

THEOLOGICAL WITNESS OF ÓSCAR ROMERO—INTEREST GROUP

Convener: Todd Walatka, University of Notre Dame
Moderator: Leo Guardado, University of Notre Dame
Presenters: O. Ernesto Valiente, Boston College School of Theology and
Ministry
Ana María Pineda, Santa Clara University
Michael Lee, Fordham University

The first year of this interest group focused on the nature of Óscar Romero's theological reflection, the sources he draws upon, the contextual nature of his thought, and his relation to other forms of theology (particularly liberation theologies). It was structured as a panel discussion of Michael Lee's book, *Revolutionary Saint: The Theological Legacy of Óscar Romero*. Leo Guardado offered a brief summary of the book in terms of its key themes of conversion, discipleship, the option for the poor, and martyrdom, and emphasized Lee's careful attention to Romero's early life as a context for understanding his later theological legacy.

After praising Lee for avoiding the temptation of an idealized hagiography, O. Ernesto Valiente's paper engaged Lee's book in terms of the core themes of conversion and martyrdom. In terms of conversion, Valiente strongly endorsed Lee's account of Romero's so-called conversion, not as a pure break with the past, but rather as a "seeing anew" and as a "coming home." Such a vision of conversion, Valiente suggested, enables readers of Romero to recognize the way in which Romero's later witness is rooted in his earlier life while at the same time acknowledge the profound shift in Romero's thought in the 1970s, the beginnings of this shift during his time as bishop in Santiago de María (1974–77), and the importance of the death of Rutilio Grande as a catalyst in Romero's "conversion." Valiente then engaged the question of calling Romero a "martyr," particularly in terms of the traditional ecclesiastical requirement that one be killed *odium fidei* (in hatred of the faith). He praised Lee's expansion of *odium fidei* in terms of how this hatred could be expressed not only towards a persons' beliefs but also the works done by a person because of their faith. Valiente then pressed further and raised questions regarding whether an over reliance on the criterion of *odium fidei* puts a) too much focus on the motivation of the perpetrator rather than the witness of the victim b) and overlooks the millions of unnamed victims who die, not out of hatred for the faith, but rather out of callousness and indifference.

Ana María Pineda's response opened by noting the importance of Lee's book in the world of Romero studies. Many books have been written on Romero's life, his pastoral practice, and his spirituality, but little if anything has been published on the theological dimensions of his contributions to the Church. These theological dimensions, richly contextualized, are precisely what shine through in Lee's book. Pineda also focused in on the theme of Romero "coming home" and unpacked this by means of Romero's own reflections on his life: because of his involvement with the poor and their distress, such as he encountered early on in Santiago de Maria, Romero had found his way back to his childhood roots. Pineda also emphasized the need to understand Rutilio Grande's impact on Romero more fully. Though often described as close friends, only one or two letters from Romero are extant in the Grande archives. What is clear, regardless of how deep their earlier friendship may have been, was that *Romero* frequently and fondly remembered Grande and proclaimed Grande as a

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powerful witness to the Gospel in El Salvador. Finally, in reflecting on the theme of martyrdom, Pineda emphasized the need to participate in keeping the memory of the martyrs alive—otherwise they cease to witness—and connected this to the Latino custom of pronouncing the names of beloved dead and responding “Presente!”

Michael Lee’s response gratefully acknowledged the feedback from the Salvadoran theologians. He noted the importance of the three themes (conversion, discipleship, martyrdom) while framing them in terms of Romero’s move from neo-scholastic theological formation to his mature theology. In that respect, Romero serves as a kind of icon of developments in late twentieth-century Roman Catholic theology. His “conversion” demonstrates how the realization of social sin turns Catholic thinking and praxis from individualized, juridical categories to ones that account for social/global accountability. On discipleship, Romero shows the christological shift to Jesus’ ministry in the gospels as pivotal to understanding Jesus Christ. Finally, Romero’s thought and example of martyrdom push the criterion of *odium fidei* to account for the ways that Christians might be killed by self-professed Christians.

Lee concluded by claiming that Oscar Romero, in his person and theology, was one of the outstanding examples of how liberation theology has been incarnated. As such, his canonization offers an important opportunity to reassess this movement and its impact on global Catholicism today.

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