

Oscar Romero

(1917 - 1980)

2022 Conference
Christine Valladares



The social context of his significant life experience

El Salvador

- Marxism
Central America post Cuban Missile Crisis, post Che Guevara, Sandinista National Liberation Front in Nicaragua
- Poverty - 90% mestizos (mixed Spanish/Indigenous heritage). Most are campesinos - rural farmers earning less than \$2 a day. 2% of the population controlled 60% of the land. Calls for a land reform.



Religious context of his significant life experience

- 95% were Roman Catholic
- It was post Vatican II but the El Salvadoran Church still operated on the “Church Triumphant” model - Church and State aligned
- Bishops’ Conference aligned to the wealthy
- Post Medellin Conference (1968)



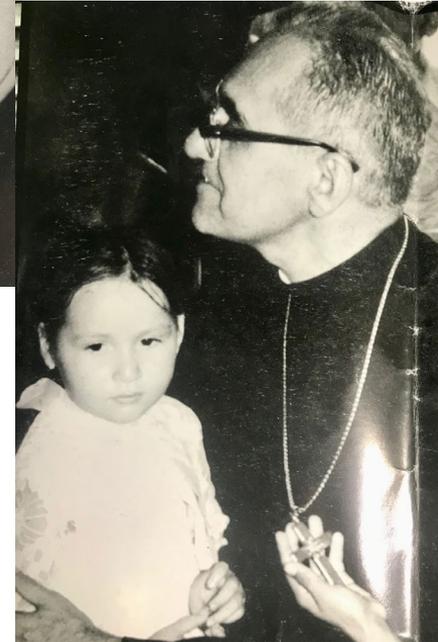
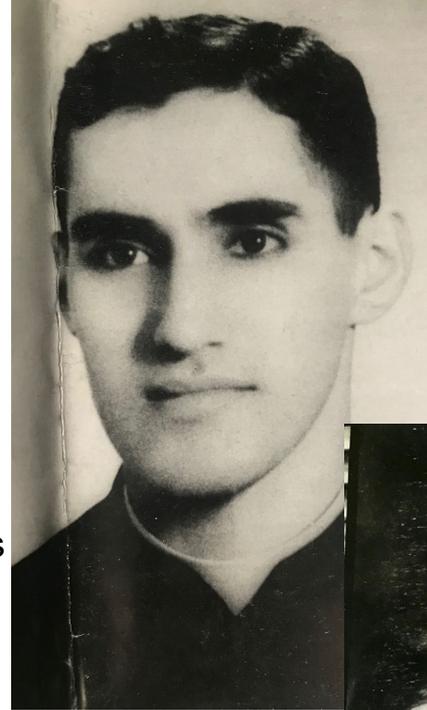
Cathedral of the Holy Saviour in San Salvador



National Palace San Salvador

Important dates in Romero's life

- Went to study for the priesthood (1931- 14 years old),
- 1932 La Matanza massacre - 2% of campesinos killed
- Sent to study in Rome (20 years old)
- Is ordained and returns to El Salvador (26 years old)
- Appointed to the San Miguel Archdiocese to assist the bishop where he works for 23 years
- The last seven years of those years he works as a diocesan bureaucrat in San Salvador. He is Secretary of the Bishops Conference for El Salvador. Director of the seminary. Director of the archdiocesan newspaper. Reports on the Medellin Conference in 1968.
- Is ordained auxiliary bishop of San Salvador(53 years old - 1970)
- Appointed Bishop of Santiago de Maria (1974)
- The army kills five people in the village of Tres Calles in his diocese
- He is appointed Archbishop of San Salvador (60 years old - 1977)
- Rutilio Grande is murdered (1977)
- Romero is killed (63 yrs old 1980)



Identifying the significant life experience.

The significant life experience may be a single event at a particular time or occur **over an extended period**, and has to be one that **informed, reinforced or changed the person's understanding and expression of the meaning of their religious beliefs.** (Study Design)

What did Romero say about this?

What do those who knew him say?

