

THEOLOGICAL WITNESS OF OSCAR ROMERO – INTEREST GROUP

Topic: Theological Witness of Oscar Romero
Convener: Michael E. Lee, Fordham University
Moderator: Todd Walatka, University of Notre Dame
Presenters: Elizabeth O'Donnell Gandolfo, Wake Forest University Divinity School
Robert Lassalle-Klein, Holy Names University
John Thiede, S.J., Marquette University

The second year of this interest group focused on key themes in Oscar Romero's theological preaching and writing: his understanding of the church as the prophetic people of God, his view of the preferential option for the poor as the mystical encounter with God, and his commitment to resistance and transformation even in the midst of horrible violence.

Elizabeth O'Donnell Gandolfo's paper, "*El Pueblo es mi Profeta*: Monseñor Romero's Theology of the People of God" demonstrated how Romero's ecclesiology was indelibly tied to his understanding of and experience with the liberating presence of God in the midst of the violence and repression of his people. In order to understand Romero as a prophet, she claimed, one must recognize how the people functioned as a prophet to him. She began with the manner that Romero became aware of Christ's presence in the poor and suffering majorities, or "masses" of his country, which he named as the crucified people. Second, she noted how Romero saw the humanizing presence of God at work when these masses become a *pueblo*. Finally, she described how Romero recognized the conciliar image of the church as the "People of God" historicized in the *comunidades eclesiales de base*. They embodied each of the three dimensions of what it meant to be a people and served as a prophetic inspiration for Romero himself.

Robert Lassalle-Klein followed with his paper, "Bridge from Medellín to Pope Francis: Archbishop Oscar Romero." In it, he made the case for the episcopacy of Archbishop Oscar Romero and the pontificate of Pope Francis providing mutual hermeneutical keys for the authentic interpretation of their respective meaning for the world church. In his view, Francis provides the clearest episcopal expression to date of the universality of God's love expressed in the preferential option for the poor discerned by the Latin American bishops at Medellín and historicized in the episcopate of Archbishop Oscar Romero. In turn, Romero's mystical encounter with God through his love and defense of the poor and all who suffer clarifies the experience of God driving the spirituality found in Pope Francis' pastoral concern for migrants, the poor, and suffering families. Francis sees Romero as the model bishop for the world church of our times. Lassalle-Klein concluded with the notion that at the center of both Romero's and Francis' pastoral vision is the conviction that the reality of the poor and marginalized represents God's self-offer today.

John Thiede's paper, "Monseñor Romero: Prophet of Love, Resistance and Transformation" critically examined a selection of Oscar Romero's homilies with a focus on how he responded to the horrible violence in El Salvador. After a brief description of the escalating violence in El Salvador, the paper described Romero's prophetic preaching about that violence—and how Romero's response to violence

Interest Group: Theological Witness of Oscar Romero

imagines, through resistance and transformation, the possibility of a new world. Key to this transformative vision was the manner that Romero drew upon the magisterial CELAM documents from Medellín and Puebla. He drew from them an ecclesiology that prioritized the work of the church as community, liberation, and transformation. Thiede concluded with the claim that Romero's voice resonates today to inspire resistance and transformation, and his collegial leadership model can be applied to ecclesial and political problems in the United States as well.

The papers were followed by a dynamic discussion period that involved questions both about Romero's ministry as Archbishop and his ongoing legacy. Questions about how that legacy is passed on ranged from how he was presented in beatification and canonization ceremonies to how the current Archbishop of San Salvador has written pastoral letters on violence and on the environment with a prophetic voice—the latter demonstrating a deep resonance with Pope Francis as well. Clearly, Romero's legacy continues to be important for the global church.

MICHAEL E. LEE
Fordham University
Bronx, New York