Thanking God for Conflict
Lessons from Oscar Romero on Faithfulness in a Polarized Society

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In 2013, I was one of a group of scholars from the US who visited Brazil to learn about efforts to end contemporary slavery there. Some of us, under the guidance of Br. Xavier Plassat, spent a few days in the state of Piaui visiting with activists. Over lunch the first day, the local leader, Lucia, introduced us to their work: the struggle to raise consciousness among landless workers about their rights, to educate them about tricks that could be used to trap them in slavery, and to support those who had been enslaved as they struggled for recognition and just compensation. One of us asked if they got much support from the church locally, and Lucia answered, "Not that much." Why not? She hesitated, thinking, and then said, "They don't like conflict."

They don't like conflict.

I don't like conflict. Getting into a fight means I might lose. I might be exposed as ignorant or hypocritical. I might win and then have to take responsibility for putting the position I held into practice. I might just have to spend ages arguing around and around the same point again. It takes so much time. For those who have the option to avoid a fight, there's always a reason to prefer to lay low.

Christian communities can be particularly prone to avoiding conflict. People often come to faith looking for something eternal as a counter to the restless emptiness of consumer culture, for some stillness in the frantic pace of digital life. We want to encounter

that beauty that will save the world. We want to be a community of mutual love and support. We don't like to have conflict interrupt and complicate any of this, whether the conflict is about whether we can witness marriages of two men, about how (or whether) we will vote or about which musical styles we'll use in worship.

It's amazing how often Christians who gaze on the image of the Crucified manage to sidestep the centrality of conflict in the life of Christ, as though the Prince of Peace were not the same man whose teachings antagonized powerful leaders and whose actions provoked controversies that those in authority tried to resolve by having him executed.

On the other hand, sometimes people, and even people like me who are usually conflict-avoiders, fall in love with conflict. Christopher Hedges, in *War Is a Force that Gives Us Meaning,*[1] captured the appeal: We find life in the fight, because it gives us purpose. Our life is no longer just one day after another, but a blaze of glory, an adrenaline rush, a righteous struggle against a clear evil. We sacrifice ourselves for a noble cause, and losing ourselves in that we feel that at last our life is about something bigger than paying the bills. Peace, by contrast, seems banal.

Thomas Becket's last, worst temptation in *Murder in the Cathedral* was to seek out martyrdom: "to do the right deed, for the wrong reason."

FAITHFUL CONFLICT?

The peace of Christ is not a passive-aggressive avoidance of conflict, and the weapons of the spirit are not instruments of arrogance and hatred. But how will Christians practice conflict as faithful disciples?

St. Oscar Romero, archbishop of San Salvador from 1977 until his assassination in 1980[2], knew about conflict. In fact, he

1. (New York: Public Affairs, 2002).

2. Many people know Romero best from the Paulist Press film starring Raul Julia. The film makes use of some poetic license but captures much of

should be the patron saint for those engaged in conflict. After a lifetime of struggle with his temper, in the crucible of his years as archbishop, when the long-standing structural violence of El Salvador was breaking out into open violence against anyone who stood with the people, including the church, he did conflict very well. He understood that being Church in the midst of social injustice means entering conflict, getting into the fight, and staying in it.

In the face of caustic public debate in the United States, many faithful people are torn between an urge to promote mutual understanding and an urge to stand without compromise against injustice and falsehood. Our church is caught between the calling to fight for justice and the calling to meet the transcendent in stillness. Our congregations need more than ever to be signs of mutual love and at the same time sites of costly truth telling. St. Oscar Romero's ministry and martyrdom show us a way forward.

Although Oscar Romero was by temperament a bit shy and introverted, according to theologian Ana Maria Pineda[3], he had a hot temper. His journals show that he prayed throughout his life about his anger and he resolved repeatedly to get it under control. It wasn't just an issue in his private relationships. Before he was made archbishop, when he served as editor of a diocesan paper, Romero led a polemical charge against Jesuit educators who he claimed were promoting not Christian teaching but—under the guise of Christianity—a merely temporal, natural, political agenda, a form of Marxism. An investigation proved the charges to be false, so his bishop demanded that Romero print the results

the truth about those years. Its major failing is that it overstates the extent to which Romero's views changed abruptly at the beginning of his tenure as Archbishop, missing the importance of his years as a rural pastor. John Sacret Young, *Romero*. Directed by John Duigan. Worcester, Pa.: Distributed by Vision Video, 2009. (originally filmed 1989)

3. This insight is drawn from her keynote address titled, "Oscar Romero: Social Justice, its Call and its Cost," March 24, 2017, during the University of Notre Dame's Center for Social Concerns conference on *Populorum Progressio*.

of the investigation. Romero published it . . . on the last page of the paper, and including in the same edition an article that criticized the investigators for a lack of faithfulness to the church.[4] He was a scrappy fighter, defending Christianity from anyone who might reduce it to a tool for temporal struggle.

