

5-2015

Oscar Romero and the Resurgence of Liberationist Thought

William David McCorkle
Clemson University

Follow this and additional works at: https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses

Recommended Citation

McCorkle, William David, "Oscar Romero and the Resurgence of Liberationist Thought" (2015). *All Theses*. 2104.
https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses/2104

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses at TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Theses by an authorized administrator of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact kokeefe@clemson.edu.

OSCAR ROMERO AND THE RESURGENCE OF LIBERATIONIST THOUGHT

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
History

by
William David McCorkle
December 2014

Accepted by:
Dr. Rachel Moore, Committee Chair
Dr. Rod Andrew
Dr. Vernon Burton

ABSTRACT

While the slain El Salvadorian archbishop, Oscar Romero, was not necessarily a liberation theologian, he embodied the teachings of liberation theology seen in the work of the Conference of Latin American Bishops and the writings of Gustavo Gutiérrez while also moderating some of the more radical interpretations of the theology. Despite the strong opposition to liberation theology from the Vatican and conservative church officials, Romero's life and legacy has helped keep the core ideas of the theology alive by serving as an example of a more peaceful version of liberationist thought. Because of his "martyrdom" and his subsequent iconic status throughout Latin America, the church could not simply dismiss his ideas. Though liberation theology seemed to wane in the years following the Cold War, Romero's legacy helped preserve its core ideas which in some aspects have seen a resurgence under the papacy of Pope Francis.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my wife, Raquel, who has supported me throughout my graduate studies and during the writing of this thesis. It is also dedicated to our daughter, Victoria, who was born this past year.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the faculty at Clemson University who were so crucial to this project. I would especially like to acknowledge Dr. Rachel Moore who always sought to encourage me to improve in my work and helped illuminate many issues within Latin American studies. I would also like to thank Dr. Rod Andrew who I had the privilege of taking three classes with at Clemson. He has helped me understand what it means to think as an historian. I also want to acknowledge Dr. Vernon Burton who has been an inspiration in his work and activism.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TITLE PAGE	i
ABSTRACT	ii
DEDICATION	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iv
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER	
I. THE RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL WORLD OF OSCAR ROMERO.....	16
II. ROMERO’S EVOLUTION AND ULTIMATE EMBRACE OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY	43
III. THE LEGACY OF OSCAR ROMERO AND HIS INFLUENCE ON LIBERATIONIST THOUGHT	69
BIBLIOGRAPHY	92

INTRODUCTION

In March of 2011, President Obama joined the El Salvadorian president, Mauricio Funes, in paying homage to the grave of the slain archbishop, Oscar Romero. Though many Americans may have been unaware of the irony or significance of Obama lighting a candle and paying remembrance to a slain saint, for the El Salvadorian community it was of great importance. It was giving credence and validity to a specific narrative of El Salvadorian history¹ that is tied to the larger themes of economic and societal justice and the core message of the Christian faith.

In the years since his death in 1980, Romero had become a hero and even a saint to many in El Salvador and throughout Latin America. He was revered as a man who went from largely supporting the interest of the powerful and wealthy to one who gave his life defending the rights of the poor and oppressed. He had become a champion of the liberationist ideals that were growing in Latin America while also rejecting the more violent aspects of the movement.

There was an irony to Obama's visit because Oscar Romero's murderers had been trained in the U.S. at the School of the Americas and were indirectly receiving U.S. aid to carry on their crusade against "communist agitators." Obama's recognition of Romero was a rejection of the whole narrative of El Salvadorian history told by men such as Romero's murderer, Roberto D'Aubuisson, who went on to lead the ultra right-wing party ARENA which had kept very strong relations with the U.S. government and ruled in El

¹ Interview with Robert White, February 27, 2014.

Salvador for two decades until 2009.² D'Aubuisson had created a narrative in which Romero had been part of a dangerous liberationist movement that had to be stopped. The military governments and right wing leaders had saved El Salvador from the threat of Communist ideology. Obama's visit gave recognition to the narrative of those who sought to follow in the footsteps of Romero.³ El Salvador's greatest problem was not radical priests but an oligarchical and violent government which maintained its rule by harsh repression. Romero and the other liberationist priests had spoken truth to those in power and had paid with their lives. However, their message helped spur change in El Salvador towards a more equal and just society.

Some criticized President Obama for not making a more open and drawn out apology for the U.S. actions in Latin America. However as Greg Grandin puts it, "by lighting a candle for Romero, Obama, it might be said, was tacitly doing in El Salvador what he wouldn't—or couldn't—do in Chile: apologize for US actions that resulted in horrific human tragedy."⁴ However, it is necessary to look beyond Obama to the changing attitudes towards Romero, and perhaps more importantly to the resurging appeal of the message of liberation he brought. This renewed interest in the message of Romero gave the U.S. president the freedom to openly honor a man who largely stood against U.S. foreign policy and actions in the region.

Oscar Romero was a critical figure in the lead-up to the civil war in El Salvador from 1980-1992. He began as largely a traditionalist who tended to support the power

² Greg Grandin, "Barack Obama, Oscar Romero and Structural Sin." *The Nation*. March 23, 2011.

³ Interview with Robert White, February 27, 2014.

⁴ Greg Grandin, "Barack Obama, Oscar Romero and Structural Sin." *The Nation*. March 23, 2011.

structure in El Salvador. When he first arose to the position of archbishop, the wealthy were overall very delighted because they saw him as one of their allies. However, as he began to spend more time with the poor and saw the suffering that they faced by the hands of the military dictatorship and the oligarchical economic structure, Romero's views began to change. He became an outspoken critic of many of the government's policies and the greed of the elite of El Salvador. At the same time, he met with rebel and leftist groups and encouraged them to resist in a peaceful and non-violent way. His prophetic voice ultimately cost him his life.

Romero's story unfolded against the backdrop of the rise of liberation theology which is essentially the idea that God sides especially with the poor and the oppressed. Though the ideas behind Liberation Theology are present in different strands throughout Christian history, it was really formalized as a doctrine by the Conference of Latin American Bishops in Medellin, Colombia in 1968 that called for "a preferential option for the poor."⁵ Essentially, they believed the church should stand with the poor and help them achieve not only their spiritual liberation but also their social, economic, and political liberation. Shortly afterwards, Gustavo Gutiérrez penned his work a *Theology of Liberation* which further expanded the philosophy and theology behind liberationist thought.⁶ In the late sixties and seventies, Liberation Theology began to spread throughout Latin America. However, it was interpreted in diverse and sometimes contrasting ways. Some took it as more of a spiritual direction for the church, while

⁵ Conference of Latin American Bishops, "Excerpts on Justice, Peace, and Poverty from the Final Document." *Medellin Convention*, September 6, 1968.

⁶ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, (Orbit Books: 1988).

others saw as a justification for violent rebellion against oppressive governments. It is hard to understand Romero's world without understanding the impact of Liberation Theology. The theology was not only radically challenging the power structure in El Salvador. It was also causing the church to reexamine its societal role. Though Romero at first was hesitant towards some of the goals of Liberation Theology, he ultimately became an icon of the movement and helped lead to its resurgence.

This thesis is not merely an outline of Romero's intriguing life. There have been many such works written. This work is about the relationship of Romero to liberationist thought and the role that he played in the resurgence of this theology in the church. Romero essentially embodied the teachings of Liberation Theology in both his message and his life, while at the same time moderating some of the more radical interpretations of the theology and making sure it stayed true to its spiritual roots. He presented a more peaceful version of the theology. In his death he became a type of icon and someone who the church could not easily dismiss. His life and death gave credence to the liberationist movement in Latin American and throughout the Catholic Church. It would be far too bold to say that Romero was the cause of a resurgence in liberationist thought. However, he certainly was a key element that helped spur changes in the Church. As a result of his life and even more importantly, his tragic death, a seed of change was planted in the church which in many ways is coming to fruition today.

It is important to make the distinction between "liberationist thought" and "liberation theology" in this thesis. Though the two are intricately related, as Robert White points out, the movement and language of liberation theology is in many ways a

historical event.⁷ The 1960s and 70s version of liberation theology has in many ways passed. However, the core “liberationist ideas” have remained and taken on new forms that are more applicable to the post-Cold War era.

For this thesis, Penny Lournex’s work *Cry of the People* (1980) was one of the most helpful secondary sources in setting the groundwork for the rise of Liberationist Theology in El Salvador and Latin America. She goes into great depth to explain the growth of the liberationist movement in the late 1960s and 1970s and the resistance it faced by conservative and dictatorial governments in Latin America. Lournex wrote the book right before Romero’s death, so it gives great insight into the thinking and movements of the church during the era. She frames the conflict in Latin America as that of right wing Latin American governments backed by an imperialistic United States against the growing movement of the church in Latin America. She presents the church in a more radical way with its overwhelming embrace of the theology.⁸

Her later work on Liberation Theology, *People of God* (1989) is more concerned with the conflict that Liberation Theology caused within the Catholic Church. She deals with the Catholic Church’s reaction to the spread of Liberation Theology in Latin America and to a smaller extent in the developed world. It also is a strong critique of the more conservative movement of the church under Pope John Paul II. While *Cry of the People* deals more with the interplay between the people’s movements and the governments in Latin America and the United States, *People of God* deals with the conflict surrounding Liberation Theology in the church, particularly the conflict which

⁷ Interview with Robert White, February 27, 2014.

⁸ Penny Lournex, *Cry of the People*, (Penguin Books: 1980).

arose between the Papacy and the third world church. It does not deal extensively with the life of Romero, but it does give more background to the spread and opposition to Liberation Theology in El Salvador and throughout Latin America as well as the impact of Romero's life on liberationist ideas. She frames the conflict as a decision between "two different visions of faith." One represents "the church of Caesar, powerful and rich" while the other represents "the church of Christ-loving, poor, and spiritually rich." She also makes it clear that the movement of the church represents "the most significant political development in the region in recent decades."⁹

The two sources that deal specifically with the life of Oscar Romero which were greatly valuable for this thesis were *Romero: A Life (1989)* by fellow Jesuit priest, James Brockman, and *Oscar Romero and the Communion of Saints (2010)* by Scott Wright. Brockman was the first author to write an extensive biography about Romero, and his work still remains one of the most authoritative. This work has a strong focus on Romero's transformation and spiritual ministry as someone both working for peace and striving for a more just society. Brockman states plainly that this work is about a man "who preferred to die rather than shirk what his conscience and heart told him he must do."¹⁰ Though it seeks to avoid pure hagiography, it does at times move in that direction. For the thesis, it is a valuable resource for its research on Romero's earlier life as well as a clearer understanding of the timeline of his life and ministry. It does not delve too deeply into Romero's actual relation with Liberation Theology, but it does give clear

⁹ Penny Lernoux, *People of God*, (Penguin Books: 1989), 1.

¹⁰ James R. Brockman, *Romero: A Life*, (Orbis Books: 1989), ix.

insights to the thinking of Romero on issues which could be greatly related to the theology.

In *Oscar Romero and the Communion of Saints*, Scott Wright gives a brief, yet powerful overview of Romero's life, ministry, and impact. This book primarily highlights the last four years of Romero's life as archbishop and the conversion in his political, religious, and economic thinking. The book in many could be labeled a hagiography with immense praise for the life of Romero, and as the very title suggests, an attempt to paint him as a saint. This book also looks to Romero's larger legacy. Wright believes that the life and martyrdom of Romero was "not only for his people, but also for the entire world. He showed us what it means to be fully human."¹¹

Some other helpful secondary sources include Chris Smith's work, *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement* (1996). The book focuses on a broad range of Catholic reaction to U.S. policy in Latin America and the spread of liberationist thought in first world nations, but there is valuable material which deals specifically with El Salvador and the impact that Romero had on peace activists, the Sanctuary Movement, and the overall effort for more societal justice. Smith points out the way in which Romero not only influenced but actually created activists in first world nations to carry on the ideals he preached.¹²

The final chapter also relies heavily on newspaper and magazine articles dealing with the aftermath of Romero's death, the spread of liberationist thought, and the

¹¹ Scott Wright, *Oscar Romero and the Communion of Saints*, (Orbis Books: 2009), 147.

¹² Christian Smith, *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement*, (University of Chicago Press: 1996), 149-150.

resurgence of liberationist thinking under Pope Francis. Another helpful source was Edward A. Lynch's "A Retreat from Liberation Theology" which gives a more critical perspective of the theology and details the arguments for many in the Catholic Church against the theology and the threats it poses from both a societal and spiritual level. Probably the most unique source for this thesis was my personal interview with the former U.S. ambassador to El Salvador during the Carter administration, Robert White. He personally knew Romero as well as other liberationist leaders such as Gutiérrez. He was able to give powerful insights into the life and more importantly, the impact of Romero in relation to Pope Francis, liberationist ideas, and church teaching.