" 'Monseñor, they say you've been converted. Is it true?' I remember his answer well: I wouldn't say it's been a conversion, but an evolution', he replied" Cardinal Gregorio Rosa Chávez

"People have almost mechanically related Romero's conversion to the killing of Rutilio and the surrounding events. I think that's excessive. ... It wasn't ideas that changed [Romero]. It was reality. That's basic. When he was an auxiliary bishop in San Salvador, his contact with reality was limited by his job [secretary of the bishops' conference] and by the office he worked in. When he was in Santiago de María, at a time of repression, he drew near to the farmworkers in their suffering, their work, and their commitments as catechists, and all of that changed him. I think it's important to highlight that so as not to oversimplify his process of conversion. What happened to Rutilio was the culmination of a journey he had been on." Maria Lopez Vigil.

"an evolution of the same desire that I have always had to be faithful to what God asks of me; and if earlier I gave the impression of being more 'prudent' and more 'spiritual,' it was because I sincerely believed that in that way I responded to the Gospel, because the circumstances of my ministry were not as demanding as those when I became archbishop." (Romero)

I got up my courage and tried to get him to speak. *"Monseñor, you've changed ... What's happened?"*

"You know, Father Jerez, I ask myself that same question when I'm in prayer ... "

"And do you find an answer, Monseñor?"

"Some answers, yes ... It's just that we all have our roots, you know ... I was born into a poor family. I've suffered hunger. I know what it's like to work from the time you're a little kid ... When I went to seminary and started my studies, and they sent me to finish studying here in Rome, I spent years and years absorbed in my books, and I started to forget where I came from. I started creating another world. When I went back to El Salvador, they made me the bishop's secretary in San Miguel. I was a parish priest there for 23 years, but I was still buried in paperwork ... Then they sent me to Santiago de María, and I ran into extreme poverty again. Those children that were dying just because of the water they were drinking, those campesinos killing themselves in the harvests ... You know, Father, when a piece of charcoal has already been lit once, you don't have to blow on it much to get it to flame up again ... So yes, I changed. But I also came back home again." (Romero)

Significant life experiences: The period that encompassed Romero being made **bishop of Santiago de Maria ...** being made **Archbishop of San Salvador** and the **death of Rutilio Grande**



... the member's level of adherence to, understanding of and faith in, **relevant religious beliefs** and their engagement with the related expressions (Study Design)

Which beliefs to explore with Romero?

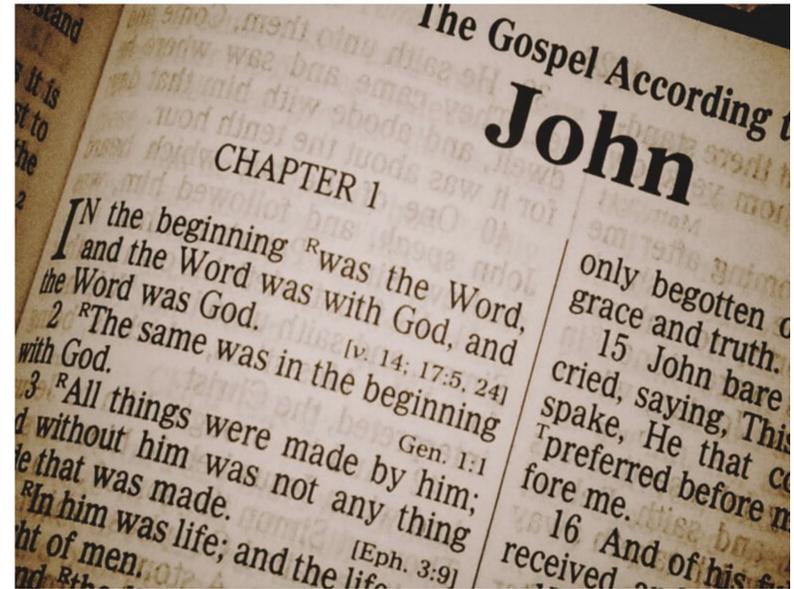
- **The Incarnation**
- The Reign of God
- Resurrection / Redemption / Salvation
- A loving and forgiving God