Romero never stopped struggling with his temper, and he never stopped preaching about the supernatural identity of the church. Even in his last years, he regularly reminded his flock of the need for prayer and sacraments, for faith that reaches beyond politics. But as is commonly noted, he did come to a new understanding of the faith, so that as archbishop, his preaching became resolutely committed to the need to address "not the soul at the hour of death, but the person living in history."[5]

> God in Christ dwells near at hand to us. Christ has given us a guideline: 'I was hungry and you gave me to eat.' Where someone is hungry, there is Christ near at hand. . . . If we could see that Christ is the needy one, the torture victim, the prisoner, the murder victim, and in each human figure so shamefully thrown by our roadsides could see Christ himself cast aside, we would pick him up like a medal of gold to be kissed lovingly. . . . How far people are today—especially those who torture and kill and value their investments more than human beings—from realizing that all the earth's wealth is good for nothing, worthless, compared to a human being. That person is Christ and in the person viewed and treated with faith, we look on Christ the Lord. . . . To try to reveal Christ is our great pastoral task. If I speak of earthly matters or political questions, it is to guide our reflection towards Christ.[6]

Romero did not leave God behind when he became a prophetic defender of the lives of his people. For Christians, reflection on the eternal work of grace is a way of seeing what is true all

4. James R. Brockman, *Romero: A Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 48.

5. Oscar Romero, *The Violence of Love*. Compiled and translated by James R. Brockman, S.J. (Farmington, PA: The Plough Publishing House, 1998), 4.

6. Romero, 202-03.

around us, not an escape into fantasy or dream about the future. Some may refer to this as "the transcendent" or the "supernatural." In Christian theology, it is not theory; it is reality.

That may sound surprising. Many people I know assume that a theological predisposition toward grace or worship or the soul goes hand in hand with an aversion to political controversy, as though "spiritual" people are less likely to challenge the status quo. Many Christians, even, imagine that the spiritual is about the immaterial, which is the interior and private and insofar as that focus is best served by a politically passive position, people who talk seriously about grace will end up serving the status quo. A cleric concerned to protect the church's transcendent calling will, to this way of thinking, tend to be uninvolved in social conflict and at least tacitly the friend of those currently in power. Preaching concerned with the divine and the soul will necessarily be vague and general, theoretical, or focused on private devotion.

Romero understood that if Christianity means anything, it means that God has become incarnate in human history, and therefore that Christians encounter the source and end of all, their Lord, where they are: in Galilee, in El Paisnal, in Anapu, in Dayton, Ohio.

> It is very easy to be servants of the word without disturbing the world; a very spiritualized word, a word without any commitment to history. . . . What starts conflicts and persecutions, what marks the genuine church, is the word that, burning like the word of the prophets, proclaims and accuses: proclaims to the people of God wonders to be believed and venerated, and accuses of sin those who oppose God's reign, so that they may tear that sin out of their hearts, out of their societies, out of their laws, out of the structures that oppress, that imprison, that violate the rights of God and of humanity."[7]

The word that marks the genuine church, he says, is first the proclamation of wonder: creation is made for peace and the humans discarded like garbage are Christ himself. God is with us.

7. Romero, 18.

The kingdom of God is at hand. Alongside that proclamation of wonder comes the accusation of sin. "A preaching that does not point out sin is not the preaching of the gospel. A preaching that makes sinners feel good, so that they become entrenched in their sinful state, betrays the gospel's call. Naturally, such preaching must meet conflict, must spoil what is miscalled prestige, must disturb, must be persecuted. It cannot get along with the powers of darkness and sin."[8]

A commitment to be faithful to the spiritual truth of Christianity demanded that Romero confront falsehood, sin, and callous complacency, and confront it in unmistakable terms, for the sake of bringing about conversion.

OBEDIENCE AND ENCOUNTER

One of the notes of Romero's spiritual practice of conflict is attentive listening with "a conscience docile to the word of truth that demands conversion."[9] The Benedictine tradition calls that "obedience," the habit of listening and allowing oneself to be changed. Romero asked it of those who listened to him, and he practiced it continually himself. He often pointed out that he was only preaching as best he could the word that had been entrusted to him. He heard that word not only in the teaching of the church as represented by popes, but also from his own clergy and from the crucified people of El Salvador. He met at length and repeatedly with clergy and with the people of his diocese, to listen and to test his understanding against their faithful witness. The transcendent word of God has taken up residence among the faithful: that is the supernatural identity of the church. Romero listened and allowed himself to be changed.

