneself is an experience of ecstasy, of being outside one-self" (Soelle, 2001). Being outside oneself is a hallmark of ecstatic mysticism that describes the union of the Giver of the gift and the gift itself. A foundational characteristic of Christian mysticism is exactly this: the non-duality of the Giver of the gift and the Gift itself (Perrin, 1996). As Meister Eckhart (1260–1328) states:

God never gives, nor did He ever give a gift, merely that man might have it and be content with it. No, all gifts which He ever gave in heaven or on earth, He gave with one sole purpose – to make one single gift: Himself. With all His gifts He desires only to prepare us for the one gift, which is Himself (Otto, 1962).

Mystical sensibility, as Meister Eckhart outlines above and as John of the Cross described earlier in this article as the "cautery of love," aligns the deep desires of the human heart with God's – and the two become one in God's Self-giving. Romero's life and death is a stellar example of the success of God's Self-giving. Romero, initially a "safe" nomination as bishop of Santiago de María, became God's "voice of the voiceless" in history. The clash of history and transcendence is what salvation is all about. Romero came to know this in no uncertain terms. He became the Lamb of God, not in sacrificial retribution but in self-giving Love. He gave what he had received. He gave what he had been transformed into.

There is no merit in such a state because there are no justifying motives, fancy rationales, or clever justifications to explain the behaviour. Romero simply *did who he was*; he lived out who he had become. Total self-giving in absolute freedom is free of desire. It is based on the simplicity and completeness of relationship with God. Romero acted freely in perfect conformity with who he was, which was to live the attributes of God as described earlier, each in their own way, by Meister Eckhart and John of the Cross.

Calling to mind further testimony of Meister Eckhart, we can say that Romero acted “without a why and wherefore” [*sunder warumbe*] (Soelle, 2001). This is another expression of what is at the heart of all Christian mysticism, the non-duality of the self and of the act. Romero, especially following the assassination of Rutilio Grande, acted without duty, fear of threat, or concern while contemplating the decisions and choices that lay before him in the clash of transcendence and history. Again, with Eckhart, I suggest that Romero acted freely, in perfect conformity with who he was, “without a why and wherefore.” This is at the centre of Romero’s mysticism: an existential embodiment of the spontaneous and self-giving Love of God. Eckhart describes further this state of being while preaching on 1 John 4:9 (“God’s love was revealed among us in this way”):

For this innermost reason you should perform all of your deeds without whys and wherefores. I say in truth, as long as you perform your deeds for the sake of the kingdom of heaven or God or your eternal salvation, in other words for an external reason, things are not truly well with you. ... Because the person who seeks for God in a particular way, takes that way and misses God. But the person who seeks for God without a way will find Him, as He is, in Himself; and such a son lives with the Son and He is life itself (Soelle, 2001).

Such a description is apt for Romero. His conversion was ultimately based on an uncompromising integrity to his relationship with God – despite the frailty of his interior psychological disposition or the ideals of spirituality that initially guided him as a young student and taught him “to do things right” and “fall into line.” As an adult – both in biological years and in maturity of faith – he lived out his relationship with God in the asceticism and mysticism served up in the world around him. For many people, especially his detractors, Romero “did things wrong,” within both civil government and the highest ecclesial offices. But Romero could not resist *doing who he had become*. There was no turning back.

It is such an asceticism and mysticism that we also are called to intentionally cultivate (Perrin, 1997). As others have said, Romero “lived in the open space of history ... lifting his voice for the voiceless” (Dennis, Golden, and Wright, 2000). May we, too, be courageous enough to live in such an open space, so that our conversion may also run its full course in due time. Romero, in his conversion, abandoned the ideologies of mute theological systems, ways of praying, and all the “shoulds” that often accompany faith life.

God's defeat of deceit on multiple levels is clear in the seduction of Romero. Conversion led him to freedom at all levels. Let us pray for the strength that such a conversion, such an "asceticism of risk" (Zynda, and Pelton, 2015) lived in the clash of transcendence and history, can also be ours.

