Resurrection in the People: Catholic Identity and Archbishop Romero

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Resurrection in the People: Catholic Identity and Archbishop Romero

As the Catholic Church continues to grow across the world, its function in different regions has evolved into various and occasionally opposing roles. Is it a relic of colonialism or a vehicle for social change and, more importantly, what does it mean to be Catholic? In the United States this has been a question of great interest in the past year both within and outside the Church. For non-Catholics, the priest sex scandals brought a sharp eye to notions of Catholic identity and commitments to that institution. For Catholics, issues like abortion and the support it is receiving from prominent Catholic politicians have brought Catholic identity under examination.

I have grown up in the suburban Catholic Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania amongst a relatively homogenous parish. Here, for many people being Catholic is going to Church on Sunday and participating in the Sacraments. A couple times a month trips are taken into downtown Pittsburgh to work at a soup kitchen and volunteer with Habitat for Humanity, but rarely is an ethical or theological conviction about these activities and their role in Catholic identity discussed or emphasized in the weekly Mass. As my interest in the work for social justice developed, the seemingly underemphasized component of this work within weekly Mass and amongst most of the parish concerned me.

I have met many other Catholics who shared a burning passion for social equality but it was not until a semester spent in southern India that I found a Church whose community was fundamentally based around theological convictions of social justice and the union of social work with Catholic identity. This community sparked a renewed vigor in my own Catholic identity and has helped me to refine and deepen my questions about Catholic identity within the United States. I have naturally become enamored with those Catholics who epitomize a Catholic identity that unifies the work for social justice with Catholicism, most particularly Archbishop Oscar Romero. Through studying his life and theology we may hope to learn something about Catholic identity that can be brought back to our own reflections on this identity in America.

Archbishop Romero, known as “Monsenor” to the El Salvadoran people,
came into power as the archbishop of San Salvador on February 22, 1977. Born in 1917 in San Miguel on the border of Honduras, Romero began studies with the Claretian Fathers when he was quite young. He became an ordained priest in 1942 and entered the Gregorian University in Rome the following year. Romero rose through the Catholic ranks until he became the auxiliary bishop to Luis Chavez in San Salvador. On October 15, 1974, he became the bishop of Santiago de Maria, a region that became a hotbed for tension between the aristocratic coffee growers and the indigenous rural proletariat.¹ When the archbishop position needed appointment in San Salvador, Romero was a likely choice for the conservative, oligarchy-tied church because of his history tied to traditional and conservative theology. For the peasants who faced oppression under the oligarchy, concern was grounded in Romero’s speeches against the “hate-filled christologies” of liberation theology, made just seven months prior to his appointment.² These were speeches against the Medellin theology, which articulates¹:

> We are on the threshold of a new epoch in the history of our continent. It appears to be a time full of zeal for full emancipation, of liberation from every form of servitude, of personal maturity, and of collective integration.” The church cannot be indifferent when faced with “a muted cry that pours from the throats of millions of men, asking their pastors for a liberation that reaches them from nowhere else.

Romero had shown no sympathy for such ideas, putting his faith in the function of the government and believing that the church should remain apolitical.

In modern El Salvador, the Popular Church is made up of those who abide to liberation theology, those who appeal to a charismatic style of worship, and many who have syncretized their native traditions to the guise of Catholicism. With the advent of Spanish colonialism and the ushering in of Catholicism, the Official Church has been associated with the hierarchical conquerors and rarely on the side of the indigenous people. At the time of Romero, those on best relations with the Vatican also sided with the current political order, which was supported by the United States and the oligarchy of fourteen families. For the peasant/indigenous farmer who was being forced from his land, the Official Church was often a symbol of alliance with the oligarchy and the ensuing oppression. The theology emerging from the Second Vatican Council (1963-1965), however, was used in conjunction with the council in Medellin (and later in Puebla, Mexico) to support the liberation theology that would radically
politiciize the Church to fight against the status quo. The new Archbishop Romero would be seen as one on good relations with Rome, one who felt comfortable with the more hierarchical pre-Vatican II church, and one who opposed the liberation theology of Medellin because of its politicization.