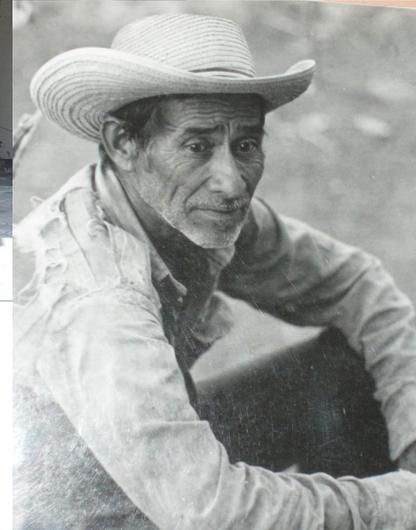
The belief in the incarnation of Christ

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” John 1:14

The incarnation is the divine nature of the second person of the Trinity in union with our human nature in the person of Jesus Christ who came in order to redeem us.

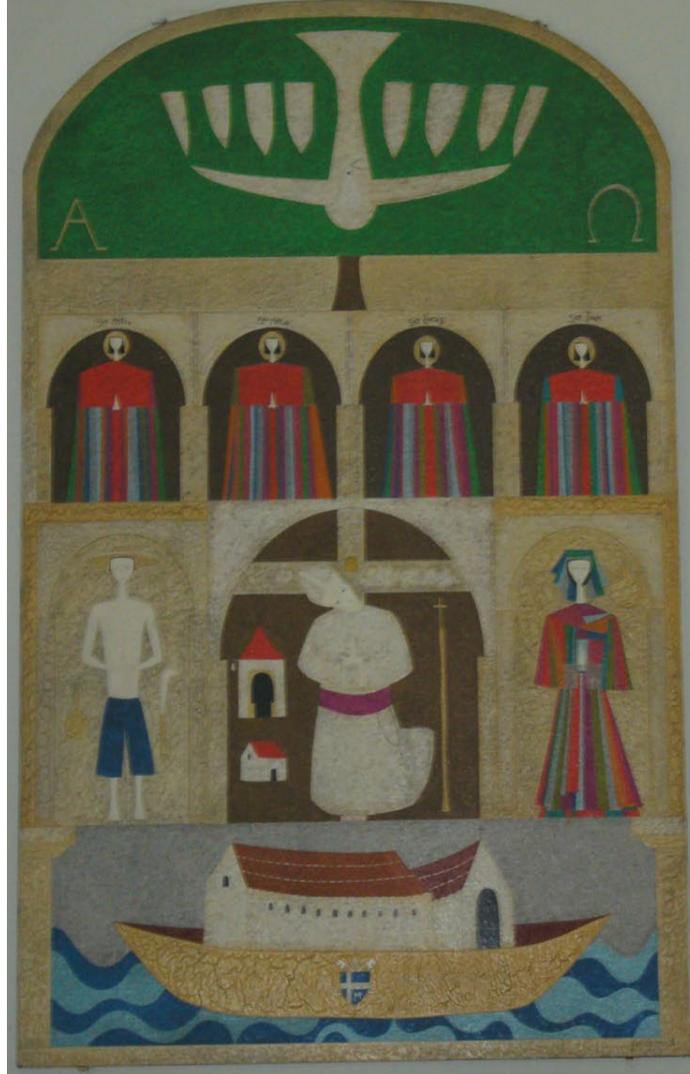


The Church as the Body of Christ - Church Triumphant or People of God



Artwork in
the
chapel at the
UCA
(University of
Central
America)

How is
Christ
incarnate in
the world of
Latin
America in
the 1960s /
70s/ 80s?



Romero's adherence to, understanding of and faith in and expression of the belief in the incarnation **BEFORE** his significant life experience.

At this point understood Christ as incarnated in the institutional Church which he taught was the body of Christ incarnated in the world (Neo-scholastic training - dualistic approach emphasizing obedience to Rome's authority)

This approach had been embedded in his training in Rome and in his admiration and respect for the papacy of Pius XI (1922 - 1939) to which he adhered.