Conclusion: Óscar Romero's Three-Fold Conversion

Romero's conversion, his turning, to find a new way in a world that at once stymied and frustrated him, yet a world that he held in the embrace of God's heart as a source of grace and love, can be described as a three-fold conversion.

First, we have the conversion of Romero himself, as outlined above. He turned from being an introverted conservative to an outspoken reformer, and came to view himself, his people, and the Catholic Church in a new way. He truly became the voice of the voiceless, converting his entire life to this cause, to the point of martyrdom.

Second, we have the conversion of the local churches: those of El Salvador and Latin America in general. Unwittingly, Romero would come to embody the radical message of Medellín (1968) – a message he was initially suspicious of, yet of which he became its strongest proponent. The Church of Latin America had its own conversion to undertake in order to return to the roots of the Gospel of Jesus Christ; Romero provided an important source of this renewal.

During his lifetime, he received little or no support from local fellow bishops or those across the ocean in Rome. We know that at times, they were even hostile to him. They, too, began a conversion during Romero's lifetime: a conversion based on his self-giving witness that continues up to today. Following his death, the government, the military, the oligarchy, and even some in the ecclesial hierarchy would have liked Romero's memory to fade into a distant past (Sobrinho, 1990). However, this was not to be the case.

The year 2017 will mark 100 years since the birth of Óscar Arnulfo Romero y Galdámez. To mark this milestone, the episcopal conference of El Salvador has launched a three-year celebration of his life – a far cry from the alienation he experienced from the episcopate during his lifetime. Many Church leaders throughout Latin America have taken up Romero's human rights work since he died (Pelton, 2015). Pope John Paul II's visit to the tomb of Óscar Romero in 1983 shows the esteem with which the institutional Church had come to hold Romero's

witness. The country, the episcopate, and the region as a whole are rediscovering Romero as “a holy person and not as a political figure” (Pelton, 2015) In order for this to happen, conversion had to have taken place on some level.

Third, Romero’s conversion is a reflection on a micro-scale of the conversion needed within the universal Church on a macro-scale, as documented by the Second Vatican Council in all of its sixteen documents. If nothing else, Vatican II was a call by the Church, to the Church, to return to its roots and remember in word and deed the saving witness of Jesus Christ. It, too, had fallen away, had become out of touch, with the people of God, who Romero knew to be “the source of holiness” – something the universal Church had forgotten, or at least significantly neglected, and needed to rediscover.

Pope Francis (elected March 13, 2013) personally intervened to assure the timely beatification of Romero, which took place on May 23, 2015, barely two years into Francis’ pontificate. Pope Francis holds up Romero as a model for all ages when, in his apostolic letter of beatification, he states:

Óscar Arnulfo Romero y Galdámez, Bishop and martyr, pastor according to the heart of Christ, evangelizer and father of the poor, heroic witness of the Kingdom of God, Kingdom of Justice, of fraternity, of peace (Francis, 2015).

Romero’s institutional canonization will most likely take place as part of the 2017 celebration of his birth.

Romero’s conversion continues to reverberate in the conversion of the Church and its leaders. It is thus truthful to say that Romero’s conversion is ongoing – in his people, in his Church, in our world, and in the world beyond it. He continues to inspire commitment and courage in the pursuit of the embodiment of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Romero’s example of self-giving love is one for all people of all ages, whether they are part of a faith-based community or not (Pelton, 2015). But what happened in Romero’s life – the clash of transcendence and history that served as the cauldron of righting the wrongs of sin, of recognizing the rightful image of God in all people, and of establishing in a special way a proper home for the poor and oppressed – remains unfinished. The journey continues. This journey is a hope-filled one, as Romero recognized in the joy of his own life and in the joy that shone in the hearts of those he loved and those who love him today.

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