Descriptions of the early Romero state that he was a “lover of rules and clerical discipline, friend of liturgical laws, he was convinced that ‘the most important thing is prayer and personal conversion.”4 Placido Erdozain, a Salvadoran priest goes on to describe an incident of military intervention at the National University where people were demonstrating against the corruption of the government and raising concern over the unequal land distribution. Romero later confronted the Christian communities and accused the base communities of getting mixed up in politics and therefore losing their Christian identity.5 The church leaders in these communities saw this accusation as so serious that they questioned whether they should celebrate the Eucharist with him. Erdozain describes Romero as believing that the church was made up of “good rich” and “good poor” and he would put as much distance as possible between himself and the “bad rich” and “revolutionary poor”, which Erdozain states that so many parishes and hierarchs still do.6

A series of events led to Romero’s radical shift from these positions just weeks into his position as archbishop. His shift is not clearly understood because Romero never clearly articulated what brought about his change in consciousness; some saw it coming with the murder of Fr. Rutilio Grande7, while others witnessed it in a retreat where he began finding a new method to reach his theology. Attendees describe this transition8:

During the first days Romero escaped from us to his accustomed solitude. That was his experience of God. But little by little he joined our common search, participated in our study sessions, and came into personal contact with all of us.

The implications of this transition are that Romero began finding his experience with God socially. Where Romero used to be more accustomed to solitude and his own personal reflection, he began to see the face of God amongst the people he worked with and the poor whom he saw suffering. Everyone echoed this transformation, regardless of when or why they perceived this transformation; Romero began to find God in the people.

With this transformation, Romero began taking stands against the government, refusing to attend any inauguration or ceremony until the circumstances around the death of Fr. Rutilio Grande and other priests and laity was clarified.
The diocese in San Salvador was becoming a center of community and communion, reflecting the transformation of Romero’s understanding of God from the personal to the communal. Perhaps the best and most accessible way to understanding the theology that Romero began to adopt comes through a study of his four pastoral letters. These letters, written independently and coauthored with Bishop Rivera y Damas of Santiago de Maria, were reflections upon the role of the church and the government within the context of events in El Salvador.

Jon Sobrino finds four fundamental principles resonant throughout Romero’s writing that he feels guided Romero’s judgment. The first is that the church is to be a servant of the kingdom of God and not its equal. This means that the church must practice the love and justice characterized by the kingdom and be willing to work with any other person or group that works for a more just society, even if they are not explicitly Christian. The second point is that the kingdom is primarily intended for the poor. They are not to be the sole citizens of this kingdom, but they cannot be denied any part in working to establish the reign of justice and equality. The third principle Sobrino finds is that the church is to promote the values of justice and love both while the new society is being built up and when it is realized, a natural supplement to the first two points. Lastly, the fourth principle states that if the church impedes the development of the kingdom of God in any way it enters into a state of sin. Impedance cannot happen on personal or structural levels if the church is to remain a faithful servant. Each particular contextual instance must be evaluated in light of these criteria.

The first principle that drives Romero’s judgment finds ground in the theology of Vatican II and Medellin, which he found complementary to one another. His first pastoral letter states:

The Second Vatican Council made the paschal mystery the center of its reflections upon the church and its mission in the world. The council explains:

The wonderful works of God among the people of the Old Testament were but a prelude to the work of Christ the Lord in redeeming mankind and giving perfect glory to God. He achieved his task principally by the paschal mystery of his blessed passion, resurrection from the dead, and glorious ascension, whereby “dying, he destroyed our death and, rising, he restored our life.”

The emphasis of the paschal mystery and the focus on the promised work in redemption of mankind is what drives Romero’s liberation theology. In his third pastoral letter, Romero and Rivera y Damas articulate this purpose most
clearly, arguing that the priest’s primary purpose is to urge the faithful “to follow Jesus in implanting the kingdom of God on earth.” They go on to emphasize that this fulfillment can never be complete, but will always drive the unification of faith and justice.

The latter part of this first principle states that the church must cooperate with any group that wants to work for similar justice, even if they are not Christian. Romero defends this position with the traditional understanding of the church as a sacrament. As a “sacrament and sign,” Romero states that the church signifies and creates “a very closely knit union with God and...the unity of the whole human race.” If the church is not the kingdom of God, but is to work to create the kingdom of God and the unity of humanity, this unity must naturally come from all of those involved in humanity who wish to work for justice, including those outside of the Christian tradition. In the same light, Romero states the church will boldly denounce any injustice found in any organization because it is the church’s duty to thirst for justice just as stated at Medellin.

