

- Topic: Oscar Romero as a Source for Public Theology  
Convener: J. Matthew Ashley, University of Notre Dame  
Moderator: Mary Catherine Hilkert, University of Notre Dame  
Presenters: Kevin Burke, Weston Jesuit School of Theology  
Margaret Pfeil, St. Joseph's University, Philadelphia  
J. Matthew Ashley, University of Notre Dame

The organizing thesis of this select group was that the life of Archbishop Oscar Romero continues to serve as a vital resource in our efforts to re-envision institutions, practices, and theology in the Catholic Church. After a brief slide presentation and a reading from one of Romero's homilies by Catherine Hilkert, the presenters argued this thesis from three different perspectives: ecclesiology, social ethics, and spirituality.

Kevin Burke's essay in fundamental ecclesiology used the ecclesial praxis of Oscar Romero to contrast "ecclesiology from above" with "ecclesiology from below." The former begins from authority, locates church order and ministry within a sacred hierarchical structure, and places the church above the world. The latter departs from human experience, finds the sources of ministry and ecclesial organization in the historical needs of the community, and speaks of the church and the world. These points of contrast provide a background for examining a category that often comes up in discussions of Oscar Romero: the theme of conversion. Romero's "conversion" after the death of his friend, Fr. Rutilio Grande, involved a change in social place. He began to think about the church from the reality of the poor. He began to exercise his episcopal ministry with an insight that comes from the perspective of the poor. Thus, he developed a practice of ecclesial authority "from below," but his practice introduces an important change in the meaning of "from below." It is no longer primarily noetic. We now have a historically concrete ecclesiology from the poor. While Romero's life witnesses to the practice of ecclesiology from below, his final Eucharist testifies eloquently to its cost.

Margaret Pfeil then presented a paper that explored Oscar Romero's contribution to magisterial discourse on social sin. It began with an overview of the rise of the language of social sin in Catholic social teaching and then examined Romero's own appropriation of and contribution to this evolving aspect of the tradition. Pfeil argued that Romero's contribution in this area was threefold. First, he provided a clear articulation of the path that ecclesial thinking on the social dimensions of sin had taken from Vatican II through 1979, thereby affirming its legitimacy as a developing aspect of the church's teaching. Secondly, and in a related way, he viewed his own pastoral letters as part of the traditioning process, and he used them to explore the boundaries of magisterial discourse on social sin. His work would resonate both at the Latin American bishops' general conference in Puebla and later at the 1983 Synod of Bishops. Finally, Romero allowed the language of social sin to challenge the institutional life of the church itself, in the hope that the church's

message of personal conversion and structural transformation would gain credibility through ecclesial witness.

Matthew Ashley followed with a paper that examined Oscar Romero's contribution to the practice of Christian spirituality. This contribution should be measured against the current fad for spirituality in North America, a fad which, however, is overly privatized. In contrast to this, Romero lived out a spirituality that was public and ecclesial and that sought to evangelize culture by prophetic denunciation and hopeful annunciation. To demonstrate the general thesis, Ashley took up the specific theme of "contemplation and action" and its cognate notion of "mysticism of everyday life." This is a very popular theme in North American spirituality for individuals overwhelmed or alienated by their lives and work, but it has little public power to critique or change the elements of culture that produce this alienation. Romero's contribution is a way of living this spirituality in a public-prophetic way that recapitulates essential elements of its classic articulations from the tradition. A brief overview of historical attempts to understand the relationship between prayer and action used the figures of Augustine, Gregory the Great, Eckhart, and Ignatius Loyola to disclose these elements. Then Ashley used Romero's practice as a Bishop and selections from his homilies to show how Romero offers a classical recapitulation of the spirituality of contemplation in action that not only shows profound continuity with the tradition but also responds to the specific needs of a world characterized by widespread injustice and inhumane suffering.

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