The two most essential primary sources when dealing with the core ideas behind Liberation Theology was the work of the Latin American Bishops in Medellin, Colombia in 1968 and *A Theology of Liberation* by Gustavo Gutiérrez. Arguably, the most important event for the formation of Liberation Theology in Latin America was the meeting of the Latin American bishops in which they laid out the vision for the Latin American Catholic Church in regard to the political and economic rights of the people.¹³ The bishops wrote this document at a time of great struggle in Latin America when military dictatorships were abundant, and the movement of the workers and poor was often suppressed in the name of fighting Communism. As a result of this repression, many local priests and bishops started to reimagine the political and social ramifications of the Christian message. It was also inspired by the greater autonomy and focus on social justice which had been started by Vatican II and the papacies of Pope Paul IV and

¹³ Conference of Latin American Bishops, "Excerpts on Justice, Peace, and Poverty from the Final Document." *Medellin Convention*, September 6, 1968.

Pope John XXII.¹⁴ The document produced by the church gave a calculated yet strong defense of the poor and the church's role in working for the people's liberation. Though the word Liberation Theology is not used in the document, it became the source from which much of the teachings of the theology evolved. It was also the most authoritative work which most in the Catholic Church, including the more conservative papacy of John Paul II, acknowledged and at least formally embraced.

Shortly after the meeting in Medellin, Gustavo Gutiérrez wrote his work, *A Theology of Liberation*, where he offers a deeper theological and philosophical explanation and defense of Liberation Theology. Most of the work fits clearly into the teachings of the Medellin Conference though he does propose some slight variations and uses more Marxist language to describe the basis for the theology.¹⁵ Because of this work, Gutiérrez has often been called the "Father" or "Founder" of Liberation Theology¹⁶ even though the movement had really had begun before his famous work.

The first chapter examines both of these writings to more fully understand what the critical message of Liberation Theology was, especially when it relates to the issue of peace and revolution. On this issue, both documents deal with the common theme that there is a time for legitimate self-defense, but neither gives license to violent revolution. The Medellin Conference in particular strongly cautions against violence and speaks for the need of a peaceful resolution to oppression.¹⁷ Though there are other liberationist

¹⁴ Penny Lernoux, *People of God*, (Penguin Books: 1989), 21-25.

¹⁵ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, (Orbit Books: 1988).

¹⁶ John Hooper and Dan Collins, "Peru University in Vatican Battle over Right to Call Itself Catholic," *The Guardian*, October 28, 2012.

¹⁷ Conference of Latin American Bishops, "Excerpts on Justice, Peace, and Poverty from the Final Document." *Medellin Convention*, September 6, 1968, 16.

works, these would have been two that had the most impact on Romero's thinking as evidenced by his constant reference to the Medellin Conference and his personal relationship with Gutiérrez. They are also two of the most impactful and authoritative voices on the subject.

The two primary sources the thesis borrows from most extensively which relate to Romero's thinking and evolution on the ideas of liberation were his journal, *A Shepard's Diary*, and the collection of some of his most prominent sermons in *The Violence of Love*. These two sources give a rich understanding of Romero as it shows the public message he sent to the church but also the more personal thoughts and struggles that are apparent in his journal. These sources help illuminate Romero's support for the liberationist ideas but also his strong insistence on a peaceful path to a more just society. *A Shepard's Diary* is not meant to give one clear narrative. Sometimes, Romero seems even to contradict himself when he deals with the complexity of the situation that was occurring in El Salvador. Nevertheless, it helps portray a man who was torn between the desire for peace and a more equitable society, though he continually acknowledges the essentiality of both.¹⁸ In *The Violence of Love*, Romero deals with numerous themes related to the spiritual and social issues of El Salvador. Some of the sermons are clearly directed towards the wealthy disdain for the poor and the institutional violence, while others are a reprimand to the revolutionary violence and those who had forsaken the

¹⁸ Oscar Romero, *A Shepard's Diary*, (Novalis: 1993).

spiritual aspects of liberation. Since the sermons are taken from many different incidents and settings, they help paint a more complex portrayal of Romero.¹⁹

Two other important primary sources for the thesis were Jon Sobrino's *Companions of Jesus* (1990) and *Memories in Mosaic* (2013) which was edited by Maria Virgil. Sobrino is a liberation theologian who lived in El Salvador at the time of Romero's life and in the turmoil of the Civil War. The work explores the liberationist movement that had begun in El Salvador before Oscar Romero and continued after his death. Since he was personal friends with many of the priests who were killed, he gives deep insights into their lives and the motivations for their actions. Sobrino himself has published many other books related to Liberation Theology. However, for this thesis, his work is most helpful for tracing the rise of Liberation Theology in El Salvador before Romero and the impact his life had on the church.

Memories in Mosaics is a compilation of first-hand accounts of those living in El Salvador at the time of Romero's life and assassination. Most of the individuals were friends or close associates of Romero. This book details the different stages of Romero's ministry including his early years before many of his sermons were recorded or any journals were taken. This is one of the few sources of firsthand accounts from those who knew Romero personally. They offer deep insights about his transformation, personal struggles, and passion. It also offers perspectives that are often overlooked in his some of

¹⁹ Oscar Romero, *Violence of Love*, (Harper & Row: 1988).

the biographical works. It presents a more nuanced view from those who knew Romero in the different stages of his spiritual and political journey.²⁰

In The first chapter, the thesis explores the core ideas behind Liberation Theology as seen in the work of the Latin American Bishops and the writings of Gustavo Gutiérrez. There is special attention given to the themes of violence and revolution in these works. The chapter shows that while neither Gutiérrez nor the Latin American Bishops were completely pacifist, they did not give license to violent revolution. This first chapter is essential since it explores the primary principles behind the often misinterpreted teachings of Liberation Theology and sets the groundwork for Romero's relationship with the theology. This chapter also gives a broad overview of the role of the church in Latin American history and an exploration of how Liberation Theology had begun to spread in Latin America and particularly El Salvador prior to Oscar Romero.

The second chapter focuses more intently on the actual life and teachings of Oscar Romero in relation to the ideas of Liberation Theology. The goal is not to give a biography of Romero but rather show how his thinking and religious work evolved over time in relation to Liberation Theology. The thesis shows how Romero embodied the teachings of Liberation Theology while also moderating some of its radical interpretations and making sure that the theology stayed true to its spiritual roots.

The final chapter explores the impact of Romero's life and assassination. It details how Romero's legacy impacted the spread of Liberation Theology in El Salvador, Latin America, and ultimately throughout the world. Though there was much resistance in the

²⁰ María López Vigil, *Monseñor Romero: Memories in Mosaic*, (Orbis Books: 2013).

Catholic Church to the teachings of Liberation Theology, Romero served as an iconic and peaceful example of the theology which could not be easily dismissed. Because of Romero's legacy, the ideas of Liberation Theology have been able to make a steady resurgence in the church.

This resurgence became apparent twenty-three years after the assassination of Oscar Romero, when Jorge Mario Bergoglio became the new pope. Though many initially saw Pope Francis as a leader who would continue the conservative directions of the two previous papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI,²¹ he intrigued many in the Catholic Church and even those outside his church with the approach he took on controversial issues, particularly relating to economics and inequality.

One of Pope Francis' first acts was to open up the canonization of Oscar Romero which had been held up by the previous popes. Within the first few months of his leadership, he also invited Gustavo Gutiérrez, who the church had largely shunned, to have breakfast with him in the Vatican.²² Though on the surface these two events may seem somewhat trivial compared to the larger issues and pronouncements of the Catholic Church, they were deeply symbolic for those aware of the history of the Church and Liberation Theology. It showed an openness and even an embrace of an ideology had once been seen as dangerous and against Catholic orthodoxy. As Paul Valley from the

²¹ Emily Schmall and Larry Rohter, "A Conservative with a Common Touch," *New York Times*, March 13, 2013.

²² Harvey Cox, "Is Pope Francis the New Champion of Liberation Theology?" *The Nation*, December 18, 2013.

New York Times states, under Pope Francis “liberation theology is being brought in from the cold.”²³

The Pope’s new vision for the church regarding poverty and inequality help sheds light on the legacy of an individual whose impact is still reverberating in the modern world. In some ways, Romero has become a type of icon, a Gandhi or a Martin Luther King Jr., who people revere but also twist to fit their own political and social ideas. However, once one gets past the hagiography and the mythical elements given to Romero, there stands a man who was deeply complex, at times internally torn, but who went on to make not only a large impact in his country of El Salvador, but on the teaching and thinking of the worldwide church.

This thesis is not merely an outline about Romero’s intriguing life. There have been many such works written. This work is about the role that Romero played in the resurgence of liberationist thought in the church. A once conservative priest embodied the ideas of Liberation Theology while also moderating some of the more violent approaches to it. As a result of his life and even more importantly, his tragic death, a seed of change was planted in the church which in many ways is coming to fruition today. Romero life is intriguing to many because he was not primarily a political ideologue who used religion to justify his beliefs. He was a deeply religious man, who only became political when the circumstances and the good of the people made it necessary. This deep love for the people and passion for the justice he found in the message of the Kingdom of God has helped to facilitate the spread of the liberationist message throughout the world

²³ Paul Valley, “A Church for the Poor,” New York Times, September 5, 2014.

decades after his death and allowed for its resurgence in the church in the twenty-first century.

CHAPTER ONE

THE RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL WORLD OF OSCAR ROMERO

In order to understand Oscar Romero's legacy in El Salvador and his impact on the message and future of liberation theology, it is necessary to first examine the ideologies and circumstances that shaped Romero's thinking and actions. It is relatively easy to see how iconic figures like Romero impacted their society. It is a more cumbersome but equally important task to see how the society shaped the icon. Romero was not a solitary prophet in history. The large scale conflict in El Salvador among government officials, an entrenched oligarchy, peasant organizations, and revolutionary guerrillas helped form who he was. He lived in a time when the relatively new ideas of liberation theology were spreading rapidly throughout El Salvador and various groups were interpreting them in diverse and sometimes conflicting ways. Romero followed in the steps of other priests and activists in the nation who had sought to implement the ideas of liberation which had already been spreading in many South American nations.²⁴

It is difficult to understand Romero's relationship with liberationist thought without first understanding the central tenets of the theology. The Conference of Latin American Bishops at Medellín in 1968 described it as God's and the church's "preferential option for the poor,"²⁵ Another way to state it is that God loves all humanity, but he is especially on the side of the impoverished and oppressed. The bishops believed that the church should adopt the same attitude towards the poor. One

²⁴ Penny Lernoux, *Cry of the People* (Penguin Books: 1980), 30-32, 102.

²⁵ Conference of Latin American Bishops, "Excerpts on Justice, Peace, and Poverty from the Final Document." *Medellín Convention*, September 6, 1968.

could argue that this thinking has been an historical part of the Christian faith since its beginning. Liberation theologians contend that this theology is taken from the Gospels in which Jesus continually sides with the poor over the powerful and wealthy.²⁶

There are numerous examples from the Gospels from which theologians draw the ideas of liberation theology. Some of the most well-known include Jesus' teaching that "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God."²⁷ Another would be Jesus' description of the final judgment where the sheep and the goats are judged based upon how they treated the least among them. As it says in Matthew, "as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me."²⁸ For those adhering to liberation theology, these words are supposed to be taken seriously and applied to society. Jesus is embodied in the poor and disadvantaged. He sides with them in their struggles over the rich and powerful. He even at times became "forceful" over the injustice he saw in the society and overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the temple.²⁹ Jesus also uses powerful imagery such as the last becoming first, and the first becoming last.³⁰ There are also many Old Testament texts to draw from such as the book of Amos, in which the prophet preaches condemnation to those "who oppress the innocent and take bribes and deprive the poor of justice in the courts."³¹

²⁶ Ibid, 133-132.

²⁷ Mark 10:25, *King James Version*.

²⁸ Matthew 25:40, *English Standard Version*.

²⁹ Matthew 21: 12-13, *English Standard Version*.

³⁰ Matthew 20:16, *English Standard Version*.

³¹ Amos 5:12, *New International Version*.

Liberation theology is not primarily about compassion or philanthropy towards the poor, but rather about justice for their cause. It is a movement towards their spiritual, economic, and political freedom. As the Brazilian priest and liberation theologian, Hélder Pessoa Câmara, once stated, “When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist.”³² No one will cause a stir by calling for alms to the poor; however, when the church calls for societal changes to meet the needs of the poor, there can often be conflict.

Liberation theology’s ideas existed long before Latin America in the 1960s. An example of an early strand of this ideology was present in the slave population of the American South. The slaves often especially identified with the story of the children of Israel in Egypt and Babylon waiting for their deliverance, their liberation.³³ For them, religion was not just relevant to the afterlife. It was something that pertained to the present world. Ironically, many slave holders tried to use religion to keep the slaves from thinking about the current realities. Religion was largely, as Marx would describe it, an opiate for the masses.³⁴ However, many of the slaves took those same Christian ideas and turned them on their head by seeing their own liberation in the pages of scripture.

