

Six: the time it takes for spiritual maturation is a matter of God's providence. In her life, one can gain insights into the way God acts even in children. For Maria, approximately half her life was spent in ascetic exercises that can seem to us like "spinning her wheels." After 1646, she went from what the great Flemish spiritual master (Augustinian prior) Jan van Ruusbroec would call "the active life" to "inner life" and eventually "unitive life." And as he taught, each succeeding "life" still contains the preceding "lives." While the purification continued, her own efforts gradually subsided and the helm of her spiritual boat was guided more and more exclusively by God.

Seven: the influence of the long spiritual tradition of the Catholic Church became evident in her writings. Her autobiography itself does not mention it, but her spiritual advisor, Father Michael of St Augustine, himself a great leader in the Carmelite tradition, tells us that she became familiar not only with the spirituality of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, but also that of Jan van Ruusbroec, Meister Eckhart, and John Tauler. Through Father Michael, her spirit was led out into the open air, where she could at last breathe free and expansively. Even when she had no immediate access to spiritual counsel, she continued to be led interiorly by God.

Eight: we learn that her prayer life deeply affected those about her, especially as she grew in holiness. She prayed for those about her to such a degree that, in spite of her solitary life, her holy life and eventual death were recognized with gratitude by throngs of people in Mechelen even as they mourned her passing. She has been named "venerable" by the Church. Once her corpus of spiritual writings becomes better known, even in her own land, we may be finding a new "doctor of the Church" in the area of spirituality.

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

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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.

Introduction¹

As Óscar Romero ascended the ranks of Episcopal life in the Roman Catholic Church in the 1960s and 1970s, he did so against a darkening sky in his home country of El Salvador. Although the injustices into which he was born in 1917 were evident in his small village of Ciudad Barrios, San Miguel, as everywhere else – poverty, civil oppression, hoarding of land by the elite – nothing compared to what would emerge in these areas during the last few years of his life. The bloody and protracted Salvadoran civil war that erupted in 1979 and continued after his death in 1980 saw tens of thousands of lives lost before civil order was re-established by the signing of the Peace Agreement (1992) after the United Nations intervened.

In this stretch of time, from 1917 to 1980, and often amid squalid conditions, Óscar Romero would journey from the life of a simple, poor, would-be carpenter to a bishop, reformer, and saint. From the beginning, he shared much with the one who had come to be known as Jesus of Nazareth two thousand years earlier. Had Romero known just how much their lives and journey could have been compared, he might have considered abandoning his own journey before the power of the Holy Spirit transformed his heart and spirit such that he could no longer turn his back on the plight of the Salvadoran people.

How can such a journey – from pauper to saint – be described? What can account for the radical shift in perspective and personality Romero showed – from an introverted conservative to an outspoken reformer? There is no easy or single response to such questions. But if we examine those who went before Romero in the Christian journey, we may at least discover some clues. What is suggested in this article, which is common to all saints, is that it was the *clash* of transcendence and history, the unique clash of these two factors in Romero's life specifically and in his country generally, that led this man to abandon his former self-understanding and emerge to view a significantly different face in the mirror. Romero speaks of the clash of transcendence and history, and the inevitability of it, in a homily from March 11, 1979:

If our own archdiocese has become a scene of conflict, let there be no doubt in your minds, it is because of its desire to be faithful to this new evangelization [referring to the documents of Medellín (1968) and Puebla (1978)]. From Vatican Council II until now, and in particular in the meetings of Latin American bishops, the demand is for an evangelization that is committed and fearless. ... A church that suffers no persecution but enjoys the privileges and support of the things of the earth – beware! – is not the true church of Jesus Christ (Brockman, 2004).

An overriding characteristic of his homilies was his ability to speak directly to the lives of those who heard them. The homilies, therefore, bring together history and faith/transcendence in a way that moved people to action. Of course, we all live in history and engage transcendence in different ways throughout our lives. Yet most men and women – viewed, for example, across time, geography, religious perspective, and ethnicity – do not live the intensity of the sacred journey that was and continues to be Romero's. Something extraordinary happened in him that deserves particular attention.

Romero's awareness of these two realms – history and transcendence – and his reference to both in discourse of various kinds reveals the importance the two play in his own theology. The clash of history and transcendence could well be referred to as the clash of the secular and the sacred. Romero knew that God's Spirit emerged in the life of God's people in time and space. Again, we see this reflected in Romero's own words:

The element of transcendence that ought to raise the Church toward God can be realized and lived out only if she is in the world of men and women, if she is on pilgrimage through the history of humankind (Romero, 1977).