The people did change him. In the summer of 1977, only a few months into his ministry as archbishop, Romero wrote a confidential letter to the prefect of the Congregation of Bishops in

8. Romero, 32.

9. Romero, 43.

Rome, in which he discussed a particularly difficult conflict: that between himself and the papal nuncio, who had been his close ally in the past but who had become a bitter opponent. In spite of his support among clergy and laity, Romero had met in the Vatican's representative constant opposition to his efforts to speak truthfully about abuses committed by the powerful. He wrote, "On analyzing this strange attitude of his, I have concluded that he lives at a great distance from the problems of our clergy and of humble people and that with him what has most weight are the reports of Cardinal Casariego [then archbishop of Guatemala], of the politicians, of the diplomats, and of the moneyed class of the elegant neighborhoods."[10]

When he did it well, St. Oscar Romero entered into conflict not as an act of self-assertion but as a duty arising from his listening to the people of God, in whose lives and deaths he met again and again Christ himself.

At the heart of his entering into conflict was his readiness to encounter others. We can use conflict to avoid meeting someone else. We can fight as a way to create greater distance. That's part of the appeal Chris Hedges describes: when we are at war (literal or figurative), we create a clear boundary between friend and foe. But Romero's confrontational preaching grew from and, he always hoped, led to greater encounter, including with those he most criticized. He argued and struggled because he was growing closer to his enemies, and he argued in way that tried to draw them closer to him. "It gives me . . . pleasure that my enemies listen to me. I know that the reason they listen to me is that I bear them a message of love. I don't hate them. I don't want revenge. I wish them no harm. I beg them to be converted, to come to be happy with the happiness that you [the congregation] have."[11] That call, spoken in love, perhaps especially when it is spoken in love, could only be met by either repentance or by greater opposition.

10. Brockman, 73.

11. Romero, 28.

"There is conflict—God be blessed. When a sore spot is touched, there is conflict, there is pain."[12] "No one wants to have a sore spot touched, and therefore a society with so many sores twitches when someone has the courage to touch it and say: 'You have to treat that. You have to get rid of that.'"[13] For the sake of truthful encounter, in the hope of healing, Romero welcomed conflict and counted it a blessing.

Romero entered conflict because he was touching the wounds of his community. When one touches the wounds of humanity, the beloved of Christ, and all the more when one touches the wounds of the church, the Body of Christ, there one encounters God. The gospel of John tells us that Jesus commanded Thomas to touch the marks of the nails in his hands, to put his hand into the wound in his side. No vague reference to suffering here: put your hand in my side. And that is the path to Thomas' great cry of faith: "My Lord and my God."[14]

The grace of God is not above the fray.

THE CROSS AND CHRISTIAN HOPE: WE WALK IN DARKNESS, AND WE SING.

How does grace enter into the fray, when truth is denied and justice flaunted? The answer is the cross, as Oscar Romero's ministry and martyrdom display. "The shepherd does not want security while they give no security to his flock."[15] In conflict, Romero didn't try to establish his superiority or to destroy his opponents. He wasn't aiming to win. Rather, having listened and been changed, he spoke to those he continued to identify as family, a troubled and even

12. Romero, 26.

13. Romero, 30.

14. Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle spoke of John 20 in these terms in his keynote address, "Living out the Legacy of *Populorum Progressio* Today and Tomorrow," March 24, 2017, during the University of Notre Dame's Center for Social Concerns conference on *Populorum Progressio*.

15. Romero, 151.

murderous family, to struggle toward re-union. And he spoke to them directly and concretely. It's risky, getting into the struggle without a shield of anonymity—no lobbing grenades from behind a wall or ordering a drone strike from 20000 feet. This is hand-to-hand, and you get hurt. Romero was criticized, labeled a subversive, undermined and insulted, and finally killed. Entering into conflict and staying there was a long dying to self that for Romero, was fulfilled finally in his martyrdom.

But the most important element of Romero's blessed conflict is that death is not the last word. The gospel that made Romero see with such clarity the abomination of systemic injustice also allowed him to see with hope. Clearly everything is not fine. Everything will not be fine. We have seen the bodies. We have heard the blatant falsehoods and the more subtle rationalizations, entrenched so deeply that they have become platitudes. It would be easy to despair.

