

April 1, 2012 - Palm Sunday

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Isaiah 50:4-7; Psalm 22:8-9, 17-18, 19-20, 23-24; Philippians 2:6-11; Luke 22:14-23:56

Last week, March 24, marked the 32nd anniversary of the death of San Salvador Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero. It was always striking to me that Romero should have been killed by an assassin's bullet the Monday before Palm Sunday and that his funeral, which was interrupted by more bloodshed, should have occurred the Monday following—the doorway to Holy Week. Romero's commitment to peace was unmoved by the violence that continually threatened him in the last three years of his life. Instead, he echoed Christ's own response to violence, "Stop! No more of this!"

Oscar Romero was a quiet, soft-spoken man, "except when he was in the pulpit," recalls Franciscan Brother Octavio Durán, who was a seminarian in El Salvador at the time Romero was consecrated archbishop. Romero's homilies were long, bold, detailed teachings, rooted in Scripture and in the life of the "church of God" in El Salvador.

Week after week, he recalled by name the victims of the growing violence in the country. Though I did not know Romero, nor those who were killed, tortured or disappeared in the late 1970s, I used to listen to tapes of his homilies and pray with the litany of victims, until the tapes finally wore out. I understood this holy man to say that if we forget those who suffer violence at the hands of others, we run the risk of dismissing their humanity, our own, and that even of the perpetrators.

Having passed through his own mighty conversion, Romero constantly called the church to a change of heart. Shortly before his death, he told a reporter, "You can tell the people that if they succeed in killing me, I forgive and bless those who do it." Romero thus put into words the action of Jesus in the garden of his capture when Jesus raised his hand to heal and restore the ear of the high priest's servant, cut off by an overzealous disciple, whom Jesus corrected in that same motion.

In our day, we remain tempted by violence, whether as self-defense, self-indulgence or revenge. Today, armed conflict or all-out war rages in 20 countries around the world. There is violence in our homes, our neighborhoods and in our church and other houses of worship. There is violence in our language, music and art. The meek are considered weak and the brash bold.

Yet how much more courage and boldness does it take to both name the violence and victims in our lives, society and world and to forgive the perpetrators? Even in small, day-to-day conflicts we find this difficult. It is much easier to ignore or justify the event, sweep it under the emotional rug, or cathartically lash out at the wrongdoer with no real intention of evoking change.

Jesus models for us the way of peace when he identifies himself with the poor and those who suffer and calls persecutors to conversion through forgiveness. In Luke's gospel Jesus' lament over his abandonment by God is replaced by words of forgiveness for those who mock, beat and crucify him: "Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing."

The path he walks is made of love, humility and the healing grace of forgiveness. In the letter to the Philippians, Paul underscores this when, reciting a well-known hymn, tells how Jesus "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

Oscar Romero chose to follow Jesus and to accept the consequences of a life of service to the poor, a life that could be violently unpopular with the powers of the time. Yet, he did not respond to violence with a call for more violence but, rather, trusted in love. "I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced," as the prophet Isaiah says.

This same choice confronts us today.

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