Liberation theology today has gone in many different directions. Theologians and activists have not only applied the theology to issues of economic injustice, but also to racial issues, women’s rights, and LGBT rights. As Gustavo Gutiérrez points out, it has

³² Helder Camara cited in Zilda Rocha, *Helder, the Gift: A Life that Marked the Course of the Church in Brazil* (Editora Vozes:2000).

³³ Kimberly Rae Connor, *Imagining Grace: Liberating Theologies in the Slave Narrative Tradition* (University of Illinois Press:2000)

³⁴ Karl Marx, “A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right Introduction.” *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, February 1844.

also been picked up by other religious traditions such as Islam and Judaism where theologians have sought to apply the teachings of justice and liberation in the Torah and Qu'ran to modern day issues.³⁵

However, Romero's life is most clearly understood in the context of the Latin American strand of liberationist thought in the mid-twentieth century which had many distinctive characteristics due to the unique religious, political, and social circumstances in Latin America at the time. From a religious perspective, much of this new thinking found its roots in the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and the teachings of Pope Paul IV and Pope John XXII. These popes both stressed justice for the workers and poor. Pope John XXII pointed out the disparities in many of the third world nations where "enormous wealth, the unbridled luxury, of the privileged few stands in violent, offensive contrast to the utter poverty of the vast majority."³⁶ The Second Vatican Council reiterated this as they declared, "never has the human race enjoyed such an abundance of wealth, resources and economic power, and yet a huge proportion of the world's citizens are still tormented by hunger and poverty."³⁷ The council also opened up more freedom and autonomy for the international church to apply the message of the Gospel specifically to their communities. Though Vatican II did not take away the power of the pope or Vatican, it did cause the church's power structure to become more collaborative in

³⁵ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Orbit Books: 1988), iv.

³⁶ Pope John XXII, "Mater Et Magistra" (speech, Rome, May 15, 1961), Vatican Holy See, par. 69.

³⁷ II Vatican Council, "Gaudium Et Spes." *Pastoral Constitution of the Church*, December 7, 1965.

nature.³⁸ The bishops in Latin America felt a freedom to pursue a different vision of the church which would never have been acceptable before Vatican II.

It is from this background, as well as the turmoil that the Cold War, globalization, and military dictatorships had wrought, that liberation theology arose in Latin America. In some aspects, Latin America had become a great chess board on the world stage between the Soviet Union and the United States, where the geopolitical interests of the great world powers had overshadowed the needs of the Latin American people. It also led to an increase in political violence in which the peasant populations usually suffered the most. Globalization had opened up opportunities for some in these third world nations, but for the poor it often meant a new source of exploitation and more resistance to labor rights. The military dictatorships were abundant and often used extremely harsh tactics to stop any resistance. In some cases, they especially targeted the peasant regions since they were more likely to be open to revolutionary groups.³⁹ This was certainly the case in El Salvador.

Until the meeting of the Latin American Conference of Bishops in Medellín in 1968, there was no single doctrine of liberation in the Latin American church. However, there were individual priests and churches applying their unique interpretations of the teachings of Jesus and the freedom granted by the Vatican II to the political and social turmoil that their countries were wrestling with. Some of the earliest expressions of liberationist thought in Latin America were present in Brazil, Peru, and Chile as more

³⁸ Penny Lernoux, *People of God* (Penguin Books: 1989), 21-25.

³⁹ Garret Huizer, *Peasant Rebellion in Latin America* (Penguin Books: 1973).

priests became “disturbed by the marked inequalities in their societies.”⁴⁰ It was also clear that the church was becoming divided between those priests whose parishioners belonged to the powerful and elite of society and the majority of priests who were serving in areas where their parishioners were mainly poor and working class.

There has always been a degree of tension and division within the Catholic Church in Latin America when it came to its relationship with the elite and impoverished in the society.

There have been times when the church has simply stood beside the wealthy and approved of their oligarchical rule over the masses. There are certainly numerous examples of when the Church was either complicit in or silent towards the actions of the powerful.⁴¹ This trend goes all the way back to the conquistadors with church officials who remained largely silent in the midst of the great injustice done to the native people.⁴² In fact, there seemed to have been a type of reciprocal agreement between the church and governing bodies. As Gary Smith states,

The Crown had allowed the missionaries to convert and pacify the Indians. After this was accomplished, royal officers and members of the secular ecclesiastical hierarchy replaced them. This was economical for imperial territory was expanded with a minimum of risk.⁴³

⁴⁰ Ibid, 25.

⁴¹ Penny Lernoux, *Cry of the People* (Penguin Books: 1980), 24.

⁴² Clive Henry Afflick, “The History and Politics of Liberation Theology in Latin America and the Caribbean.” *University of Miami, Dissertations* (1989)

⁴³ Gary Smith, “The History of the Catholic Church in Latin America and Liberation Theology.” *Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute* (1982).

As Clive Afflick states, “the Church grew accustomed to serving civil power in order to accomplish its mission of evangelization.”⁴⁴ The church retained this relationship from colonialism through the twentieth century as it often served alongside the state in subduing the people without calling those in power to account.⁴⁵ This was largely the case in El Salvador up to the mid-twentieth century which could account for the strong reaction on the part of the ruling class when the position of the church began changing. The elite had seen the church as largely a collaborator with the ruling class, not antagonist towards it.

Though the church often bowed to the civil authorities throughout the history of Latin America, there have been other times when the church has stood up to the powerful in defense of the poor and oppressed. One of the strongest examples of this was Bartolome de las Casas who was a priest in Central America and the Caribbean in the earliest days of the conquistadors. While the conquistadors were often causing great suffering to the indigenous population, las Casas was recording the atrocities in order to plead with the Spanish Crown and Church to stop the cruelty. His work *An Account, Much Abbreviated, of the Destruction of the Indies* tells the narrative of the Spanish conquest from the perspective of the indigenous people which contained sordid details that the colonial elites tried to bury. His writings also plead for the proper role of the church in defense of the innocent and calls out their oppressors. One can see de Las Casas’ strong feelings about what was happening when in referring to the Spanish he

⁴⁴ Clive Henry Afflick, “The History and Politics of Liberation Theology in Latin America and the Caribbean.” *University of Miami, Dissertations* (1989), 6.

⁴⁵ Anthony Gill, *Rendering Unto Caesar: The Catholic Church and the State in Latin America* (University of Chicago Press: 1998).

wonders if “it does not befit those Christians to be called devils, and whether it would not be better to condemn the Indians to the devils and the fires of Hell at once than to these Christians of the Indies.”⁴⁶ It is easy to see both the anger towards the conquistadors and the compassion that de Las Casas felt towards the native people. De Las Casas represented the prophetic role of the church which would be revived under the teachings of the liberation theologians in the 1960s and 70s.

During the 60s and 70s, the direction that some bishops seemed to be taking the church was one which involved calling the oligarchical power structure into account and calling for the rights of the poor and oppressed in the society. A prominent example of this was the Colombian priest, Camilio Torres, who spoke out against the Colombian oligarchy and eventually died in the struggle after he joined with the guerrillas. He became a type of martyr, though the “vast majority” of priests rejected his justification of violence in the struggle for liberation.⁴⁷

There was also a realization of the importance of a different message from the church in the light of the Cuban Revolution. The church was “shaken by the flight of 70% of the Cuban clergy following the revolution.” They were looking for an “alternative...to prevent the spread of communism on the continent.”⁴⁸ They wanted to “reform” the “social and economic structures” and lessen the appeal of Communist revolution.⁴⁹ The church knew that if it did not stand up for the rights of the oppressed, a

⁴⁶ Bartolome de Las Casas, *An Account, Much Abbreviated, of the Destruction of the Indies* (Hackett Pub: 2003).

⁴⁷ Penny Lernoux, *Cry of the People* (Penguin Books: 1980), 29.

⁴⁸ Manzar Foroohar, “Liberation Theology: The Response of Latin American Catholics to Socioeconomic Problems,” *Latin American Perspectives* Vol. 13, No. 3, (1986): 37.

⁴⁹ Penny Lernoux, *Cry of the People* (Penguin Books: 1980), 24.

much more radical and religiously antagonistic revolution would likely sweep through Latin America. Those in the church inclined to more liberationist positions believed that a social policy based on the ideals of the Kingdom of God would help ensure a more just society without having to resort to Marxist tactics.

In 1968, the Latin American bishops convened in Medellín to reach a common agreement about the issue of the church's role in the political and social chaos which was surrounding Latin America. There were some bishops of a more conservative, traditional leaning while others were much more radical in their persuasion. As Manzar Foroohar points out, "the final documents of the conference were written by different groups of bishops and therefore reflected diverse, if not contradictory, ideas."⁵⁰

The final statement produced by the bishops, which was a type of culmination of the liberation thought which was growing at the time, became the quintessential document for the new direction of the Latin American church during this era. Though the bishops did not use the term "liberation theology" in the document, it is arguably the most important document to consider when trying to understand the formation of liberationist thought in Latin America as it led to the "development of liberation theology, with its emphasis on the emancipation of the poor and oppressed."⁵¹ Penny Lernoux describes it as the "Magna Carta" of the persecuted church.⁵² Though there had been early proponents of liberationist thought prior to Medellín, this was the first

⁵⁰ Manzar Foroohar, "Liberation Theology: The Response of Latin American Catholics to Socioeconomic Problems," *Latin American Perspectives* Vol. 13, No. 3, (1986), 46.

⁵¹ Penny Lernoux, *People of God* (Penguin Books: 1989), 26.

⁵² Penny Lernoux, *Cry of the People* (Penguin Books: 1980), 37.

document that actually gave a form of consensus and provided an authoritative voice for the rest of the Latin American church to follow.

The document begins by describing the reality of the situation in Latin America which is a “misery that besets large masses of human beings in all of our countries.” It is a misery which “expresses itself as injustice which cries to the heavens.” The bishops at Medellín place much blame on oligarchical rule, free market liberalism, and the growth of multi-national corporations. There is a call for a new vision of what the economy should entail, one in which business and societal leaders “radically modify the evaluation, the attitudes and the means regarding the goal, organization and functioning of business.”⁵³

There is also a clear questioning of the whole capitalistic system which is built upon “powers, inspired by uncontrolled desire for gains, which leads to economic dictatorship and the ‘international imperialism of money.’”⁵⁴ There is also a call for land reform, the organization of cooperatives for peasant populations, and a just taxation on foreign companies operating within Latin America. Much of the document seems to mimic the platform of a leftist political movement. However, the document also warns of going to the opposite extreme of radical Marxism which “in practice becomes a totalitarian concentration of state power.”⁵⁵ There is an obvious desire to find a third way, an alternative to the Cold War struggle of the United States and the Soviet Union. However, this third way is far from a powerless and feeble neutrality. Its main purpose is

⁵³ Conference of Latin American Bishops, “Excerpts on Justice, Peace, and Poverty from the Final Document.” *Medellín Convention*, September 6, 1968, 6.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 12.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 5.

to stand for justice and represent the voices of the poor whose cries have been silenced in the name of greed and power.

The document also clearly lays out the religious teaching behind the need for political and social liberation. It argues that salvation itself is tied to liberation because “in the economy of salvation the divine work is an action of integral human development and liberation, which has love for its sole motive.” The bishops go on to state that love is “the dynamism which ought to motivate Christians to realize justice in the world, having truth as a foundation and liberty as their sign.”⁵⁶ The divine love of God is demonstrated in his church through its desire to work for justice in the society. It is not a weak or sentimental love. It is one based upon action and sacrifice. In order to follow Jesus’ command to love one’s neighbor as oneself, it is necessary not only to make sure that one is treating their neighbor in a kind and respectful way, but that one is also helping create a society where one’s neighbor can be truly liberated.

Structural injustice is also linked to the sin of humanity. Christ not only came to liberate people from their individual sins but also from the “slavery to which sin has subjected them: hunger, misery, all oppression and ignorance, in a word, that injustice and hatred which have their origin in human selfishness.”⁵⁷ Ultimately, Christ’s work of salvation and liberation expands far beyond the reach of the individual soul. True salvation should ultimately expand to the social, political, and economic realities. The church which is called to stand in solidarity with the poor will help that liberation become a reality.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 2.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 2.

What is of significance when examining this document from Medellín in light of Romero's life is the view towards violence in the establishment of a more just society. The bishops state that, "Violence is neither Christian nor evangelical... the Christian man is peaceful and not ashamed of it. He is not simply a pacifist, for he can fight, but he prefers peace to war." They go on to declare the church's "Christian preference for peace." The word "preference" may sound weak or even optional in the English translation, but "preferencia" in Spanish has a more strongly binding significance. It is not just an inclination towards peace, but a deep and profound desire. It is not merely the first option with a license to violence if peace is not easily established. There is a realization that true liberation requires peace. As they state, it is difficult to establish "a regime of justice and freedom while participating in a process of violence."⁵⁸

There is also the fear that a violent revolution will bring a new form of oppression which usually "generates new injustices, introduces new imbalances and causes new disasters." After all "one cannot combat a real evil at the price of a greater evil."⁵⁹ For those who would like to portray the Medellín conference as giving a blessing to violent revolution, these passages create a problem. There is a deep commitment in the conference to resolving the injustices of the society in a peaceful matter. It is not an absolute pacifism which is present in other Christian traditions such as the Quakers or Mennonites. Nonetheless, it certainly is a very pacifist position in the context of Catholic history where the church has often justified and even blessed war and bloodshed.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 16.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 16.