In the context of El Salvador, this primarily means working with Marxist groups who also work to achieve justice for the poor. Much like Romero’s early aversion to politicization of the church, the Official Church as well as the western international community has great reserves to adopt any Marxist ideas. The criticism was particularly sharp for such alignments because of U.S. involvement in the government and U.S. desire to protect economic interests in El Salvador. Pope John Paul II has great reserves to such ideology on account of his growing up in Poland. Romero responded to these concerns by again renouncing the politicization of the church. In his second pastoral letter, he states that the church’s interactions with politics should be lively because Christ’s message and activity is to be lively, but the church is never to engage in party politics. The church’s methods are to be only those that work for the kingdom of God, not under the guise of party politics. This method is in accordance with ideology outlined in Vatican II, which states, “While respecting the autonomy of politics, it (the church) will continue to maintain its own properly ecclesial character.”

The nature of Romero’s second fundamental principle, however, is economic. If the kingdom is primarily intended for the poor, to some extent the church that works for this kingdom inherently maintains a political and economic ideology. Jon Sobrino seems to tackle this challenge by describing how Romero did not idealize the poor. He finds that Romero had found a “locus...
where something fundamental about God may be learned,” which ultimately served as a guide to discover, for a particular time and place, the criteria necessary for building the kingdom of God. Sobrino goes on to state that this focus on the particular (in the poor) can work to overcome the often-meaningless generalization that “God can be found everywhere and in whatever manner.” The focus on the particular provides meaning to the identity and purpose of God, and consequently the church, which Sobrino argues, allows Romero to be truly impartial and find God everywhere. By seeing the experience of the poor as messengers for working towards God’s kingdom, Romero is free from being bound to the ideologies that the poor adopt if these ideologies are not working to accurately heal or describe the experience of the poor.

Romero’s third fundamental principle calls for the promotion of the values of the members of the kingdom, who as stated before, predominantly will be the poor, and that these values are to be catered to both in building the kingdom and in sustaining it. One may understand this in the same light as Sobrino’s understanding of Romero’s consideration of the poor as messengers for the construction of God’s kingdom. By retaining the values of the poor, the kingdom will be sustainable. Romero’s requirement for the poor to take their own action and to help deliver the instructions for ushering in God’s kingdom challenges some traditional hierarchical notions within the church. This challenge resonates with the theology of Vatican II, which warns the laity not to always think that pastors are the experts on every problem or that they can always give concrete solutions.

Romero’s fourth fundamental position states that the church will come into sin when it hinders the construction of God’s kingdom on either the personal or institutional level. This position is congruent with his first fundamental position that states the church is not the kingdom of God. If the kingdom is the promise of perfection and redemption, and the church is not this kingdom, the church is logically capable of sin. This point, particularly in light of the second fundamental position, is a radical departure from traditional Vatican thought because it empowers the poor laity to covet the core understanding of God’s kingdom, as opposed to the papal hierarchy. Many Catholics who adopt such ideas find theological support for this in the Second Vatican Council, which moves to empower the laity and acknowledge their opportunity for revelation and knowledge of God. The implications of such ideas are particularly heavy for Catholicism because such movements could render papal authority as limited and loyalty to the hierarchy as marginal.
Such challenges may be analyzed by the means in which the revelation and authority of the church has been shaped through history. If a linear perception of history is adopted, one may accept the traditional authority of the church and work within the structures of the Official Church, adapting these ideologies to one’s own historical context. This is the position of the Vatican, articulated through the theology of Karl Rahner, and illustrated in the rigidity of papal succession and the inability of a succeeding pope to directly contradict his predecessor for fear of challenging papal authority. A non-linear perception of history, evident in the theology of Hans Kung, may work to abstract an absolute truth throughout the history of the church and challenge certain constructions of church authority within its historical context against the absolute truth. When these constructions pervert this absolute truth, Kung calls for a reform. And so we ask, what was Romero’s perception of history?

Romero’s second pastoral letter articulates this perception. He begins by describing his early church understanding of history, which says that the history of humankind and the history of salvation run along parallel lines that meet in eternity.20 With this model, secular history becomes nothing more than a time of trial, culminating in salvation or condemnation. This description is a form of linear history, evident in the terms “parallel lines.” In this case, a clear dichotomy exists between the temporal and the eternal (where humankind may be understood as the temporal and salvation as the eternal) until the point of death. Romero goes on to state21:

The church has a different view of history nowadays. It is not mere opportunism or a desire to adapt itself to the world that brings it to think differently. It is because it has genuinely recovered the insight, which runs throughout the pages of the Bible, into what God is doing in human history. This is why it has to take that history very seriously. Vatican II certainly recalled the traditional understandings of the church as being on pilgrimage toward that “future and abiding city,” but added that the church at the same time reveals “in the world faithfully though darkly, the mystery of its Lord until, in the end, it will be manifested in full light.”

