

THEOLOGICAL WITNESS OF ÓSCAR ROMERO – INTEREST GROUP

Topic: Óscar Romero and Engaging Catholic Social Teaching Today
 Conveners: Todd Walatka, University of Notre Dame
 Moderator: Michael E. Lee, Fordham University
 Presenters: Rubén Rosario Rodríguez, Saint Louis University
 Todd Walatka, University of Notre Dame
 Respondent: O. Ernesto Valiente, Boston College School of Theology & Ministry

The third and final year of this interest group culminated with a panel that assessed how Óscar Romero’s legacy can address critical challenges facing the world and Church today. Entitled, “Óscar Romero and Engaging Catholic Social Teaching Today,” the panel focused on widening the discussion of Óscar Romero’s ministry and preaching with an ethical emphasis by exploring the role of Catholic Social Teaching in Romero’s thought and placing his views on violence in dialogue with US Black theology.

Rubén Rosario Rodríguez’s paper, “Rethinking Radical Nonviolence: Romero, Catholic Social Teaching, and Racism,” launched the discussion by engaging Romero’s work in dialogue with the Black theology of James Hal Cone. Rodríguez noted that while Romero’s pastoral letters assert that the only truly Christian response to political violence is nonviolence, there is also a defense of revolutionary violence as legitimate self-defense in the context of authoritarian repression. Turning to the US context, Rodríguez noted that Romero’s legacy has not always proven a comfortable conversation partner for Black liberation theology, given the latter’s embracing of revolutionary violence. Thus, he suggested Catholic Social Teaching (CST) as a way to have these viewpoints dialogue. Recognizing how Romero was indebted to CST on the role of legitimate liberating violence in his pastoral letters, Rodríguez explored Bryan Massingale’s interrogation of CST on racism to find many themes resonant in Cone’s theology. In the end, Rodríguez suggested that it is the context of oppression—economic and racial—that forms a common ground between Romero and Cone’s understandings of revolution as nuanced and complex responses to unrelenting violence.

Todd Walatka then analyzed how Catholic Social Teaching shaped Romero’s theological and pastoral vision and how Romero’s use of Catholic social teaching can speak to our own divided times. Though opponents accused Romero of meddling in politics, causing disunity in the church, succumbing to Marxism, and antagonizing many traditional allies of the institutional church, Romero defended himself by drawing on the Catholic Social Teaching tradition as it was expressed particularly at Vatican II and in the works of Paul VI. Nevertheless, one of the principal dangers of reading Romero in terms of CST is precisely a vision of him as someone who merely applies what Rome defines and teaches. Walatka posed an alternative where Romero is part of a distinctive Latin American tradition of CST exemplified by Medellín and Puebla. One of its most useful legacies for today is a distinctive emphasis of the treatment of human dignity that links dignity with agency/self-determination. The recognition of the human dignity of the oppressed does not just demand merciful action

on their behalf; it demands the creation of a society in which they can be artisans of their own destiny.

Ernesto Valiente concluded the session responding to the two papers. He complimented each author for their perceptive analysis of Romero's thought and particularly on its relation to Catholic Social Teaching. Valiente turned to expand on the historical circumstances that distanced Romero from his peers in the progressive movement of the Salvadoran Church in the early 1970's. As powerful as the narrative of Romero's "conversion" is, and it certainly represents both an embracing of Catholic Social Teaching and a step forward in its incarnation, Valiente noted that it came "too late" for a country that was headed for civil war. As much as he used his role as archbishop to avoid that tragedy, the historical structures and the repressive violence were obstacles he could not overcome.

The papers were followed by a lively discussion period that involved questions exploring more deeply the manner that Romero interpreted Catholic Social Teaching and how it was enriched by the example of his ministry in El Salvador. Questions also abounded about the relationship between Romero's reckoning with the colonial context in El Salvador and the US reckoning with the history and present reality of systemic racism. A particular point of discussion regarded the manner that Romero advocated for a church that is involved in politics while not engaging in partisan/party ideologies.

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