We've had enough of that. Romero preached, "The great need today is for Christians who are active and critical, who don't accept situations without analyzing them inwardly and deeply. . . . We want persons, like fruitful fig trees, who can say yes to justice and no to injustice, and can make use of the precious gift of life, regardless of the circumstances."[16]

That kind of vitality requires hope. We call hope a supernatural virtue because it is a propensity to act toward an end beyond nature, toward the heavenly banquet at which all may feast with the triune God who gives and receives love as the very source of our reality. Engaging in the conflict that follows when we touch the wounds of our society, without seeking the safety that is denied to others, is only possible because there is hope that the good news is in fact *good news*, and that our struggle leads to something more than a tactical victory. The peace we long for is not a fantasy; it is what lies at the heart of reality. God is not overcome by sin. Neither

16. Romero, 199-200.

is Oscar Romero and neither are we. But the sign of that peace in our world so broken by sin is the sign of the cross.

We cannot know, any more than Romero knew, that we are always right, that we will be safe, that history will remember us favorably. Recently, I met a religious sister from Vietnam, Sr. Kim Tran, who told me that they had a saying, "We walk in darkness, but as we walk, we sing." A few days later, I met Bishop Lazarris of Brazil, who repeated the same thought to me, having learned it from the Pastoral Land Commission of the Catholic Church in Brazil: "It is dark, but I sing." Grace is a weed that springs up everywhere, I tell you.

The promise of incarnate grace is that the God who is beyond our imaginations, beyond our aspirations, beyond our best efforts and our attempts to stake out once and for all the right position so that we can hold it against all comers — that God has taken up residence among humanity, not as a horizon of aspiration or an otherworldly consolation, but in the beloved brother and sister with whom we argue, even in the one who kills. As Romero preached, "He is not a distant God. Transcendent, yes, infinite, but a God close at hand here on earth."[17]

THE CONSOLATION OF THE GOSPEL IS NOT A VACATION FROM REALITY

A few years ago, I spoke with a Christian leader in Northern Ireland who told me that his congregations had to choose between being sites of consolation or sites of justice. I understand, as I expect you do: if the congregation began to explore the truth of their situation together, they would come into conflict. The flow of quiet comfort would be interrupted, and for people living in a society so plagued with hatred and division, the need for a place of quiet for recollection is not a trivial need. Romero himself said, "Blessed are they who enter often to speak alone with their God."[18]

17. Romero, 136.

18. Romero, 69.

But Romero challenges us to recognize that the gospel offers no consolation that exists outside of that truth-telling and struggle that is a dying to oneself. He also said, "Blessed are those who feel and live the crisis and who settle it with a commitment to our Lord."[19]

This is not a contradiction. There is, in fact, a consolation that comes with struggle. In the midst of dying to ourselves by engaging in conflict driven by love of others there we find a new intimacy with Christ. Romero (and how characteristic this is of the saints!) was not a dour, gloomy man, but one who delighted in his work, in his people, in his faith. "Those who lose their lives for my sake and for the gospel will find them." These confrontational words I've been reading to you were preached during mass, amid songs and silence and Eucharistic thanksgiving.

How small, how parochial we have let our imaginations of grace become. To avoid offending each other, we sidestep the truth, and then we wonder why the faith seems among us to be dead. The consolation of the gospel is not like an hour of TV after a workday or like a week at the beach, a little reprieve from reality. It is "new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17): what was broken beyond repair is redeemed, what was lost is found, and the world has turned. We come to church looking for a consolation too petty, too trivial, and we resist those voices, like Romero's, like Pope Francis's, which invite us to encounter in the wounds of the world, of others, and of ourselves, the presence of our joy. Christ promises us peace—a peace that surpasses all understanding.

Romero preached this hope that counters all despair, all bitterness, even as it stands with eyes open, with bruised body, in the heart of a sin-sick world.

> Let us sing a song of hope and be filled with cheerful spirit, knowing that this Christian life, which came to us with Christ through the Virgin Mary and takes on flesh in all believers, is the presence of God, who makes us a promise: No, brothers

19. Romero, 93.

> and sister, El Salvador need not always live like this. "I will tear off the veil of shame that covers it among all peoples. I will wipe away the tears" of all those mothers who no longer have tears for having wept so much over their children who are not found. . . . God's banquet will come; wait for the Lord's hour. Let us have faith; all this will pass away like a national nightmare and we shall awake to the Lord's great feast. Let us be filled with this hope.[20]

What are the conflicts your community is avoiding for the sake of a false peace? What conflicts is it grasping as a way of shutting other people out, drawing boundaries that eliminate the need to listen to challenge? The call into conflict is a call to follow Christ in patience with each other, in dying to self, and in hope of a new life. We have often done it badly, but that does not mean we cannot do it well. St. Oscar Romero can help us to see that the call to be a community of mutual love is also a call to engage in the hard spiritual work of good conflict, in confidence that the peace of Christ which surpasses understanding will hold us all.

20. Romero, 95-96.