Sacred scripture is full of stories and examples that demonstrate this. But in his earlier life, Romero envisioned this encounter as a peaceful eruption, not a clash. And certainly not as *an inversion* whereby the Church would be characterized as obstructionist (to put it minimally) to the reforms needed in El Salvador to deliver justice to the oppressed, and the simple people would be characterized as the righteous ones – the true carriers of the Word who fought to bring about the justice needed.

That Romero lived in a neat and tidy system of Christian life that kept reality at bay on multiple levels is evidenced in the following 1977 excerpt from the San Salvador newspaper *La Prensa Gráfica*, following his appointment (but not yet installation) as archbishop of San Salvador. He knew of the mix, yet still clung to the surety of peaceful resolution

¹ The foundations of this article are from a lecture titled "God's Defeat of Deceit: The Seduction of Óscar Romero," which I gave at the International Conference on Óscar Arnulfo Romero, Notre Dame University, September 25-28, 2014. It was a response to a paper by Damian Zynda, Th.D., titled "How Far Can a Soul Ascend If It Lets Itself Be Possessed Entirely by God?" These, and other papers from the conference, were later published in Robert S. Pelton, ed., *Archbishop Romero and Spiritual Leadership in the Modern World* (New York: Lexington Books, 2015). My contribution is found on pages 56-60. Used with permission.

when the two – history and transcendence – overlapped:

“We must keep to the center, watchfully, in the traditional way, but seeking justice,” he said. The mission of the priest “is eminently religious and transcendent,” but on the other hand, “the government should not consider a priest who takes a stand for social justice as a politician or a subversive element when he is fulfilling his mission in the politics of the common good” (Brockman, 1999).

What Romero was to find out in his own life, and in the lives of those whom he loved, was the inevitability of the clash between the “politics of the common good” and “the religious/transcendent” – that is, between history and transcendence – as a result of faithfulness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Romero, like the narrator of “The Hound of Heaven,” could not escape this emergent reality of God’s love in his own life, as he found out in his later years. Though an introvert, Romero was constantly drawn out of himself, whether by the needs of the institutional Church or, eventually, by the needs of the people whom he came to love and for whom he died. His remarkable story is worthy of the attention of all – religious or not – who desire to live the fullness of life, wherever life has placed them.

Óscar Romero – A Few Notes on His Life

In 1980, the year Romero died, El Salvador, which is nestled within a cluster of seven small Central American countries, was not on the international community’s radar. Decades of oppression of the poor by the rich and the successive corrupt governments went largely unnoticed by the world. From 1979 on, civil war reigned. Tens of thousands of people were violently killed, and the world stood by silently. Well, at least most of the world. The United States, under the leadership of President Jimmy Carter and subsequently President Ronald Reagan, did turn its attention to the violent oppression of the people of El Salvador – but on the morally wrong side of the conflict. The Salvadoran army, which was largely responsible for carrying out the oppressive acts against the Salvadoran people under the instruction of the corrupt government, was funded, trained, and backed by the United States.²

² This fact would eventually prompt Romero, as archbishop of San Salvador, to write a letter of protest to US President Jimmy Carter. After extensive consultations with the laity, men and women religious, and his priests, Romero sent the letter on February 19, 1980 – barely a month before he would meet the same brutal fate as tens of thousands of Salvadoran citizens: death at the hands of the oppressive military regime. President Ronald Reagan, who took office the following year, maintained and increased the support to the oppressive governments of El Salvador. See Robert

Once again, the story of David and Goliath played itself out with the unlikely of opponents: the poor and resourceless people of El Salvador on one side and the richest, most powerful country on earth on the other. It was into this nascent world that Romero was born, along with six siblings, to Santo Romero and Guadalupe de Jesús Galdámez.

Because his family was poor, Romero received a very limited education. Even so, he was already set on a future as a priest, and entered the minor seminary in San Miguel at the age of thirteen instead of continuing the carpenter apprenticeship his parents wanted for him. Theology studies continued at the national seminary in San Salvador; then he was sent to Rome to study at the Pontifical Gregorian University. He was ordained a priest on April 4, 1942, in Rome after completing a licence in theology. His bishop asked him to stay on in Rome to do a doctorate, but due to needs in his home diocese of San Miguel, Romero returned to El Salvador at the further request of his bishop to take up ministerial responsibilities. These included “parish work, diocesan work as secretary of the San Miguel diocese, high school chaplaincy, and diocesan newspaper work” (Dennis, 2000).