There is a recognition that there will be those in power who “take advantage of the pacifist position of the Church.” There is a strong warning to these individuals that peace will only be an option in a more just society. Those who insist on maintaining an unjust order will be “responsible to history” for inciting violent revolutions.⁶⁰ They declare with Paul IV that, “Peace can only be obtained by creating a new order which carries with it a more perfect justice among men.”⁶¹ Injustice naturally leads to violence and revolution. It will not be the church that calls for violence, but they are warning those who create an unjust system that it is a strong probability that revolution will come if there is not significant social change.

They also want to make sure that violence is not just defined as the actual clash of arms or spilling of blood. The whole oppressive system is a form of structural violence in and of itself. Creating peace is not just about making sure that there is not a violent revolution in response to oppression. It is ensuring the structural oppression itself comes to an end. There can be a lack of open and obvious conflict and bloodshed in a repressive system, but there cannot be true peace in society.

Despite their overwhelming desire for peace, the bishops do seem to leave a slight option open for a revolution. They state that “a revolutionary insurrection can be legitimate in the case of evident and prolonged tyranny that seriously works against the fundamental rights of man and which damages the common good of the country.”⁶² In context, it is stating that it could be the option in the most extreme of circumstances, but

⁶⁰ Ibid, 15.

⁶¹ Pope Paul IV cited by Ibid, 14.

⁶² Pope Paul IV cited by Ibid, 15.

with the caveat that a violent revolution usually “generates new injustices.”⁶³ It would be hard to conclude from this statement that the bishops are justifying revolution. However, they do seem to set themselves apart from a purely pacifist position. It appears to leave the option open for revolution for extreme situations with outrageous human rights abuses. Of course, where this line that marks “evident and prolonged tyranny” is drawn becomes a more problematic issue. Would the violence visited upon the peasants in El Salvador by the military forces justify taking up arms? Would the continual oppression of an oligarchy in a country such as Peru or Columbia where owners treat workers with disdain and few human rights justify revolution? This is where the interpretation of the Medellín conference becomes challenging. Some will see this slight exception as a license for revolutionary actions even if that is a distortion of the original intent.

Overall, the Medellín conference expresses the church’s desire to identify and side with the political, social, and economic liberation of the poor. It calls for a new societal and economic system that is no longer based on greed and profit but on protecting the vulnerable and preserving the common good. However, the conference also expresses a strong desire that a peaceful solution be reached. It also stresses the fact that liberation is not ultimately about a political philosophy, but is at the very heart of Christian salvation.

Shortly after the meeting in Medellín, the Peruvian priest, Gustavo Gutiérrez, began penning his book entitled *A Theology of Liberation* (1971) in which he offers a much deeper theological and philosophical explanation and defense of liberation

⁶³ Ibid, 16.

theology. Most of the work fits clearly into the teachings of Medellín though he does propose some slight variations and uses more Marxist language to describe the basis for the theology.

He opens his work with the declaration that liberation theology is not like past theologies which merely “reflect on the world” in a type of detached fashion. Rather, it seeks to “be part of the process through which the world is transformed.”⁶⁴ He explains this new emphasis of the Latin American church as an extension of the Vatican II which “sketches a general outline for Church renewal” and of Medellín which “provides guidelines for the transformation of the Church.”⁶⁵

Gutiérrez was very well versed in European philosophy and uses this to a great extent in his arguments. He points out that liberationist thought is not “the exclusive preserve of scholars of a Christian inspiration. Converging viewpoints are found in Marxist-inspired positions.”⁶⁶ Though he would not completely embrace all the ideas of Marxism, he sees their philosophical value in the ideas of liberation theology. He also uses Hegel’s idea of the “historical process” which will lead to the “genesis of consciousness and therefore of the gradual liberation of humankind.”⁶⁷ Gutiérrez saw liberation as not only an achievable goal but an inevitable historical reality. Humanity is evolving to the point of complete liberation. From a spiritual perspective, Christ was going to build his kingdom where justice flows and oppression ceases.

⁶⁴ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Orbit Books: 1988), 12.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 73.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 16.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 19.

Gutiérrez also delves more deeply into the history of the church in Latin America which has often served the interests of the elite. He describes how the dominant groups “have always used the Church to defend their interests and maintain their privileged position.”⁶⁸ This of course extends all the way back to the days of the conquistadors. Gutiérrez does point out the voices of justice that have been present in the church despite the overall climate of injustice. On numerous occasions he references Bartolome de las Casas and his calls for justice for the indigenous populations. Liberation theology was following in the tiny strand of the Latin American church that has stood up for justice for the poor and native populations.

A crucial point to examine when looking at the teachings of Gutiérrez is his teaching on the ideas of peace and revolution. While there is no direct refutation of the Medellín Conference on the ideas of violence, there does seem to be less of a strong plea for peace in Gutiérrez writings. There is a strong message that simple reforms which keep the same power structure in place will not lead to genuine liberation. Liberation “implies a confrontation” with those “who control the national power structure,” and only “a profound transformation, a social revolution” will really change the system of injustice in Latin America.⁶⁹ While the church is not to be active in the violence it should “place itself squarely within the process of revolution, amid the violence which is present in different ways.”⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Ibid, 41.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 54.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 75.

He uses the life of Jesus to portray a type of revolutionary movement. He sees great congruency between the ideas of the first Century Jewish radicals, the Zealots, and the teachings of Jesus.⁷¹ Although Jesus rejected much of the hateful nationalism that defined the Zealots, he was very critical of the Roman power structure. An example of this is seen in how “the publicans...the dominant political power, were placed among the sinners” in Jesus’ teachings.⁷² He also argues that Jesus overturning the moneychanger’s tables in the temple was a clearly revolutionary act. Furthermore, Gutiérrez stresses that the death of Jesus was not only for religious reasons but also for profoundly political ones. His claims of being the King of the Jews and the Messiah was deeply in conflict with the Roman officials, and “his influence over the people challenged the privilege and power of the Jewish leaders.”⁷³

Gutiérrez is continuing a theme from the Medellín Conference that as long as there is injustice, there will be violence in the society. The church should not celebrate the violence, but neither should it accept peace at the price of keeping the status quo of injustice. He also indicates that some violence is more “justified.” He states that we have to avoid “equating the unjust violence of the oppressors (who maintain the despicable system) with the just violence of the oppressed (who feel obliged to use it to achieve their liberation).”⁷⁴ If one looks only at this statement, it would seem that Gutiérrez is endorsing the Marxist revolutionaries. However, he also warns that these guerilla groups

⁷¹ Ibid, 131.

⁷² Ibid, 132.

⁷³ Ibid, 133-132.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 64.

“mobilize the masses...by urging them to follow a radical line” rather than establishing “an organization which really represents their interests.”⁷⁵

He goes on to state that the church should not “accept with unconcern...a situation in which human beings live in confrontation with one another.”⁷⁶ However, he echoes Medellín by pointing out that the church “must not fail to see the situation as it is and to understand the causes that produced it.”⁷⁷ Violence does not just happen. Revolutionary violence is caused by a structural violence that has to be overcome. It would be unfair to say that Gutiérrez is sanctioning or blessing violent revolution. However, he does at some points, and more explicitly than the Medellín conference, show great empathy for the violence of the oppressed. He would obviously prefer a non-violent “social revolution”. However, he seems to imply that at least at times, violence will be the only option available to overthrow an overly corrupt power structure. It is a fact that is not to be celebrated but understood as a reality in a world that has still not embraced the message of liberation in the Kingdom of God.

Gutiérrez also gives a clear refutation of the capitalist system in much stronger language than Medellín. He sees the capitalist economy as “generating progress and growing wealth for the few and social imbalances, political tensions, and poverty for the many.”⁷⁸ He also did not believe there could be “autonomous Latin American development within the framework of the international capitalist system.”⁷⁹ True justice for the people would not be achieved by simply making small adjustments to the free

⁷⁵ Ibid, 55.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 156.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 157.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 51.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 54.

market system. A new economic system must take its place. He sees socialism as representing the “most fruitful and far-reaching approach” for the aims of liberation. However, he also points that this must be a uniquely Latin American form of socialism. He quotes Jose Carlos Mariategui who states that the socialism of Latin America “must be a heroic creation” which brings “Indo-American socialism to life within our own reality, in our own language.”⁸⁰ He is certainly not looking for the atheistic socialist models of Russia and Eastern Europe. He sees great potential in the direction Chile was taking towards a more socialist system. He quotes a group of priests at the university parish in Santiago who state that “Socialism, although it does not deliver humanity from injustice...does offer a fundamental equality of opportunity..it dignifies labor so that the worker, while humanizing nature, becomes more of a person.”⁸¹ He also quotes the Mexican priest, Sergio Mendez Arceo, who states that “a socialist system is more in accord with the Christian principles of true fellowship, justice, and peace.”⁸²

Gutiérrez is not only denouncing the injustices that the poor are experiencing at the hands of the elite class, nor is he merely calling for reforms that the wealthy can make. He is calling for a new social system in which there is greater political and economic equality. It is a system that is more fully engaged with the liberationist values. Capitalism is not merely an imperfect system. It is a system that by its very nature keeps individuals from living in a society based on the values of liberation and Christian brotherhood.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 55-56.

⁸¹ Ibid, 66.

⁸² Don Sergio Mendez Arceo cited by Ibid, 65.

Gutiérrez does not see his message as radically altering the message at Medellín. He saw Medellín as a great step forward in the ideas of liberation theology. However, he also notes that it had “imperfections and lacunae.”⁸³ Gutiérrez wanted to fill in some of the philosophical, theological, and economic gaps that the Medellín Conference was unable to fully explore. There is nothing in his work that would be in direct confrontation with what the bishops stated at the conference. However, there does seem to be a slightly different emphasis in Gutiérrez work especially when it comes to the issue of peace and revolution. He appears to leave a little more space for the more radical interpretation of liberation theology which would follow.

Though the Conference of Latin American Bishops at Medellín and Gustavo Gutiérrez were not the only two voices in the development of liberation theology,⁸⁴ historically they were the most essential. Medellín is significant because it gave ecclesiastical authority to many of the ideas that were already forming in the midst of the Cold War and the military governments of Latin America. There are a number of reasons for the significance of Gutiérrez’ work. One is because of the timing in which he wrote it right after the conference in Medellín. Although its message was not completely identical to Medellín, it coincided with the conference and philosophically expanded on the bishops’ work. One could argue that Gutiérrez’s work is the most in-depth treatise of Liberation Theology up to this point in history. It dealt with the economic, political, philosophical, theological, and spiritual aspects of liberation thought. For many,

⁸³ Ibid, 73.

⁸⁴ For more liberationist sources see Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, *Introduction to Liberation Theology* (Orbis Books: 1987), and Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth* (Orbis Books: 1994).

Gutiérrez is considered the “Father” or “Founder” of liberation theology.⁸⁵ Though this title obviously is an historical oversimplification, it does show the influence of his work and how he is viewed in both the Catholic and non-Catholic world.

Liberation theology was spreading far beyond Columbia and Peru. In El Salvador it was expanding rapidly in the early 70s, especially among many of the rural priests who worked with the peasant populations.⁸⁶ In order to understand the growing appeal of liberation theology in El Salvador, it is important to realize the historical realities of the nation. El Salvador had obvious similarities to many other Central American nations. From its earliest days, it tended to have an oligarchical system with a Spanish elite at the very top and a large indigenous and Mestizo population below. A few elite families controlled the majority of the land and treated many of the workers in a repressive way. The government usually served the interests of these families and disregarded the needs of the peasant populations.⁸⁷

El Salvador was almost continually involved in conflict from the 1930s to the 1990s. Starting in 1931, the right wing general, Maximiliano Hernández Martínez, led a military coup in El Salvador and brutally put down any resistance to his government. One of the most famous examples of this resistance was Farabundo Martí who helped lead a peasant uprising against Martínez and the elite oligarchs who supported him. Martínez harshly crushed the rebellions leaving tens of thousands dead.⁸⁸ Throughout the 1960s and 70s, El Salvador continued to be ruled by primarily right wing military governments.

⁸⁵ John Hooper and Dan Collins, “Peru University in Vatican Battle over Right to Call Itself Catholic,” *The Guardian*, October 28, 2012.

⁸⁶ Penny Lernoux, *Cry of the People* (Penguin Books: 1980), 70-71.

⁸⁷ Christopher White, *History of El Salvador* (Greenwood: 2008).

⁸⁸ Jorge Arias Gomez, *Farabundo Martí: La biografía clásica* (Ocean Sur: 2010).

