



Perhaps Oscar Romero's most famous words, an ominous foreshadowing of his assassination at the hands of State Power, comes from a statement he made to a journalist just a few days before he stood behind the communion table, held up the bread of life and cup of salvation, and was gunned down by the powers and principalities. As he sensed the impending death he was sure to face, these words resound now as loudly as they did when he said them 38 years ago:

“If they kill me, I will rise [*or, I will be resurrected*] in the people of El Salvador.”

Today, in honor of Oscar Romero's canonization by the Catholic church and in honor of these words he spoke, I'd like to invite us to imagine with Romero. I'd like us to imagine together what a resurrected people looks like...in El Salvador and the United States and all over the world. And today's Gospel Lesson offers a particularly powerful lens to help us imagine with Romero.

In this snapshot, the people bring their little children to Jesus and ask him to bless them. It doesn't take long for this simple request on their part and this simple act on Jesus' part to be met with profound resistance. But Jesus tells them, in no uncertain terms, **“Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”**

The kingdom of God comes to life in the audacious hope of resurrected people. Today, we ask together, what kind of people would Romero audaciously hope for today? How can his witness and his words teach us to be a resurrected people in the world today?

Romero believed that the church, that resurrected people, had something to offer a world suffocating from its own repression and violence.

Romero believed that it was not merely the work of activists and social justice leaders to bring peace to El Salvador or to make land reform a reality for the landless poor.

Romero believed that the gospel had something particular and profound to say and do on behalf of the oppressed.

Romero believed that the gospel resided most palpably among the oppressed.

Romero believed that a resurrected people could change his country and the world.

So this morning, I offer a few brief reflections from Romero's life and legacy as well as our Gospel Lesson about what it means to be a resurrected people.

**A resurrected people center the testimonies
of the most vulnerable among them.**

Jesus placed these children front and center in this moment. They weren't just his sermon illustration. They were his teacher. Their experience, their lives, their bodies mattered to him. And in an ancient Near Eastern context like his, no human body could have been much more vulnerable than a child's. Vulnerable to disease, exploitation, abuse, neglect, with no legal infrastructure that ensured their safety.

Especially these children. Children, likely of Palestinian descent living in a Roman empire. These children may have not mattered to their State, but they did matter to their parents. And Jesus knew this...he felt this...he held this up as the primary expression of the kingdom of God.

Romero began to center the testimonies of the vulnerable around him, too. He began to realize that the poor, the day-laborers, the exploited and mistreated were not his sermon illustration, but his teachers. He began to believe the testimonies of people he had been trained to ignore or disbelieve, people like Christine Blasey Ford and Laquon McDonald and Fannie Lou Hamer.

A little story from Maria Vigil Lopez's book,
Romero: Memories in Mosaic to shine a little light
on my point.

Romero arrived one Sunday to celebrate mass in Tierra Blanca, in the midst of those cotton fields, in the midst of those huge landholdings.

“Monseñor,” I told him, “our custom is to do the Bible readings of the day and then invite anyone who wants to comment on them to do so. At the end, the priest summarizes what everyone has said and adds or corrects according to what he believes.”

That Sunday, the Gospel reading was the one about the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. When it came time for the commentary, Juan Chicas asked to speak.

“This reading has helped me to understand that the boy who carried the five loaves and two fishes in his bag was the one who really obligated Christ to perform the miracle.”

When Monseñor heard the word, “obligated,” he interrupted.

“Young man, why do you think that anyone could obligate Christ to do anything. Christ was free!”

But Juan Chicas didn't allow himself to be intimidated. “I say that he was obligated because five loaves and two fish were nothing to the feed that whole crowd, but at the same time, they were all the body had. So they were both nothing and everything at the same time. That's the thing! So what happened? When the boy offered everything he had, Jesus could do no less. He had to do everything he could, too. And he could do miracles! So he did! There, I think I've unraveled it for you. Now you understand, don't you?”

Monseñor looked stared right at him and kept silent. Other people made comments. Finally it was his turn to close the sermon.

“I brought with me a long homily for this occasion,” he said, “but I won’t give it now. After listening to all of you, I can only repeat what Jesus said, “Thank you, Father, because you revealed the truth to the humble and kept it hidden from the learned.”

**A resurrected people root their work in
time and place.**

Jesus was concerned with *these* children, *in this place, at this* moment, not abstract children in some abstract place at some abstract moment. Jesus demonstrated as he held these particular children in his arms that we are called to pay attention to particular people in our particular contexts, too.

Romero, no doubt, was a theologian. He went to seminary in Rome. He loved systematics. He loved Christian theology. He loved ideas and concepts and he gave much of his life and education to learning more about them. But, Romero became a real pastor when those ideas found themselves fully in service to the time and place and the people in which he found himself.