- His love for the Church of Rome, shown by his episcopal motto, *"to be of one mind with the Church,"* a phrase he took from [St. Ignatius](#) (Brockman). He had "a deep fidelity to the institution and hierarchy of the Church unwavering devotion to its doctrines." (Walters)

- Expressed in his opposition to the theology of the Medellin Conference which he believed lacked an understanding of the Gospel call to conversion and the sacrificial and spiritual salvation of Christ.



BEFORE CONT:

Romero as a student in Rome wrote of the role of the priest to be Christ in the world showing his understanding of this incarnation of Christ in the Church:

“This is your heritage, O priest: the cross. And this is your mission: to portion out the cross... to be a priest means to be with Christ, a crucified one who redeems and to be, with Christ, a risen one who apportions resurrection and life.”

In his years in San Salvador his view was affirmed that *“the priestly role centred on liturgy, devotions and sacraments”*. *The priest’s unique role was to minister to the spiritual needs of his parishioners, not to meddle in their material lives or get involved in politics.*” (Walters) The incarnated Christ was found through the Church in the sacraments.

He expressed this by using his authority in the social structure to scold those who supported base communities or challenged his support of the government. He said to the parish of Zacamil, *“I want to tell you that I don’t agree with the one-sided way in which you have been using your faith! You’re not doing pastoral work here at all. You’re doing political work! And you haven’t called me to a Mass. You’ve called me to a meeting of subversives!”*

BEFORE cont

In 1974 he wrote in an editorial for the Archdiocesan newsletter: *“ In the name of faith, those who have lost their faith have tried to struggle against faith. And this is very sad, truly sad. For our part, we have preferred to adhere to that which is certain, to cling with fear and trembling to the Rock of Peter ... instead of leaping like reckless and foolhardy acrobats to the speculations of the impudent thinkers of social movements of dubious origin.”*



Bishop of Santiago de Maria



Romero's adherence to, understanding of and faith in and expression of the belief in the incarnation DURING his significant life experience.

During this period his adherence to the Church's teachings on the incarnation were tested. He arrived in his diocese committed to the traditional understanding of the Church as the Body of Christ whose dogmas and doctrines needed to be followed faithfully. However,

- his appointment took him back to the diocese of his childhood in which most of the residents were campesinos living in poverty. It was the poorest region in El Salvador.
- Six campesinos were murdered and a priest kidnapped and beaten in a neighbouring area. Then five campesinos in his own diocese were hacked to death with machetes.

He wrote in a letter of protest to the President:

*... the way in which a "security force" had wrongfully acted, as if it had the right to mistreat and kill. ... [I went there] to console the families that had been attacked ... by a squad of National Guardsmen. On the way to their homes, I stopped to pray by the body of a still-unburied victim who had been shot in the head. His wife and mother were beside him, weeping. When I arrived at the houses that had been invaded by the armed forces, **it broke my heart to hear the bitter laments of the widows and orphans who, sobbing inconsolably,** told me about the attack. Romero*

During cont:

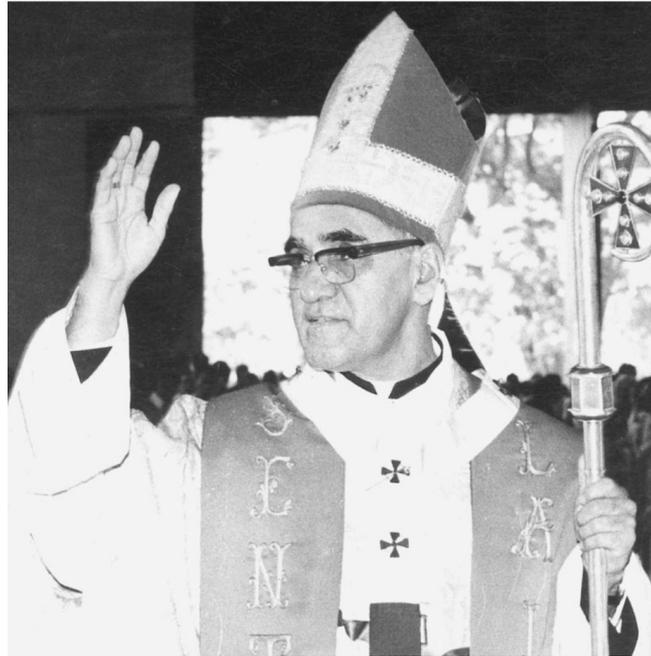
Nevertheless he remained steadfast in his opposition to the teachings of Medellin. It was in 1975 that Pope Paul VI, with whom Romero had already established a relationship, released *Evangelii Nuntiandi* which affirmed the value of base communities led by catechists as this would “strengthen the Body of Christ”.