This oligarchical and military rule led to peasant uprisings, unrest, and brutal repression towards any type of organizing or unionization among the poor workers.⁸⁹

One of the most important events which served as a backdrop to the rise of liberation theology in El Salvador was the “Soccer War” between Honduras and El Salvador in 1969. Though it officially began after a disputed soccer match, the actual cause was due largely to a border dispute where El Salvadorian peasants fled across the border to gain land after the military government encouraged it in order to free land for coffee and cotton exportation.⁹⁰ Not only had the peasant population been forced off their lands by a powerful oligarchy, they had been forced into a deadly conflict where they were caught in the middle between the interests of El Salvadorian and Honduran oligarchs. Though Honduras and El Salvador officials described the conflict in nationalistic terms, it was ultimately a struggle between elite interests who gave little heed to the good of the people in their nations.⁹¹

Jon Sobrino, a Spanish priest in El Salvador during the 1970s and 1980s, credits the Jesuit Priests for bringing liberationist thought to El Salvador. He specifically portrays the Jesuit, Ignacio Ellacuria, as being “the guiding intellect in Central America” for his “examination of conscience” as he tried “forcefully applying the principles of liberation theology” to the situation which was occurring in El Salvador. For Sobrino, liberation theology’s “watershed” moment was in the Province Retreat in San Salvador in

⁸⁹ James R. Brockman, *Romero: A Life* (Orbis Books: 1989), 1-2.

⁹⁰ Penny Lernoux, *Cry of the People* (Penguin Books: 1980), 63.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 63-64.

December 1969 when Ellacuria began laying out his spiritual and political vision for El Salvador.⁹²

The institution that became the epicenter for liberationist thought during the early 70s was the University of Central America in San Salvador. The university had been originally “conceived as an anti-Marxist alternative” to the increasingly radical National University. However, when Ellacuria joined the board of directors he helped lead the university in a different direction towards a more liberationist perspective.⁹³ Ellacuria was also responsible for producing the Jesuit Magazine *ECA* (Estudios Centroamericanos) which began to apply the teachings of liberation theology directly to the conflicts and injustice in El Salvador. One of his most poignant articles was in response to the 1969 war with Honduras where he “showed that the root of the conflict lay in unjust landholdings in El Salvador.”⁹⁴ For his opposition to the oligarchy in El Salvador, the government took away the national subsidy from the UCA. The UCA ultimately became seen as an enemy of the oligarchy and military government in the late 70s and 80s.⁹⁵ Eventually, Ellacuria, just like Romero and scores of other priests, was assassinated along with five other Jesuit priests on November 16, 1989 in the midst of the civil war which was raging in El Salvador.⁹⁶

The archbishop before Romero, Luis Chávez, was also instrumental in helping change the ideology of the clergy in El Salvador. Though it would be an exaggeration to paint him as a strong liberationist, he did help move the church towards “an interest in

⁹² Jon Sobrno, *Companions of Jesus: the Jesuit Martyrs of El Salvador* (Orbis Books: 1990), 60..

⁹³ *Ibid*, 61.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 61.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, xxiv, 52.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, xi.

rural affairs” and land reform. However, the church was “immediately attacked for its interference.”⁹⁷ A prominent priest, Jose Inocencia Alas, was temporarily kidnapped for standing for agrarian reform. Other priests and church officials started receiving death threats for their solidarity with the peasants and the refusal to support the oligarchical power structure. The violence and repression that Romero faced was nothing new in El Salvador. Many of the priests that had gone before him had already been targets of the military government for their actions amongst the poor.⁹⁸

Some of the most powerful actions that the church made on behalf of the peasant population occurred in the region of Aguilares, a sugar growing region which was primarily ruled by a few elite families. In this area, priests such as Rutillo Grande encouraged the peasant populations to form their own “Christian communities” which would more deeply study the words of Jesus, particularly his message of the Kingdom of God, and help apply them to their own lives and the society around them. Grande wanted them to go a step further than passively studying the Bible, he wanted them to become “active agents of change and seek fundamental conquests” such as “unions and the defense of labor rights.”⁹⁹

The organization of peasants into these Christian communities fit very well into the framework of the Medellín Conference which calls for “the organization of the peasants into effective intermediate structures, principally in the form of cooperatives.” These cooperatives would provide “the benefits of culture, health, recreation, spiritual

⁹⁷ Penny Lernoux, *Cry of the People*, (Penguin Books: 1980), 65.

⁹⁸ Penny Lernoux, *Cry of the People* (Penguin Books: 1980), 69-74.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 70.

growth, participation in local decisions and in those which have to do with the economy and national politics.”¹⁰⁰ Ultimately, liberation theology was not about a benevolent upper class or a progressive middle class trying to help out poor communities. It was about a movement from the bottom up in which the poor organize and work towards their own liberation through a greater sense of community.

Of course, the powerful land owners were not enthusiastic about the new organization of the peasants. They denounced Grande and the other priests as “subversives” and “false prophets of hate.”¹⁰¹ They also had powerful church allies, especially in the capital, who also disapproved of the actions of Grande and the other rural priests. Additionally, the oligarchs in El Salvador had the support of right-wing paramilitary groups that monitored any type of peasant organization.¹⁰² The most prominent example of this was the group ORDEN who Penny Lernoux describes as a “brownshirt organization” who kept “tabs on peasant and slum dwellers’ associations.”¹⁰³

One of the significant events in the evolution of liberation theology in El Salvador was the assassination of Father Grande in 1977 by right wing forces while working with the rural communities. In many ways, he became the first perceived “liberationist” martyr in El Salvador. Though he was more radical than Romero, they were friends and his assassination had a powerful impact on Romero. In his death Grande became a type of “national hero” as “over one hundred thousand people ignored the government’s state of

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 6.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 71.

¹⁰² Ibid, 72.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 72.

siege to attend his funeral.”¹⁰⁴ While the forces against Grande were hoping to destroy his liberationist message through his death, it ironically flourished even more as he became seen as a martyr and other priests were encouraged to take up what he started. It also further implanted in the El Salvadorian people the need for a more just and peaceful society.

The El Salvadorian oligarchy also began targeting others priests and church leaders for their teachings and social action. One example was Father Alfonso Navarro Oviedo who preached a message of all individuals being equal whether priest, peasant, or landowners. He was later assassinated to “avenge” the death of the El Salvadorian Foreign Minister, Mauricio Borgonovo, who had been killed by leftist rebels. After his death, the assassins warned that they would kill all the Jesuits if they did not leave the country. Some anonymous flyers began circulating which stated “Be a Patriot! Kill a Priest.”¹⁰⁵

El Salvador was becoming an increasingly divided nation when Romero rose to the position of archbishop. Liberation theology was already taking hold in many of the rural areas. Fellow Jesuits had laid the groundwork and message from which Romero would eventually build upon. Romero became such an important figure not only because of his message, but perhaps more importantly because of the timing of when he came to power. The country was on the verge of civil war, and the Church now found itself unwilling to simply remain within the safe confines of a non-worldly spirituality. It was now becoming an activist voice for change within the nation.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 74.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 75-76.

El Salvador fits into the greater story of faith, politics, and liberation in Latin America. What was occurring amongst the Jesuits of El Salvador had already begun in countries such as Nicaragua, Chile, Peru, and Brazil.¹⁰⁶ Though Romero is the one most remembered for the liberationist movement in El Salvador, his life and message were the outgrowth of the earlier movement that had begun before him through the dissemination of liberationist thought throughout Latin America and the work of the El Salvadorian church officials in helping to organize and mobilize the peasants to realize the ideals of the Kingdom of God. Though Romero became the most famous martyr in El Salvador, he was not the only one standing up to the government officials, neither was he the only one to be killed for his political and religious message. Romero's impact was undeniably unique, but the ideology and movement behind liberation theology had been laid down before him by many individuals who will remain largely unknown in world history. Romero will not be remembered for creating a new ideology, but rather for making the daring choice to actually embrace and proclaim it both in El Salvador and throughout the world. It would be a decision which would ultimately cost him his life.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 30-32, 102.

CHAPTER TWO

ROMERO'S EVOLUTION AND ULTIMATE EMBRACE OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Archbishop Oscar Romero has become one of the icons of liberation theology, but he actually began as a priest who was very reluctant and even hostile to the aims of the Medellín Conference and the ideas behind the new liberationist movement of the church in Latin America. However, by the end of his life, he had essentially come to embody the teachings of Medellín while moderating some of the more radical interpretation of the theology and reestablishing the spiritual basis for liberationist thought. In doing so, he helped preserve its message into the twenty-first century and facilitated the spread of its ideas far beyond his native El Salvador.

Romero was born on August 15, 1917 in the town of San Miguel near the Honduran border. He grew up in a family of relatively humble means and from a young age desired to be a priest.¹⁰⁷ At the age of 20, he began studying at the National Seminary in the capital, San Salvador. He soon left the seminary and went to the Gregorian University of Rome. He stayed in Rome from 1937 through 1943 in the midst of World War II. He was there under the papacy of Pope Pius XII who some have accused of being passive towards the fascist regimes of Italy and Germany.¹⁰⁸ Romero saw it differently and praised the Pope for being a strong leader in opposition to fascism. Even at the end of his life, Romero remarked that, “this is the Pope I most admire.”¹⁰⁹ The loyalty that

¹⁰⁷ Scott Wright, *Oscar Romero and the Communion of Saints* (Orbis Books: 2009), 7-9.

¹⁰⁸ David Kertzer, *The Pope and Mussolini* (Random House: 2014).

¹⁰⁹ Oscar Romero cited by James R. Brockman, *Romero: A Life* (Orbis Books: 1989), 37.

Romero felt towards the Vatican would be a defining characteristic of his life even when there was later conflict over his liberationist views under the papacy of John Paul II.

Romero did not write much material at this time that would reveal much about his personal life. However, some of his fellow students give a glimpse into his personality and character. One classmate stated that “his conduct was irreproachable...observant of the regulations, pious, concerned for his priestly training in every aspect.”¹¹⁰ This dedication would be something that would strengthen him as a priest, but the rigidity would also make him more apprehensive of the changes that were occurring in the Catholic Church in Latin America.

Romero returned to El Salvador in 1944 and began his ministry in Ciudad Barrios where he gave his first mass.¹¹¹ Those who knew him described him as a traditionalist, but also one who had a genuine compassion for those around him. One of his parishioners, Elvira Chacón, describes the kindness he showed to her alcoholic brother. He would not let anyone “reproach him or hassle him.” She saw Romero as having a “soft spot for drunks and for the downtrodden in life.”¹¹² Romero appeared to have truly cared for the poor, but he had not yet evolved to the point where that compassion had turned into a passion for societal justice on their behalf.

He stayed in Ciudad Barrios until 1967 when he moved back to the capital of San Salvador. By this time, the ideas of liberation theology were starting to grow in El Salvador. The Jesuit bishops had founded the Central American University in order to

¹¹⁰ Carlos F. Enriquez cited by Scott Wright, *Oscar Romero and the Communion of Saints* (Orbis Books: 2009), 12.

¹¹¹ Ibid, 15.

¹¹² Elvira Chacón cited by Ibid, 17.

educate the poor,¹¹³ and the Second Vatican Council's move to give more autonomy to local parishes had led to local church leaders taking bolder societal actions on behalf of the poor. The political tensions were also strong as the right-wing military general, Fidel Sánchez Hernández, ruled the country. There were tensions between the elite oligarchy and the peasant populations which led to both internal violence and foreign conflict with the "Soccer War" of 1969 which had begun primarily because of El Salvadorian peasants crossing the border to find land after they had been evicted from their property by the ruling oligarchy.¹¹⁴ Romero arrived in San Salvador in 1968 right before the meeting of the Conference of the Latin American Bishops in Medellín. This was also the time when Jesuit Priests were organizing local peasant populations into "Christian communities" in order to study the scriptures and also to demand their political and social rights.¹¹⁵

Romero was initially unconvinced and even antagonistic to the movement of the church into a more political role on behalf of the poor and the use of liberation language as a justification to organize the people. During this time he served as editor of the archdiocesan paper, *Orientación*. Romero laid out a very conservative and anti-Marxist viewpoint in the stories and editorials in the paper. For example, when a Jesuit high school began to teach ideas from Medellín, the paper launched a month long attack on the school as it labeled the teaching "demagogy" and "false liberation education." Romero also republished many conservative articles which decried "certain fashionable theologies" that invoked "dangerous Marxist positions."¹¹⁶ Some church leaders,

¹¹³ Ibid, 23.

¹¹⁴ Penny Lernoux, *Cry of the People* (Penguin Books: 1980), 63.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 69-70.