In 1967, Romero was named secretary-general of the bishops’ conference in El Salvador and was subsequently named executive-secretary of the Central American bishops’ conference. He was in his 50s when named to the latter, already into the second half of life! Skills required to effectively function in these positions would include the capacity for careful listening and thoughtful response; the ability to integrate and present complex ideas coherently; demonstrated organizational skills; deep respect for the bishops and their work in his own country as well as across Central America; and a high level of discretion. I can only assume that Romero held most, if not all, of these skills to a high degree or he would not have been named to the position of executive-secretary of the bishops’ conference.

His role as secretary to these institutions would have built on his tendency to introversion and sympathy for a more conservative face of the Catholic Church. During these years, Romero was prone to conformity and was a “staunch supporter of hierarchical authority” (Pelton, 2004). The years of study, as well as his extensive commitment to administrative work as secretary to the episcopal conferences, would

S. Pelton, ed., with Robert Ball and Kyle Markham, *Monsignor Romero: A Bishop for the Third Millennium* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 117. See also the United Nations website: <http://www.csusmhistory.org/atkin008/plea-to-carter-response-from-reagan>. Accessed September 13, 2015.

have shielded him from day-to-day contact with the poor, isolating him in his own world. Romero admitted as much. In a conversation with the Salvadoran provincial of the Jesuits, Fr. César Jerez, while the two were visiting in Rome, Romero explores this issue:

“We all have our roots. ... I was born into a poor family. I’ve suffered hunger. I know what it’s like to work from the time you’re a little kid.” That life was interrupted by years of studying.... [Romero] recalls becoming “absorbed in my books. I started to forget about where I came from. I started creating another world,” he explained (Clarke, 2014).

We know that Romero was initially suspicious of the ecclesial reforms advocated by the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) as well as the subsequent declarations of the first conference of all the Latin American bishops in Medellín, Colombia (1968), which held Vatican II as its foundation and inspiration. Just as the Council sought to bridge the gap between the modern world and what were often seen as the antiquated ways of the Catholic Church, Medellín aimed to bridge the gap between the oppressed and an institutional Church that had, to date, largely ignored them. Both Vatican II and Medellín were about reform, but Romero was not quite there yet.

Even though in El Salvador the masses were oppressed by the ruling oligarchs and military juntas – both largely supported by the institutional Catholic Church and local bishops – Romero believed that change would come, but it would come in peace and through proper peaceful processes. The bishops went to great lengths to avoid public conflict and division of any kind, even if the goal would have been a noble response to the Gospel: an increase in social justice and fairness of resource distribution (Dennis, 2000). The result was maintenance of the status quo – which Romero also initially supported, because he believed in the basic goodness of those in power (Dennis, 2000).

As he travelled up the ranks of ecclesial life – for example, as editor of the archdiocesan newspaper (*Orientación*), then as monsignor (1967), then as secretary to the two Episcopal conferences, he became a powerful man. He had proven his intelligence, work ethic, and orthodoxy. It should have come as no surprise that he was ordained an auxiliary bishop in 1970 and then became bishop of the diocese of Santiago de María in 1974. It was here that he was forced to begin speaking out against the oppression of his people; it was here that his awakening quietly began. The buck stopped with him now; there was no one else but him to speak up for his people. His reputation as a reformer had hardly been established – publicly or within his own self-awareness,

to any degree – when he was appointed archbishop of San Salvador in 1977. Had such a reputation preceded his appointment as archbishop, it is questionable whether the appointment would ever have taken place.

The oligarchy and the military wanted a “safe” Episcopal appointment, and that is what they believed they got in Romero. The priests of the archdiocese, however, were not as pleased. Their previous archbishop had supported them in their work with the poor and their efforts for land reform. They wondered whether Romero would do the same:

While the upper class smugly rejoiced in the selection of Romero ... a groan of despair spread among the priests of the diocese who presumed that Romero would do his utmost to curtail their work among the poor. ... [The] Romero who became archbishop was far from the man who would soon become beloved throughout the Americas as the “voice of the voiceless” (Clarke, 2014).

Throughout his tenure as archbishop of San Salvador, the struggles of the poor and the oppressed escalated. The poor were without land and resources – fourteen Salvadoran families controlled over 60% of the farmland. Those who worked in the coffee plantations were abused, and anyone who came to their assistance – including sympathetic clergy or religious – were persecuted or murdered by the military. Although Romero felt deeply the tragic nature of the tyranny and oppression within which they lived, he did not yet have the conviction to rise up in a public way.