He compliments this statement later in the letter with the statement; “There is no dichotomy between the temporal and the eternal, between secular and religious, between the world and God, between history and the church.” The language used indicates a perception similar to Kung’s, where the perception has been recovered through insight into the liberation/redemption message promised throughout the Bible. Romero sees something new offered to the
perception of history in Vatican II, that the church reveals God in the world daily, destroying the dichotomy previously perceived between the temporal and eternal.

Romero’s new perception follows the non-linear Kungian theology, but goes on to explicitly focus on the interconnectedness of the secular and religious, world and God, and history and church. It is this emphasis that not only calls for reform of a deviance from time-transcendent absolute, but for a church that radically affects and transforms all of humanity within its social, political, and economic contexts. For Romero, this is the historical perspective of liberation theology, a compliment to the four fundamental principles shaping his pastoral letters.

Romero’s third pastoral letter provides an insight into the overall plan of this liberation, as the church should proclaim it. Liberation is to involve the entire person, spiritually as well as socially, and maintain an openness to “the absolute that is God.” A second point states that liberation is found in the work for the kingdom of God, which extends beyond religion and into the social and political. Even in these realms, liberation proclaims salvation in Jesus Christ, who teaches us about the nature of the kingdom in the first place. Romero’s third description of liberation is that it is based on a profound want for “justice in love,” which invites a spiritual identity a goal of salvation and life with God. Supplemental to this idea is Romero’s fourth point, which states that liberation “demands a conversion of heart and mind” and cannot remain something content with only structural change. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly to critics of liberation theology, Romero’s fifth point states that liberation excludes violence because it is unchristian and ineffective to preserving the dignity of other humans.

The first point targets the individual and emphasizes the necessity to remain open to “the absolute that is God.” In light of the discussion on perception of history, we find that this absolute may be understood as the promise of God’s kingdom and the necessity to work towards its construction. The need to remain free from sacrifice to demands of any strategy or tactic most likely refers to the need to remain independent from the Marxist ideologies that were often shared by those who adopted liberation theology. The second point pertains to this topic by stating that this does not mean the liberation should be alienated from the Marxists.

Romero is consistent in his refusal of assimilation to party politics, but his appreciation for Marxist social and economic analysis should not go unmen-
tioned. Erdozain sees this appreciation as one of five main points to Romero’s fourth and final pastoral letter. Romero’s second pastoral letter pointedly states that calling the church Marxist is accusing it of infidelity, because as asserted in the episcopal conferences, that insofar as Marxism is atheistic, it is incompatible with Christianity. Erdozain notes that the fourth pastoral letter argues, “Only a metaphysical materialistic Marxism is incompatible with the life of faith.” For those who wish to understand whether the church supports the general structures of capitalism, socialism, or communism, they are left in some ambiguity. In his second pastoral letter, Romero acknowledges this by stating:

The real problem, however, arises from the fact that alongside the traditional condemnation of Marxism the church now lays down a condemnation of the capitalist system as well. It is denounced as one version of practical materialism.

This leaves little structural guidance for the creation of the kingdom other than the complete devotion to the needs of the poor and a flourishing of their ethics. By remaining ambiguous, Romero is able to remain dynamic, timeless and honest to the changing needs of the poor.

Romero’s fourth characteristic of liberation echoes the necessity of remaining dynamic in the understanding of the Kingdom of God. Structural changes are not the only requisite because if they were, the new structural changes would inevitably fall to corruption and sin. Demands of merely structural change would result in an idolatrous Church because it would fail to account for the personal renewal and transformation that are promised by an acceptance of God into one’s heart. Liberation therefore calls upon these changes, and consequently, an embracing of the ambiguity of structure prescribed to the Kingdom of God.

The inevitable corruption of a liberation theology that seeks only structural reform concentrates on ends rather then the means such liberation may invoke. When structural reform is the primary goal, there is an under emphasis on personal accountability towards the means of achieving that goal. Romero encountered this threat when Marxist rebels used revolutionary violence to ascertain social reform. Because many of the Marxist rebels became great allies to the Popular Church through sharing a common cause, the issue of revolutionary violence became a difficult topic for Romero as well as many of the other Salvadoran priests to negotiate.