Romero was invited to sit in on a Gospel discussion led by a campesino and was forced to recognise his snobbery in underestimating the wisdom of the poor.

Romero, who on his arrival in the diocese, condemned campesinos for using the cathedral as sanctuary from wealthy landholders; was within a year allowing them to move into schools and his own house.

At this time he was feeling conflicted. He at this point understood the plight of the poor, but he had a strong faith in the Roman view of respect for both Church and State. Conversion of the wealthy, he still believed, was the answer to the problems of El Salvador.

Romero becomes Archbishop of San Salvador (1977)



Romero's adherence to, understanding of and faith in and expression of the belief in the incarnation AFTER his significant life experience.



National
Guard Tres
Calles



Rutilio Grande, and his
two companions -
martyred



He spoke of the event of Grande's death and the "misa unica" as a time for "a change in attitude" ... "a development in self awareness"...that it awakened "a special pastoral fortaleza (strength)" ... "that God was calling me" to act in a way "that contrasted with my temperament and my conservative inclinations"... he had "a duty to take a positive stand to defend my Church and ... to stand with my greatly oppressed people."

His friend Fr Innocent Alas said, "he crossed the threshold. He went through the door. Because as you know there is baptism by water, and there is baptism by blood. But there is also baptism by the people." Romero was baptised in Christ by his people who he came to see as Christ incarnated. Romero said to the people , "You are the image of the divine victim 'pierced for our offences' ... You are Christ today, suffering in history".

"We not only read the Bible, we analyze it, we celebrate it, we incarnate it in our reality, we want to make it our life. Our goal is to incarnate the Word of God in our people." (Romero 1979)

Jon Sobrino described Romero as "a living Gospel, a piece of Good News to the world's poor." Sobrino also said of Romero's faith that he held "a profound faith in God ... For him to speak with God was something as straightforward and routine as life itself."

"The church will always exist as long as there is one baptised person. And that one baptised person who is left in the world is responsible before the world for holding aloft the banner of the Lord's truth and of his divine justice". (Romero)

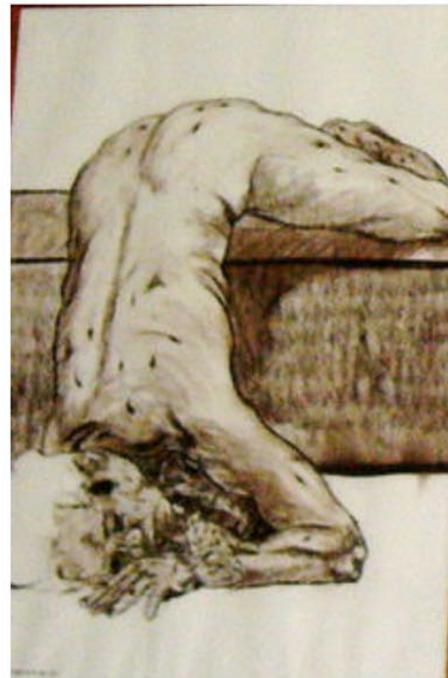
AFTER cont.