This changed within weeks of his becoming archbishop, with the assassination of one of his priests, Fr. Rutilio Grande, s.j. – a colleague and friend – on March 12, 1977. Two travelling companions, an elderly man and a young boy, were killed with him. After Grande’s death, Romero radically changed his conservative attitude toward the government and demanded that the assassinations be investigated. Though he was persistent, his demands went unheeded. Other attacks on Church personnel – clergy, laity, and religious – ensued to threaten people into submission (Clarke, 2014).

Horrified by these atrocities, Romero began a more intentional and organized network of support for the poor and oppressed. Also, from that moment on, he systematically declined invitations to official government events lest he give the appearance of approving of the government (Brockman, 1999). He had finally “come alive.” The “old Romero was cast off completely and a new Romero emerged: empathetic, soulful, and courageous” (Clarke, 2014). He preached on every possible occasion that “the poor were the good news of God, that

the poor – not the magisterium, the episcopacy, or theologies – were the source of holiness” (Dennis, 2000). It is the poor who break open the veil, ripping apart the distance between God and our unconverted humanity, which exposes a breathless beauty, the God of Love.

What Romero had begun to live at the core of his being was the realization that holiness is not a product of one’s life lived in adherence to rules, to abstract theologies, or even to specific liturgical rites. This led him to understand that faith – Christian faith – is not lived in isolation, befriended by rote theologies and sterile liturgical rites, but rather is a product of a shared life lived with others in the daily ebb and flow, give and take, of community life following the example of Jesus Christ. He finally understood that we belong to each other and that this fact calls forth a deep level of care that cannot be ignored. It is not doctrine or theology that extends this deep level of care, but faith that God is alive in God’s people.

This message has also been at the core of Pope Francis’s pontificate. While addressing the Second International Congress of Theology, Francis stated:

Doctrine is not a closed, private system deprived of dynamics able to raise questions and doubts. On the contrary, Christian doctrine has a face, a body, flesh; He is called Jesus Christ and it is His Life that is offered from generation to generation to all men and in all places (Francis, 2015).

Holiness is a journey of a people, together, in solidarity with the Jesus of the Gospels. Here, in this journey, transcendence and history inevitably clash in order to transform whatever needs transforming by God’s grace and Divine Love. In Romero, this clash began to reverberate with intensity in his own heart to such a degree that he was no longer able to resist rising up to finally become the “voice of the voiceless.” His conversion, his turning, had begun in earnest following the death of Rutilio Grande, as all the world would eventually see.

Romero himself admitted, in a conversation with Fr. César Jerez, s.j., that he had changed after Rutilio Grande’s death; but he also said he had changed with some degree of continuity.

“When I saw Rutilio dead, I thought, ‘If they killed him for what he was doing, it’s my job to go down that same road.’ ... So yes, I changed. But I also came back home again” (Clarke, 2014).

Romero’s response to an interviewer’s question during the Latin American bishops’ meeting in Puebla, Mexico (1979), about the

noticeable changes in his life strikes a similar tone:

“If you wish, you could call it a conversion, but I think it would be more precise to define it as a development in the process of knowledge. I have always wanted to follow the gospel, although I did not suspect where it was going to lead me” (Gaspari, 1980).

Clearly, Romero’s preference, and one assumes it follows his own sense of interiority, in describing the evident changes that took place in his life was to present it as a result of a slow but progressive evolution. Whether it was a gradual evolution or radical shift – syntheses of the old and the new or an entirely new beginning – the description is secondary to what happened on the ground in the last years of his life. The bottom line is the remarkable transformation that took place within him for those around him to witness and to emulate.

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Becoming Fire that Ignites Other Fires

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Abstract

Consecrated Life is a sincere attempt to reincarnate Christ in our complex and conflicting life situations. It demands from the part of a religious person a relentless search and a deep hunger for interiority. A religious must find her/his interior health and wealth in and through a personal relationship with God. When our inner core gets supernaturally charged, naturally we start radiating the Holy Spirit, burning as if a fire is shut up in our bones - a Jeremiah experience (Jer 20:9) that transforms our life into a divine mission. Presenting Christ to the world through personal witnessing is the primary task of the consecrated (VC, 72). A vibrant spirituality that enhances life, a genuine fellowship that sustains and supports community life and a prophetic witnessing of Christ through the practice of Evangelical Counsels are essential parts of revitalizing consecrated life.

Introduction

Consecrated life is a call to become a fire that "lights up the heart" (Benedict XVI) and ignites other fires. However, often our tendency is to change everything else except ourselves. Consecrated life can flourish only through close association with Jesus Christ in line with the charism of the Founders and abandoning false securities of every sort. This demands radical reform, reassessing of structures and using them for revitalization and vibrancy of the consecrated life.

Consecrated life needs to be appraised from a communitarian