¹¹⁶ Oscar Romero cited by James R. Brockman, *Romero: A Life* (Orbis Books: 1989), 48.

including Archbishop Luis Chavez y González, criticized Romero for his anti-liberationist position. Father Fabian Amaya harshly condemned the paper under Romero as one which “criticizes injustice in the abstract but criticizes methods of liberation in the concrete.”¹¹⁷

The political conflict continued to rage in El Salvador as there was a purported fraudulent election in 1972 in which a more leftist coalition had won but was prevented from taking control by the military government. When there were protests against the election, especially among students at the National University, the government declared martial law.¹¹⁸ Romero actually defended the harsh government actions since he believed the university “was a hotbed of subversion...and it was necessary to take measures against it.”¹¹⁹

In 1974, Romero became Bishop of Santiago de Maria which included his home town of Ciudad Barrios. During this time, as the government repression grew stronger against peasant organizations and Romero began spending more time with the people as opposed to his theological studies, his attitude began to change. One of his colleagues stated that for Romero “hearing about Medellín and having his lip tremble were one and the same thing..but still, he was learning.. learning from reality.”¹²⁰ He had begun spending time with the peasants and hearing their perspective, not merely the perspective of the wealthy and powerful. Romero “spent a lot of time listening,” and he realized that

¹¹⁷ Fabian Amaya cited by Ibid, 49.

¹¹⁸ Scott Wright, *Oscar Romero and the Communion of Saints* (Orbis Books: 2009), 31.

¹¹⁹ Oscar Romero cited by Scott Wright, *Oscar Romero and the Communion of Saints* (Orbis Books: 2009), 31.

¹²⁰ Juan Macho cited by Ibid, 33.

the stories of oppression were not merely liberationist or revolutionary propaganda but a reality which was impossible to ignore.¹²¹

On February 20, 1977, Romero became Archbishop of San Salvador. There was a great deal of skepticism among many of the priests, especially some of the more liberationist elements, as they believed Romero represented the interests of the oligarchy and military government. In fact, former Archbishop Chavez y González was disheartened. “Romero had been his auxiliary for four years, and he was aware of his limitations.”¹²² Some put it more bluntly. A fellow seminarian stated, “Damn! Now we’re ruined.”¹²³ Another questioned, “Why didn’t God deliver us from this man?”¹²⁴

On the other hand, many of the wealthy saw Romero’s ascension as a positive sign as they believed his predecessor, Luis Chávez y González, had been too embracing of liberationist thought. There were even rumors that some of the oligarchy had traveled to Rome to push for Romero’s nomination.¹²⁵ Francisco Estrada claims that the nuncio from the Vatican “asked the rich, and the rich gave their complete backing to Romero’s appointment. They felt he was ‘one of theirs.’”¹²⁶ There has been some disagreement by Romero’s biographers on how truly conservative Romero was at the time. One biographer, Scott Wright, paints Romero as someone with a very conservative mindset that slowly changed his ideology after seeing the suffering of the people.¹²⁷ James

¹²¹ Juan Macho cited by Ibid, 34.

¹²² César Jerez cited by María López Vigil, *Monseñor Romero: Memories in Mosaic* (Orbis Books: 2013), 51.

¹²³ Juan Bosco Palacios cited by Ibid, 52.

¹²⁴ Plinio Argueta cited by Ibid, 53.

¹²⁵ Magdalena Ochoa cited by Ibid, 50.

¹²⁶ Francisco Estrada cited by Ibid, 50.

¹²⁷ Scott Wright, *Oscar Romero and the Communion of Saints* (Orbis Books: 2009).

Brockman also sees a great change in Romero's ideology, but he sees him as a moderate who became more radicalized.¹²⁸

Whatever his exact personal beliefs were on economics and politics, Romero was certainly hesitant to have the church confront the power structure in El Salvador out of the fear of becoming too "political." He wanted to be the priest to both the rich and the poor, even if that meant shying away from some of the explosive issues of the day. Though there was some evidence of his mindset evolving over a period of years, the one event that changed Romero more than anything was the murder of his friend and fellow Jesuit, Rutillo Grande, in 1977. He had been one of the primary leaders in the movement to build more autonomous Christian communities amongst the peasants. This close friendship was somewhat of an irony itself as Grande was certainly one of the more "radical" priests with whom Romero had been more skeptical. However, Grande had been one of the few radical priests who was willing to work with and befriend Romero.¹²⁹

When Grande was killed on his way to give mass, the church in El Salvador was shaken. His fellow Jesuit, Jon Sobrino, saw it as the moment of "conversion for Archbishop Romero" when "the scales fell from his eyes."¹³⁰ It was an event that "reached the deepest corner of his being, shaping from good and all, and leading him to the sacrifice of his life."¹³¹ Ernestina Rivera describes it as the time where "the word of

¹²⁸ James R. Brockman, *Romero: A Life* (Orbis Books: 1989).

¹²⁹ Scott Wright, *Oscar Romero and the Communion of Saints* (Orbis Books: 2009), 38-41.

¹³⁰ Jon Sobrino cited by James Brockman, *Word Remains: A Life of Oscar Romero* (Orbis Books: 1982), 28.

¹³¹ Jon Sobrino cited by Scott Wright, *Oscar Romero and the Communion of Saints* (Orbis Books: 2009), 52.

Father Rutillo had been passed to Monseñor.”¹³² The El Salvadoran government tried deflecting the responsibility for these violent actions by blaming them on radicalized right-wing militias. However these groups were largely government sponsored agencies acting through the guise of right wing terrorism. They were “phantomlike... simply names used by the security forces to disguise some of their actions.”¹³³ In Romero’s later opposition to the government, it is apparent that he also did not believe that the majority of the terror directed at the priests and the poor was due to the actions of non-governmental right-wing terrorists, but rather a movement of the government in San Salvador to suppress any resistance to its oppressive rule.

In response to Grande’s death, Romero called for a single national mass to remember the life of Grande (which upset more conservative church officials). He also made it clear that he was no longer going to serve in the official state ceremonies as the government was not interested in “making justice manifest in regard to this unprecedented sacrilege which has horrified the whole church.”¹³⁴ From this point on, Romero’s relationship with the state, the wealthy, and the poor began taking a significant turn. It was an ongoing change where there was much personal conflict about how to move forward as the repression from the government and the violence from leftist forces began to push the country towards a civil war.

Romero did not immediately embrace all the liberationist beliefs of Sobrino or Grande. However, what was happening in El Salvador was changing him and causing

¹³² Ernestina Rivera cited by María López Vigil, *Monseñor Romero: Memories in Mosaic* (Orbis Books: 2013), 68.

¹³³ James Brockman, *The Word Remains: A Life of Oscar Romero* (Orbis Books: 1982), 56.

¹³⁴ Oscar Romero cited by Scott Wright, *Oscar Romero and the Communion of Saints* (Orbis Books: 2009), 46.

him to see the significance and necessity of the message behind Medellín and writers such as Gustavo Gutiérrez. His change also occurred in the context of increasing government repression against peasant organizations, student groups, and labor activity. As the governmental violence in response to the people's movements began to grow, Romero found himself in a prophetic role in which the liberationist ideas became central to his message of societal peace and justice. In some aspects, the military government of El Salvador pushed Romero to the left and caused him to re-examine his past political and religious beliefs.

He began to meet with the more leftist political parties and revolutionary groups in the nation, and while encouraging them to follow a path of peace, he also gave credence to their desire for liberation as it reflected the true liberation of Christ. He tells of an interesting meeting he had with the Marxist leader of the National Democratic Union who told Romero that the Church was no longer the opium of the people but rather “the best consciousness raiser” and that “a great part of what was happening in the country that contributed to the transformation was the work of the Church.”¹³⁵

Like the Conference at Medellín which had called for the church to be “concretized in criticism of injustice and oppression, in the struggle against the intolerable situation which a poor person often has to tolerate,”¹³⁶ Romero was willing to call out the greed and excess of the oligarchical class who “in order unjustly to defend their interests and their economic, social and political privileges, have been guilty of so

¹³⁵ Oscar Romero, *A Shepard's Diary* (Novalis: 1993), 400.

¹³⁶ Conference of Latin American Bishops, “Excerpts on Justice, Peace, and Poverty from the Final Document.” *Medellin Conference*, September 6, 1968, 21.

much unrest and violence.”¹³⁷ The condemnation of the inequality and greed in the society was not due to a rabid hatred, but out of a desire for the ultimate good and salvation of the wealthy as well. Romero saw the greed and inequality as not merely a socially constructed injustice, but based on deep societal sin. As he states, “many would like a preaching so spiritualized that it leaves the sinner unbothered and does not term idolaters those who kneel before money and power.”¹³⁸ However, he also wanted to make it clear that the church’s message was not meant to be “biased and scornful” of the rich. After all “the message is universal. God wants to save the rich also.”¹³⁹

Many of the wealthy did not see it that way. A wealthy woman who had embraced much of Romero’s messages states that “the rich detested him. They were outrageous in their disdain for him...you would only hear insults and contemptuous remarks about him.”¹⁴⁰ The media also turned against him and accused him of being a communist sympathizer. At one point the paper, *La Opinión* labeled him as “Monsenor Marxnolfo Romero.”¹⁴¹ Many who were close to Romero were also labeled as communists by the police for mere association with him.¹⁴²

In addition to his denunciations of the oligarchy, Romero also spoke out against the whole notion of the unrestricted capitalist system though perhaps not in such an overwhelming manner as liberationists such as Sobrino or Gutierrez. He harshly denounced “the absolutizing of wealth”. He believed it was “the great evil of El Salvador:

¹³⁷ Ibid, 352.

¹³⁸ Oscar Romero, *Violence of Love* (Harper & Row: 1988), 121.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 140.

¹⁴⁰ Coralia Godoy, María López Vigil, *Monseñor Romero: Memories in Mosaic* (Orbis Books: 2013), 154.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 122.

¹⁴² Aida Parker de Muyschondt cited by Ibid, 84.

wealth, private property, as an untouchable absolute.”¹⁴³ He also preached in favor of and worked for just land reform in the nation even though he knew that the powerful landowners would oppose it from every angle even if this opposition would “radically harm the country’s economy.” He believed land reform was the only just response to those who had been laboring for the oligarchy for many years without just recompense.¹⁴⁴ Romero also believed that capitalism was a spiritual danger to the country. As he states, “the full liberation of the Salvadoran people, not to mention personal conversions, demands a thorough change in the social, political, and economic system.”¹⁴⁵ The system was damaging the spiritual lives of the wealthy by leading them to greed and excess, and it was damaging the spirituality of the poor by creating a sense of desperation which led to violence, despair, and a host of other spiritual ills.

He also echoed Medellín and Gutiérrez with his constant message that true peace could only be obtained in a more just society. Once when two prominent leaders in private industry came to talk him about the violence that was occurring in the nation, he told them that they needed to “accept the hard demands of the gospel, that it is only possible to have true peace if there is true justice.” Without a real change in the “social, economic, and political structures of the country” he would “be unable to stop the wave of violence.”¹⁴⁶ In a sermon the year before his death, he stated “to the rich and powerful: unless you become poor, unless you have a concern for the poverty of our

¹⁴³ Oscar Romero, *Violence of Love* (Harper & Row: 1988), 152.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 178-179

¹⁴⁵ Oscar Romero cited by Scott Wright, *Oscar Romero and the Communion of Saints* (Orbis Books: 2009), 100.

¹⁴⁶ Oscar Romero, *A Shepard’s Diary* (Novalis: 1993), 316.

people as though they were your own family, you will not be able to save society.”¹⁴⁷ It was ultimately up to the powerful and wealthy to save the El Salvadorian society from a violent revolution, not by instituting harsher punitive measures, but by creating a more just social system. Romero was not going to be used as a tool of the oligarchy by merely serving as the voice to pacify the masses by promising them a wonderful afterlife if they did not complain about or rebel against their earthly conditions. He would preach peace but also let the ruling class know that they would need to establish the environment where peace would be possible.

The crucial message of the preferential option for the poor of both Gutiérrez and the Medellín Conference was very apparent in Romero’s teaching and ministry. He reminded the powerful that “they should listen to the voice of justice and the voice of the poor as the voice of the Lord himself.”¹⁴⁸ He admits that he had been previously guilty of telling the suffering “be patient, heaven will follow, hang on,” but he now realized “that’s not the salvation Christ brought. The salvation Christ brings is a salvation from every bondage that oppresses human beings.”¹⁴⁹ Where he had once been skeptical of the goals of Medellín, he now reaffirmed and even cited Medellín as he stated that the church now “understands Christ’s preference for the poor, because the poor are as Medellín explains, those who ‘place before the Latin American Church a challenge and a mission that it cannot sidestep.’”¹⁵⁰ Romero stressed the importance of the church in El Salvador being “incarnate” and “side by side with the poor.” It is also called to “proclaim the good news

¹⁴⁷ Oscar Romero, *Violence of Love* (Harper & Row: 1988), 147.

¹⁴⁸ Oscar Romero, *A Shepard’s Diary* (Novalis: 1993), 352.

¹⁴⁹ Oscar Romero, *Violence of Love* (Harper & Row: 1988), 163.