He moved to adhering to the teachings of Medellin and the preferential option for the poor instead of adhering to the dogma and doctrine of Rome. When scolded by the Vatican Secretariat of State for not applying the wisdom of Christ, he responded, “If he was so prudent, then why was he killed?”

The Church’s role is “to serve as Christ’s instrument in the redemption of the whole of humanity.”
(Romero) ... priests should “be the living testimony of a church incarnated in the problems of it’s people.”
(Romero)

“The church is not a fortress set apart from the city, it follows Jesus who lived, worked, battled and died in the midst of the city.” ... the old days of “ecclesiastical paternalism” must end. “The greatest sign of faith in a God of life is the witness of those who are ready to give up their own life.”

Christ incarnated in the people : The Stations of the Cross at the UCA



Overview

ADHERENCE TO THE BELIEF: Romero's adherence to the belief in the incarnation shifted during his significant life experience away from the neo-scholastic interpretation of the Christ being incarnated in the institutional church, to a pastoral acceptance of the Medellin teaching of Christ incarnated in the poor. In his time as Archbishop he increasingly used this belief as the basis for his actions in support of the poor and oppressed campesinos.

UNDERSTANDING OF THE BELIEF: His understanding of the belief that Christ is found in the teachings of the Church and in the sacramental life was firmly established in his early priesthood. His confidence in his authority as a priest, and his ownership of the scriptures, is evidence of his view that Christ was to be found in the hierarchical structure of the pre-Vatican II church. It was his introduction to the ability of the campesinos in the base communities to interpret the Gospel and make Christ real in their lives that shifted his understanding of the belief to one in which he began to find Christ teaching him through the poor. His understanding was informed by Medellin's "preferential option for the poor" and Paul VI *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.

FAITH IN THE BELIEF IN THE INCARNATION OF CHRIST: Throughout his priestly life witnesses attest to Romero's sincerity in his actions and his capacity for prayer. He was a deeply spiritual person who was open to Christ's message. It is the depth of his faith that changes as he moves towards what he knew would be a violent end. His words show that he saw this as he, and those suffering in El Salvador, taking on the suffering of Christ in the confidence that it would lead to redemption and resurrection.

- analyse the influence of the member's religious beliefs and related expressions on **their interpretation of the significant life experience** (STUDY DESIGN)

"When I looked at Rutilio lying there dead I thought, 'If they have killed him for doing what he did, then I too have to walk the same path.'" His words to the people of Aquilares at a mass after the death of Rutilio Grande were: "I want to ask for your prayers that I be faithful to this promise, that I will not abandon my people. Rather I will run with them all the risks that my ministry demands."

"To remain anchored in a non -evolving traditionalism, whether out of ignorance or selfishness, is to close one's eyes to what is meant by authentic Christian tradition... the church is not a museum of souvenirs."

"As a Christian I do not believe in death without resurrection. If they kill me I will rise again in the people of El Salvador. I am not boasting, I say it with the greatest humility. I am bound as a pastor, by a divine command to give my life for those whom I love, and that is all Salvadorans, even those who are going to kill me. If they manage to carry out their threats, from this moment I offer my blood for the redemption and resurrection of El Salvador."

"No one can extinguish the life that Christ resurrected. Not even death and hatred against Him and against His Church will be able to overcome it. Christ is the victor!"

The words of a Carmelite nun who was present when Romero was shot has said, "It were as though the Lord had spoken to him: 'I don't want you just to offer me bread. Now you are the victim, you are my offering.'"

"Romero's theology derives its power not just from its profundity or the eloquence ... but from his spirituality the way he lived his theological convictions." (Lee)

Base Christian Communities El Salvador today



Resources

<http://www.romerotrust.org.uk/>

<https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/archbishop-scar-romero-setting-record-straight>

Saint Oscar Romero: Pastor, Prophet, Martyr Kerry Walters

Revolutionary Saint: The Theological Legacy of Oscar Romero Michael E. Lee

The Violence of Love James Brockman

Oscar Romero: Love must win out Kevin Clarke

Monseñor Romero: Memories in Mosaic edited María López Vigil

