

Archbishop Oscar Romero: A Disciple Who Revealed the Glory of God

Damian Zynda, University of Scranton Press, 2010, 238 pp.

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Archbishop Oscar Romero knew it was coming. He'd confided to several friends that he was afraid to die. But the threats had increased until he knew that his name was first on the list of those scheduled to be killed by the military of the rightist government of El Salvador.

On March 24, 1980, Romero was shot and killed while celebrating mass. Most of his fellow bishops did not come to his wake or funeral. Rome had just appointed an apostolic administrator for the archdiocese because Pope John Paul II had sided with the other bishops. They had feared that the archbishop's scolding of the government and the wealthy families was alienating the power structure in El Salvador from the Church. Romero had lamented the discord among the hierarchy. But he'd come to an understanding of "Church" that left him no choice but to take the side of the poor whom he saw as the persecuted brothers and sisters of Christ.

Author Zynda provides some biographical background. Oscar Romero's father wanted him to be a carpenter. But Oscar wanted to be a priest and his father relented. The future martyr was educated first by the Jesuits and then in Rome where he was ordained in 1942. The war interrupted his graduate studies there so he returned to El Salvador where he became the well-organized and compulsively hard-working secretary to the highly-disorganized ordinary of San Miguel.

After a stint as secretary-general of the Salvadoran National Bishop's Conference, he was made a bishop in 1970. He was appointed bishop of Santiago de Maria in 1974.

The genius of this book is not the biographical information. That's given in earlier biographies. Instead, Zynda has probed the man's psyche and soul. Frequent verbatim quotes from his *Spiritual Notebook* document insights into his spiritual life, his commitment to prayer and penitential practices, and his efforts to understand and cope with his scrupulosity and his obsessive-compulsive personality disorder (OCPD).

Romero was initially very much on the side of the oligarchy. He had friends among the wealthy "Fourteen Families" who controlled the economy and the government. He dismissed any idea that they were somehow behind the kidnappings and killings that were terrorizing the poor. He was seen by Rome as a "safe" choice as bishop.

But in fact, fearful that any insurgency would bring Communism to El Salvador, the government – backed by the United States – was sponsoring the terrorism being carried out by the military.

"Romero's myopia began to dissipate, however, when on June 21, 1975, the National Guard terrorized and massacred the villagers in Las Tres Calles, a small rural village in

his diocese.” (p.29) “Gradually exposed to life struggles from the perspective of the poor, Romero began to recognize the truth of the poverty, suffering, and repression around him, and the deeply Christian motives of so many of those struggling for a better world.” (p.31)

Romero was appointed archbishop of San Salvador in 1977. Less than a month later, Rutilio Grande, a very close Jesuit friend of Romero’s, was ambushed and murdered by the Salvadoran military. “Romero’s biographers agree that the death of Rutilio Grande was the singular event that crystallized Romero’s conversion.” (p.33)

“Oscar Romero came to recognize the poor, suffering Christ in the faces, lives, and circumstances of the people he called ‘my brothers and sisters’. His homilies, speeches, and pastoral letters indicate that he began to see Christ incarnate in the suffering poor.” (p.42)

For clues to the nature of Romero’s “conversion”, Zynda explores the theology of Irenaeus of Lyons from the second century. Irenaeus sees the uncreated Godhead (the Father) shaping creation and especially human persons with the two “hands” of Word and Wisdom. The Word becomes the Word made flesh in Jesus. His role is first to “recapitulate” or reestablish the relationship of humanity to God and then to “accustom” God and humanity to dealing with each other on these new terms.

The “Wisdom” hand refers to the Spirit who invites human persons to use the opportunity offered by Jesus to grow toward comfort with God, finding him in the “fleshiness” of their real-life experiences. “Arousing a desire for God and leading disciples through the mystery of fullness in Christ is the work of the Spirit who anoints, liberates, and deifies.” (p.55)

“Humans are created with a capacity to receive God and the freedom to respond or refrain from responding to the actuation of grace. The struggle that results from God’s unrestricted call of grace and our finite ability to respond is *the* central dynamic in the process of conversion.” (p.54)

The “real life” situation in which grace played out for Oscar Romero is where Zynda turns next. A victim of both scrupulosity and OCPD, Romero lived in fear of failure and sin. He compulsively drove himself to discipline, tightly scheduled prayer, and intractable score-keeping on himself. To outsiders he appeared as withdrawn, humorless, rigid, and demanding. He sought the help of psychology and, over time, used it to understand and cope with his disorders. “Grace touched the rawness of his personality and invited him to embrace his humanity, to accept uncertainty and unpredictability as part of life, and to relinquish absolute control of himself and others.” (p.93)

The change this effected was most obvious in the last three years of his life, the time from his appointment as archbishop of San Salvador. His rote-type prayer continued but his experience with the Ignatian-style prayer led him to a more personal relationship with Jesus. His opening up to take more risks led him to more trusting, intimate, even loving

relationships with friends. “Romero was beginning to understand that human relationships did not have to be framed in a hierarchical structure or exist for functional purposes. He was beginning to understand that mutual friendships were a natural part of adult relationships.” (p.86)

Particularly, his preaching now reflected the shift that this progress enabled. Romero’s heart broke for the campesinos murdered by the military and he became forceful and fearless in condemning those responsible. He saw the victims now as Christ suffering in the person of his people.

Next, Zynda traces Irenaeus’ three-step template for conversion through the experience of Archbishop Romero. It began with the young Romero’s strong desire to “be possessed by God.” This for him was the “prophetic” phase of seeking God. The “adoptive” step was in Romero’s discovery of a prayer style that allowed him a more intimate access to God. By the end of his life, he had reached to “paternal seeing of God” whom he found in his prayer, in his friends, in the campesinos who were his Church, and in his courageous faith in facing certain death.

Finally, the book suggests a paradigm for “conversion” based on the theology of Irenaeus as modeled by the life of Romero. It includes four dimensions. (1) Some form of contemplative prayer allows us to meet our loving God on an intimate level. (2) Communal prayer, especially in the liturgies of Word and Sacrament, opens us to the graces and needs of our co-pilgrims. (3) Asceticism arises from the self-discipline required to reach out to the needs and pain of others. (4) And discernment of spirits keeps us alert to the course-changes required to sustain us on a path to growth in the likeness of Jesus Christ.

This summary review doesn’t do the book justice. It would be a serious, profound, worthwhile read!