As his friend and student Jon Sobrino later described it, “In the cathedral, Monseñor spoke to the people. They made up most of his audience, and he spoke mainly to them. Obviously he cared about “the country,” and “the church,” as well as “the political society, democracy.” But what moved him to speak, what inspired his words and guided his message, was above all the reality of the suffering, hope-filled, “people.” He called “the people” his teacher. He would say, “You and I together are preaching this homily.”

In 1979, before writing his Fourth Pastoral Letter, entitled, “The Mission of the Church in the Midst of the Crisis of My Country,” he sent a questionnaire to the communities, asking for their opinion about the country, the church, the basis contact of the Christian faith. Questions like: “What is the greatest sin of the country?” and “Who is Jesus Christ for you?” Then he took their answers seriously. In his next homily he said, “You and I together have written the Fourth Pastoral Letter.”

**A resurrected people understand their
lifelong need for conversion and
transformation.**

You may be gathering that I've been comparing Monseñor Romero to Jesus through much of this sermon. And for a commemoration like this one in which Romero's saintly life is rightly extolled as an example for us to follow, it makes sense to draw that comparison. It is a reminder to us that we are being called to be like Jesus with the one life we've been given to live.

But the reality is, for most of Romero's earthly life, his ministry didn't look much like the Jesus who took the children in his arms and blessed them. His ministry looked more like the disciples who rebuked Jesus for wasting time on them. And Romero would be the first one to agree with me about this.

For much of Romero's life, he ministered to wealthy landholders in El Salvador. He was friends with people who didn't concern themselves with the full humanity of the day-laborers and farmers who held up their wealth by the sweat on their brow. He baptized their babies and sat at their tables. He spoke in non-confrontational ways about agrarian land reform, wealth, and justice for the landless poor. He tried to stay out of the fray of politics. He tried to pastor the poor and serve the rich and hope that somehow, it would all work out in the end. But, then something happened that changed his life forever.

In 1977, one of Romero's dearest friends, Rutilio Grande, a priest struggling alongside the poor as they called for equitable land reform, was slaughtered by the Salvadoran state. Romero had just been named Archbishop of El Salvador, partly because, though he had great compassion for the poor, had mostly stayed out of movements that engaged the demands of the poor.

But he could not hold back any longer. He could stand on the sidelines as Jesus' disciples did chastising him for wasting time and resources on little children.

And so began a conversion of spirit, and energy, and resources.

We must never forget that even the most religious among us are desperate for conversion and transformation.

Bishop Romero spent much of his life as priest to the empire, and it wasn't until his conversion that he became a prophet of liberation.

Romero describes conversion this way:

“A genuine Christian conversion today must discover the social mechanisms that make marginalized persons of the worker or *campesino*. Why do the poor, the *campesinos* only have an income during the time when coffee, sugarcane and coffee are being harvested? Why does our society need to have *campesinos* unemployed, workers underpaid and people who do not receive a just salary?”

“These mechanisms ought to be analyzed not only by sociologists and economists **but also by Christians** so that they do not become accomplices in a system that continues to create more people who are poor and marginalized and destitute. Only through this path of conversion can we find true peace in justice.”

**A resurrected people see beauty where
the world only sees problems.**

Jesus actually saw these little ones as more important than any idea, conversation, institution, or policy. Romero began to realize this. That the poor weren't a topic for discussion, or a problem to figure out. The poor, the day-laborers, the strugglers, and the dreamers...they were...they are the beautiful image-bearers of God. They demand our collective attention and imagination not to absolve our collective guilt and failure...but to save us from ourselves.

Romero described it like this, “There is no dichotomy between man and God’s image. Whoever tortures a human being, whoever abuses a human being, whoever outrages a human being abuses God’s image, and the church takes as its own that cross, that martyrdom.”

**A few days before he died, Romero said,
“If they kill me, I will rise in the Salvadoran
people.”**

Jon Sobrino writes: “Archbishop Romero is present, very present. He is risen, very much risen, among the Salvadoran people, as in so many other places on this earth. His current presence, surely, like Jesus’ presence, is a two-edged sword dividing the human race in two. That presence brings to light both the evil deeds of the oppressor and the good words of those who go in quest of justice and peace. It is hope for the poor and threat to the mighty.”

“There are those today who still fear Archbishop Romero—in the government, in the armed forces, in the oligarchy, and even in the hierarchy [of the church.] They would like to forget him, reduce him to silence, bury his spirit along with his body. Then there are those who praise him today as a saint and prophet of the past, but who would like to bury him in the past to still the echoes of his voice.”

“If we wonder why Archbishop Romero is so alive and present—if we ask ourselves the secret of this person, this Christian, this archbishop—I should like to sum them all up--in a twin assertion.

Romero was a person of this world, and he was a person of God. He saw and loved this world with the yes and heart of God, he learned to know and love God from out of the hopes and anguish of this world. He brought God to this world and brought this world to God.”

Thank you, God for Oscar Romero.

Thank you God, for the wisdom of the poor.

Thank you God, for the possibility of conversion.

Thank you God, for your willingness to save us.

Thank you God, for a resurrected people. Amen.