¹⁵⁰ Oscar Romero cited by Scott Wright, *Oscar Romero and the Communion of Saints* (Orbis Books: 2009), 64.

to the poor” through showing how they are uniquely blessed in the Kingdom of God. Finally, the church should “defend the poor.” The church should be like the “voice of Israel’s prophets” who spoke judgment on those who oppress the poor.¹⁵¹

Romero not only imparted the message of liberation in his sermons and journals, he began to proclaim the core of its message to many outside of El Salvador in his increasingly influential international role. At the Latin American Bishops Conference in Puebla, Mexico in 1979, Romero went to represent the El Salvadorian church. One of the goals of the conference was to define what had been started at Medellín in regard to liberation theology. Pope John Paul II had stated at the opening address that the bishops should “take Medellín’s conclusions as its point of departure, with all the positive elements contained therein, but without disregarding the incorrect interpretations that have sometimes resulted.”¹⁵² It is clear from Romero’s journals that there was some tension at the conference especially after his fellow El Salvadorian, Bishop Aparicio, released a statement in the midst of the conference which “blames the Jesuits for the violence in El Salvador and accuses them of having come to Puebla to defend the Archbishop’s position” which Aparicio saw as “indefensible” as it “personally offended the government.”¹⁵³

Puebla is an example of how Romero had begun to change his position on the issue of liberation theology. Where once he would have stood with the more conservative bishops in condemnation of the teachings, he was now being seen as someone who had

¹⁵¹ Oscar Romero, *Violence of Love* (Harper & Row: 1988), 189-190.

¹⁵² John Paul II, *Address of His Holiness John Paul II* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana: 1979).

¹⁵³ Pedro Arnoldo Aparicio cited by Oscar Romero, *A Shepard’s Diary* (Novalis: 1993), 146.

gone through a “supposed conversion.” Though Romero did not quite see it in such dramatic terms, he did acknowledge that “to be converted is to return to the true God and, in this sense, I felt that my contact with the poor ... brings me to feel even more my need for God.”¹⁵⁴ Through Romero did not play a large role in the conference, he had become a type of international figure by this point and was being constantly interviewed by Mexican and international outlets regarding the situation in El Salvador and the role of the Church. He stated to the journalists that the El Salvadorian church would boldly denounce “whatever limits our ability to build a country which has love, justice and peace at its foundation.”¹⁵⁵ Romero also tells of his time meeting with Archbishop Helder Câmara of Brazil, who is widely seen as one of the most prominent liberation theologians. Câmara expressed his “appreciation for the self-sacrificing work” that the Jesuits in El Salvador were undertaking.¹⁵⁶ Romero had largely gone from the conservative priest who attacked the Jesuits’ actions in El Salvador to one who identified with them and defended them both within and outside the country.

Puebla also demonstrated the growing polarization within the church. There seemed to be little middle ground in the Latin American church. There were those who were strongly in favor of liberationist ideas and those who opposed even slight movements in that direction. This could also be a reason for Romero’s surprising rapid acceptance of more liberationist views. There was a type of war going on within the Catholic Church, and though Romero wanted to keep a degree of autonomy, it was clear

¹⁵⁴ Oscar Romero cited by Scott Wright, *Oscar Romero and the Communion of Saints* (Orbis Books: 2009), 93.

¹⁵⁵ Oscar Romero, *A Shepard’s Diary* (Novalis: 1993), 135.

¹⁵⁶ Helder Câmara cited by Ibid, 147.

that he was siding with the more liberationist priests even if that meant alienating himself from the more conservative leaders.

Though there was much that Romero was encouraged with at Puebla, he was also afraid that the same thing would happen with the “Puebla Document as with Medellín’s. Many Catholics, out of prejudice, at times out of ignorance, did not put it into practice.”¹⁵⁷ For Romero, Puebla was simply the progression of what happened at the Vatican II and Medellín. Romero wanted to make it clear that under his leadership the El Salvadorian church was prepared to offer an “evangelization that is committed and fearless”¹⁵⁸ no matter how much resistance it would face by those in power both inside and outside the church.

Romero did not merely represent the ideas of liberation theology in his teachings, but more importantly in his life and ultimately, his death. Medellín taught that identifying with the poor was much more than giving speeches about social justice. It involved living with them, empathizing with them in their sorrow, and ultimately joining hands with them in the hard and arduous task of spiritual and social liberation.¹⁵⁹ Romero was willing to be the object of scorn from government officials, the wealthy oligarchy, and even some of his fellow priests. He appeared to let go of his past respectability and timidity and was willing to risk being portrayed as subversive or a communist in his solidarity with the people.

¹⁵⁷ Oscar Romero, *Violence of Love* (Harper & Row: 1988), 145.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 145.

¹⁵⁹ Conference of Latin American Bishops, “Excerpts on Justice, Peace, and Poverty from the Final Document.” *Medellin Conference*, September 6, 1968, 21-22.

Romero helped exemplify the central teachings of Medellín and greatly changed his position on liberation theology due to the undeniable realities he had lived through. However, he represented a more moderate and peaceful version of liberationist thought compared to some of the radical interpretations of the Medellín Conference which were growing in Latin America. He also reinforced the deep Christian roots behind the theology which show that social and economic liberation are simply part of the greater liberation from sin that Christ offers. In doing so, he helped exemplify to both the Latin American society and the greater world community that the message behind liberation theology was not about a license to violent revolution, but about the pursuit of both justice and peace in light of the ultimate spiritual liberation of Jesus.

During this time, there were priests like those in Nicaragua who had openly supported the revolution under the Sandinistas and had actually gone on to serve in top government positions under Daniel Ortega's new government.¹⁶⁰ There were also priests in El Salvador who, while not necessarily picking up arms to fight with the revolutionary forces, were incredibly sympathetic to their aims. An example of this was Father Neto Barrera, who Romero described as a priest who had "acquiesced greatly with the political and revolutionary ideas" of the rebel movements.¹⁶¹ Romero, on the other hand, always stressed the necessity of peace in working for justice. Violence was not a necessary evil. It was a great sin that the church should never sanction nor bless, whether it was violence from the elite power structure or from those who were resisting their oppression.

¹⁶⁰ Penny Lernoux, *People of God* (Penguin Books: 1989), 59.

¹⁶¹ Oscar Romero, *A Shepard's Diary* (Novalis: 1993), 117.

Romero tells the story of two young men who came to see him who thought that “only violence” could resolve “the unjust situations in our country.” Romero pleaded with them to give up their violent ideology and follow “the force of Christian love.”¹⁶² He makes it very clear in his writings that “hate and vengeance can never be the path to true liberation. The road that leads to genuine well-being always goes through justice and love.”¹⁶³ If both ideals were not stressed, true liberation could not be achieved.

He agreed to meet with different guerilla groups and listened to their desire for liberation in which he found much agreement. He recognized that their aims were often built on a genuine desire for the good of the people and a more just society. However, he also sought to “persuade them to the Christian ideal of nonviolence.” The revolutionary forces may have had the same end goal as the church, but their way of reaching it was vastly different. Romero laments the refusal to follow the path of love. Because of this resistance, Romero saw a “deep gap” between the guerillas and the “Christian position.”¹⁶⁴

Romero made it very clear that “the only legitimate violence” is the self-sacrificial violence which follows Christ’s example. It is a violence that allows individuals to “repress in themselves the outbursts of pride, kill in their heart the outbursts of greed...that out of it a new person may arise.”¹⁶⁵ As Romero states, “the violence we preach is not the violence of the sword, the violence of hatred. It is the

¹⁶² Ibid, 170.

¹⁶³ Ibid, 351.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, 176.

¹⁶⁵ Oscar Romero, *Violence of Love* (Harper & Row: 1988), 39.

violence of love....that wills to beat weapons into sickles for work.”¹⁶⁶ Though there is the importance of peace and non-violence mentioned in the documents at Medellín and the writings of theologians such as Gutiérrez, it plays a more central role in the writings of Romero. There are a number of explanations for this. One would obviously be the fact that El Salvador at the time was heading for a full blown civil war, which was not necessarily the case in some of the other countries where liberation thought was spreading. However, there also seems to be more of a complete commitment towards non-violence. Perhaps, Romero feared that if excuses were made to justify violence in one incident or situation, it would give license to justify violence in almost any setting where injustice is occurring. Every conflict would be seen as the “exception” which would justify violence in the name of a more just society.

Though he did condemn the violence on the left, it is clear from his writings that he believed the wealthy and powerful shared more of the blame for the violence in the country than the groups resisting that change through the use of violence. Just as in the teachings of Medellín and Gutiérrez, all violence was not the same to Romero. The structural injustice, repression, torture, and assassinations by the oligarchy and government forces had to be stopped for true to peace come. However, while the people were waiting for that peace, they should not resort to the path of violence no matter how tempting or justified it could appear.

Romero also set a different pattern from some other followers of liberationist thought by refusing to directly align the church with any political group or organization

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 12.

whether it was the government or right-wing parties on one hand or the revolutionary movements on the other. Romero felt the church would have to give up parts of its identity and prophetic voice if it aligned itself too closely with any organization. As Romero states, “The church cannot be the ally...of any political system or of any human political strategy.”¹⁶⁷ Romero met with people from both sides of the political spectrum, government officials and guerilla leaders. He also met with foreign ambassadors, foreign press, moderate and radical political parties, and military officials. In many ways, his commitment to peace allowed for this broad outreach to diverse groups of people. Romero was deeply political, but he was not partisan or tied to the thinking of any one organization. He would state the truth to all groups. He would affirm what was positive in their organizations while decrying the negative he saw.

He encouraged all parties to follow the path of peace and justice. To the leftist organizations, he encouraged them to continue to strive for the liberation of the people but in a peaceful and non-violent manner. To the government officials and oligarchy, he encouraged them to serve in their positions with a sense of justice and compassion towards the poor and needy. On one instance a soldier came to ask Romero what he should do as he was very guilt ridden over the corruption and human rights abuses within the military. He wanted to leave the army. Romero instead told him “to be honorable within the military...not taking advantage of the situation as others do.” He should live as “yeast in his own dough.”¹⁶⁸ Though Romero enraged many of the conservative bishops by refusing to stand beside the government in the church’s “official role,” he also

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 176.

¹⁶⁸ Oscar Romero, *A Shepard's Diary* (Novalis: 1993), 297.

disturbed many on the left for not completely embracing their organizations or fully attacking the army and government.

Romero states that “an unwise mixture of politics with pastoral care can cause great evil.”¹⁶⁹ The Vatican II and twentieth-century popes had certainly brought up this theme as the church moved to a less central role within governmental entities.¹⁷⁰ The church had begun promoting religious tolerance instead of ecclesiastical control of the society. However, Romero was not only concerned about the church controlling the state in a more conservative, theocratic system. He was also concerned that some in the church were going to the other extreme and wedding the church to Marxist ideology at the expense of ecclesiastical and Biblical teaching.

Many liberationist leaders at this time had fewer reservations of aligning the religious faith with political organizations. There was more obvious support among other Jesuits for the leftist organizations in El Salvador. Many of the individuals in areas like Aguilares that had been part of the Christian communities eventually joined in with the rebel forces in the lead-up to the civil war. The Conference of Medellín and Gutiérrez clearly call for the church to align itself with the cause of the poor. The extent to which the church should align itself with leftist organizations is a little more unclear. At the Medellín Conference, the bishops stated that with the goal of “human advancement” for the poor there is “the necessity of the rational structuring of all our pastoral action and the integration of all our efforts with those of other entities.”¹⁷¹ Given the call for peace at the

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 166.

¹⁷⁰ II Vatican Council, “Gaudium Et Spes.” *Pastoral Constitution of the Church*, December 7, 1965.

¹⁷¹ Conference of Latin American Bishops, “Excerpts on Justice, Peace, and Poverty from the Final Document.” *Medellin Convention*, September 6, 1968.

Medellín Conference, the church aligning itself with revolutionary groups is somewhat problematic; however, it is not completely ruled out under extraordinary circumstances. In Romero's interpretation of the message of liberation, the church should not become partisan or joined to one organization. If it were to do so, it would sacrifice the purity and unique mission of the church.

It is difficult to say how Romero may have evolved on this issue if he had lived through the war. Would he have kept his autonomous stance or would the conflict have pushed him further in the direction of embracing the revolutionary position? What is clear is that while Romero may have wanted to remain autonomous and nonpartisan, he was not neutral. He certainly sided more with the peasant and people's movements especially as the conflict and violence escalated. He saw the structural violence of the government as being the underlying issue that had to be resolved. Because of this, his prophetic message became increasingly aimed at those in positions of power.