On the occasion of guerilla priest Ernesto Barrera’s death while engaging
in revolutionary violence, Romero had to make an active stance on his position about violence by deciding whether or not he to give the funeral rites. He ultimately decided to do so, but his purpose was seemingly not to condone Barrera’s actions. Romero’s fifth characteristic of liberation illustrates his disillusionment with violence as an affective means for ushering in God’s Kingdom. In his third pastoral letter, he states that hate and violence are not the Christian ideals, but instead “the strong and peaceful energy of constructive works.”

As pointed out by Placido, Romero articulates in his fourth pastoral letter that this is not to say that Christians are called to be completely pacifist, but that it is only violence that “intentionally kills innocent persons or is disproportionate in the short or long term to the positive effect that is intended.” Placido goes on to articulate that the violence that should be condemned is often institutional and systematic violence because it births other forms of violence. In this sense, we may understand Romero’s condemnation of violence which is orchestrated and planned, because it is that violence that consciously violates the dignity of people. Violence in self-defense or in the immediate defense of a powerless person can be justified so long as it works to preserve the positive and peaceful works that remain the general goal.

Romero’s radical move towards the theology of the Popular Church created great resentment of him by the ruling elites of El Salvador as well as the National Association of Private Enterprise (ANEP; Asociacion Nacional de la Empresa Privada), which controls nearly all of the flow of capital across Central America. Both the ANEP and the ruling elites launched million dollar campaigns to ruin the reputation of Romero, who because of his high-ranking position was most effective in mobilizing the Salvadoran people through the Church. The campaigns, which included the help of some conservative high-ranking clergy, included attacks through Rome, death threats, and pamphlets labeling him as a communist. Ultimately, the planning of these groups led to his assassination at the pulpit on March 24, 1980.

An analysis of the life and theology of Archbishop Romero helps to detail and contextualize the Popular Church. Consistent with the definition of the Popular Church, Romero came to embrace a social and politicized theology and emphasized his own Catholic identity through consistency with the theology of Vatican II. He also spoke out against the traditional Official Church identity that had become the historical norm for high-ranking clergy throughout El Salvador. For Romero, the Church should be a vehicle for ushering in
the Kingdom of God on earth, which is characterized by an alleviation of the problems associated with the experience of the poor. Romero calls upon the Catholic to see the face of God within the poor and to have a transformation of the heart and mind in this witness. This personal conversion must be complemented by a commitment to works of social change as characterized in Romero’s definitions of liberation.

For me, Romero has become a paradigm for how one can effectively grow and adapt his or her traditional Catholic identity to one that calls and moves the spirit in new and underdeveloped ways. His three year mission in the unforgiving struggle for social justice that culminated in his assassination mirrors the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ life in profoundly moving ways. As Romero grew into his role as Archbishop, he began to unify his personal and communitarian Catholic experience into a cohesive identity that nurtured and sustained itself, ultimately ushering in the liberation that Romero spoke of during his life.

I say “communitarian” Catholic experience because I see a distinction between the personal Catholic experience and the community experience. For me, the personal Catholic experience is independent from space and time. The personal is integrated with the mystical experience and often occurs independent of the surrounding world. For me, the personal Catholic experience is, in its most infant form, the recognition and engagement of the individual’s relationship to God. In my experience, the personal is the most natural predisposition. In turn, I find it the responsibility and challenge of the individual and the community to mature the personal experience. This maturation comes in the communitarian Catholicism by sharing in the Sacraments and developing the individual’s relationship with God through openness and dialogue within the community. Consequently, the most mature personal Catholic experience will be almost entirely in the communitarian Catholicism, as a person will have come to encounter God most readily in the relationships and sacraments he/she has and encounters within the world. As we continue to reflect upon what it means to be Catholic in the United States, we can hopefully learn from the model that Archbishop Romero has lived.
Notes:
5 Ibid. Pg. 6
6 Ibid. Pg. 6
9 Ibid. Pg. 23.
12 Ibid. Pg. 103.
13 Ibid. Pg. 66.
14 Ibid. Pg. 97.
15 Ibid. Pg. 78.
16 Ibid. Pg. 97.
18 Ibid. Pg. 28
20 Ibid. Pg. 67.
21 Ibid. Pg. 67.
22 Ibid. Pg. 98.
23 Ibid. Pg. 98.
24 Ibid. Pg. 98.
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29 Ibid. Pg. 106.
31 Ibid. Pg. 42.

**Works Cited**