Romero's autonomy and willingness to serve as a type of peace broker obviously upset people on both sides of the growing conflict in El Salvador. In October of 1979, when there was a bloodless coup by a couple of young officers which promised a more peaceful and just government, Romero agreed to meet with them. This greatly upset many on the left as they saw Romero "as putting too much trust in those people." He was letting himself be deceived, and he was deceiving other people in the process.¹⁷² On the other side, Romero faced great resistance when he tried to meet and work out a compromise with guerrillas who had taken hostages. In one instance in February of 1979,

¹⁷² Carmen Elena Hernandez cited by Scott Wright, *Oscar Romero and the Communion of Saints* (Orbis Books: 2009), 106.

the Popular Leagues had taken a member of the National Guard prisoner at El Rosario Church. Romero essentially served as the intermediary to have the soldier returned. Though the government officially recognized and cooperated with Romero, he could sense the “aggressive” nature of the troops who were starting to lose their patience with the archbishop.¹⁷³ The popular organizations “occupied” churches on numerous occasions, often bringing in bodies of those who had been killed by government oppression. Romero did beg the leaders to “think about, evaluate these occupations, taking into account the difficulties” which it caused for the church.¹⁷⁴ He urged them to “think of some other way” to have their voices and message heard instead of occupying churches.¹⁷⁵ However, from his journals, one can also glean Romero’s empathy for the cause of many of the organizations, even as they brought weapons and violence into the church. While he did actively denounce the violence, those in power in El Salvador saw him as far too cooperative with these groups.

In addition to keeping the church unattached to any political organization, Romero was also deeply concerned that liberation theology maintain its spiritual emphasis and not merely turn into a call for political liberty and economic justice. He believed that, “while one is a slave of sin-of selfishness, violence, cruelty, and hatred-one is not fitted for the people’s liberation.”¹⁷⁶ He was concerned that the El Salvadorian people, especially the youth, “have reached political maturity earlier than Christian maturity; they see life in political terms...and they have no time left for what is

¹⁷³ Oscar Romero, *A Shepard’s Diary* (Novalis: 1993), 370-371.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 514.

¹⁷⁵ Oscar Romero cited by María López Vigil, *Monseñor Romero: Memories in Mosaic* (Orbis Books: 2013), 176.

¹⁷⁶ Oscar Romero, *Violence of Love* (Harper & Row: 1988), 198.

Christian.”¹⁷⁷ He believed that many had first become politically aware because of their faith. This was especially true in more of the rural areas such as Aguilares where the work of priests like Father Grande had helped the peasant communities understand the political dimensions of the message of Jesus through their Christian communities.¹⁷⁸

Romero was deeply concerned that “those who have become involved in popular political organizations do not lose the faith that perhaps inspired their political commitment in the first place.”¹⁷⁹ As the church preached a message of peace that came in conflict with some of the ideas of the popular organizations, many of the youth were following the organizations over the church. Though the church may have led them to a political awareness and an understanding of the ideas of liberation, the leftist guerrillas offered a more immediate path to that liberation. As Romero states, “young people especially are impatient and want a better world right away,” but Christ offered a “long-term moral revolution in which we human beings come to change ourselves from worldly thinking.”¹⁸⁰

For Romero, the social problems in the society were not merely inevitable class struggles or conflicts over resources. He did not see the world primarily through a Marxist perspective. He saw injustice as part of the greater problem of human sin which only could be addressed in spiritual terms. Unless the people were liberated from sin, a new form of oppression would surely replace the previous one. Romero did not want the

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 174.

¹⁷⁸ Penny Lernoux, *Cry of the People* (Penguin Books: 1980), 69-70.

¹⁷⁹ Oscar Romero, *A Shepard's Diary* (Novalis: 1993), 247.

¹⁸⁰ Oscar Romero, *Violence of Love* (Harper & Row: 1988), 34.

people to merely “shout slogans about new structures; new structures will be useless without new persons.”¹⁸¹

Two of the problems Romero saw as causing much of the injustices in the land were idolatry and a lack of love. In the nation there were many individuals who were making “gold, money, lands, power, and political life” into their “everlasting gods.”¹⁸² Romero compared the situation in El Salvador to the religion of the native people of Central America. However, instead of actually worshiping numerous gods in nature, many in El Salvador worshiped the gods of “money, political interests, and national security.” For Romero, “those false gods must be overthrown.” There would only be true liberation when the people stop trying to “displace God from his alter” and instead “adore the one true God.”¹⁸³ He also saw idolatry as the source of much of the criticism and hatred of the message about the preferential option for the poor. He decries the “adorers of idols” who “disparage with slanderous and pernicious criticism those who have the courage to remind them of the true interpretation of Christ’s teaching.”¹⁸⁴ The wealthy and powerful had used the church to their advantage for such a long time. They had not shown a true interest in the call for spiritual conversion, but had rather used the church to justify their position of power. However, now that they were finally being confronted with their unjust actions, what they truly worshiped was being revealed.

Romero also saw the source of many of the problems in El Salvador as a simple failure of people to love their neighbors as themselves. If they truly practiced this love,

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 188.

¹⁸² Ibid, 105.

¹⁸³ Ibid, 116.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, 43.

there would be “no repression, no selfishness, none of such cruel inequalities in society.” A lack of love had turned the whole idea of justice into brutality. It had turned the country from having a peaceful order to a country full of torture and cruelty.¹⁸⁵ Loving one’s neighbor was not merely about showing a type of shallow kindness to them. It was more importantly about ensuring that society is meeting their basic needs, helping to create a society in which there is a real sense of justice for the poor. The failure of the country to establish this type of just order was not ultimately due to poor organization or ignorance. The failure was due to individuals choosing not to love their neighbors as themselves.

Ultimately, Romero believed the people of El Salvador would be “unable to save” their country with their own “human power.” They needed the “liberation to come from Christ” who “died to pay for all injustices” and became “the redemption to all those who suffer.”¹⁸⁶ Though the people had a very important role in the work of their own liberation, Romero believed that it was only through faith in Christ that the true liberation would come. Though Romero would applaud the liberationist sentiments in all the revolutionary movements as he saw them ultimately as a reflection of the Christian liberation, he wanted to make it clear that the ultimate liberation would not come from the power of human strength alone. The people needed to return to the spiritual roots of liberation theology in order to achieve real liberation, not only economic and social, but also a spiritual liberation from sin and death.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 89-90.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, 15.

Romero's message and life were such a powerful representation of Medellín and liberation theology precisely because he had to be "converted" to the teaching. He was not a politically inclined individual who found a theology that would suit his political aims. He was a naturally conservative and cautious bishop who embraced the teachings of liberation out of his profound spiritual devotion and his deep love for the people of El Salvador. Because of this, he held true to the spiritual roots of liberation theology as he was first a man of faith who only became political when it became a necessity.

He also embodied teachings of Medellín by seeking to moderate the violent interpretations of it. He held fast to the teaching of peace that Medellín had stressed, even when others in the church had abandoned the pursuit of peace in the desire for a more rapid justice. Through this, he helped save the message of liberation theology by preserving its true intent from those who had sought to merely use it as fodder for their political ambition.

Penny Lernoux describes Romero's voice as being "like a cry from the people."¹⁸⁷ More than any other characteristic, this illustrates how Romero epitomized the message of liberation theology. He lived a life amongst the poor and needy. He did not merely theorize about it from the comfort of a university or monastery. He did not just speculate about the ramifications of liberation from the security of the first world. He chose to continue working for justice and preaching the ideals of liberation in the midst of chaos, abject poverty, and unspeakable violence. This resolve ultimately cost him his life. However, Romero realized that this was the likely outcome. It was not his greatest

¹⁸⁷ Penny Lernoux, *People of God* (Penguin Books: 1989), 95.

concern. His life had already been joined together with the sorrow, struggles, and dreams of liberation of the El Salvadorian people. As he had taken on the voice of the people, after his death the people would carry his message to the farthest reaches of El Salvador and ultimately to the edges of the earth.

CHAPTER THREE

THE LEGACY OF OSCAR ROMERO AND HIS INFLUENCE ON LIBERATIONIST THOUGHT

On March 24, 1980 a single shot rang out in the cathedral where Oscar Romero was giving mass. Romero passed away before his fellow congregants could even get him medical attention. General Robert D'Abussion had been the one responsible for the assassination. He was a former military general and leader of the National Republican Alliance. Though he was not officially a government agent, he had the backing of many of the wealthy and powerful leaders in El Salvadorian society.¹⁸⁸ The shot had sought to silence Romero's liberationist views which were directly confronting the actions of the government and oligarchy. However, through his death, Romero became a martyr in El Salvador, Latin America, and around the world. Because of Romero's perceived martyrdom, the message he preached of a God who sides specifically with the poor and oppressed also became more powerful. Ultimately, Romero's life and death helped to enable the spread and preservation of liberationist thought into the twenty-first century.

The impact of the assassination of the "People's Archbishop" on El Salvadorian society is difficult to even measure. By the time of his death, he had become so beloved by the majority of the country that his death led not only to a sense of immense sorrow but also intense anger. A leader of the Democratic Revolutionary Front stated that in response to Romero's assassination, "If we had had called for it, there would have been a

¹⁸⁸ James R. Brockman, *Romero: A Life* (Orbis Books: 1989), 250-252.

popular uprising that day!”¹⁸⁹ As Cesar Arce describes her experience after his death, “We gathered to cry for him, even more than if he’d been a compadre or someone from our own family. He was our people’s right arm, and they broke it.”¹⁹⁰

There was widespread international condemnation of the assassination and even the government officials and oligarchy officially condemned the action,¹⁹¹ though in secret many were celebrating the death of Romero, including throwing a party “with champagne, fireworks, and dancing” where the assassin, General D’Aubuisson, served as the guest of honor.¹⁹² The El Salvadorian bishops immediately released a statement praising Romero for how he continuously “denounced with inexorable vigor institutionalized injustice and abuse against human rights.” They hoped that Romero’s violent death would serve for the “conversion and reconciliation of the family of El Salvador,” a conversion which would bring about a society of “greater justice and brotherhood.”¹⁹³ They desired that the dual goals of both justice and peace that Romero championed would become a reality after his death. They did not want him to be co-opted into a type of “passive saint” by those in power. However, Romero’s goals of peace and justice would not come immediately. In fact, the days after Romero’s death would bring even more profound repression and violence.

¹⁸⁹ Leonci Pichinte cited by María López Vigil, *Monseñor Romero: Memories in Mosaic* (Orbis Books: 2013), 292.

¹⁹⁰ Cesar Arce cited by Ibid, 293.

¹⁹¹ James R. Brockman, *Romero: A Life* (Orbis Books: 1989), 247.

¹⁹² Flor Fierro cited by María López Vigil, *Monseñor Romero: Memories in Mosaic* (Orbis Books: 2013), 291.

¹⁹³ Council of El Salvadorian Bishops cited by James R. Brockman, *Romero: A Life* (Orbis Books: 1989), 246.

At Romero's funeral over 250,000 people crowded into the streets around the cathedral to come and pay their respects to the slain archbishop. As the Archbishop of Mexico, Cardinal Corripio Ahumada, was paraphrasing Romero's famous teaching, "Violence cannot kill truth or justice," there were loud bomb explosions that resounded in the cathedral.¹⁹⁴ People began to run as snipers started shooting at the congregants from the buildings around the church. In the end, there were 31 casualties. The government tried to lay the blame on leftist forces for the bombs and violence. However, the next day eight bishops signed a letter refuting the government's account of the events.¹⁹⁵ For them, there was no doubt that government-backed right wing forces had carried out the attacks. The same forces that had put Romero in his grave were trying to stop any political action that might arise in response to his death.

The "father" of liberation theology, Gustavo Gutiérrez, had attended the mass, and he solemnly remarked that the violence on the day of Romero's burial was dismaying, but he believed, "it could not have been otherwise. Monseñor Romero's burial took place in the midst of the suffering and struggles of his people." Gutiérrez also believed that Romero's death allowed the people "to see with greater clarity the witness of many other martyrdoms-of peasants, lay people, religious, and priests in Latin America: martyrdoms that many people scandalously still do not accept."¹⁹⁶ Though there had been scores of other priests and bishops who had been killed for preaching the ideas behind liberation theology both in El Salvador and throughout Latin America, few had been so

¹⁹⁴ Jorge Lara Braud cited by María López Vigil, *Monseñor Romero: Memories in Mosaic* (Orbis Books: 2013), 298.

¹⁹⁵ James R. Brockman, *Romero: A Life* (Orbis Books: 1989), 247.

¹⁹⁶ Gustavo Gutiérrez cited by Scott Wright, *Oscar Romero and the Communion of Saints* (Orbis Books: 2009), 135-136.

internationally known as Oscar Romero. No other liberationist leader had risen to such a level of prominence to be nominated for the Noble Peace Prize.¹⁹⁷ Though Romero's story of liberation and sacrifice may have widely resembled other martyred priests, his story was the one that resounded loudest in the international press and what had occurred garnered sympathy and provoked outrage to those both in the developing and developed world.

Shortly after his death, James Goodsell from *The Christian Science Monitor* described Romero as "the conscience of his troubled land. A force for moderation." He went on to state that, "he was widely respected throughout the country" and "thoroughly committed to the human rights of all Salvadoreans."¹⁹⁸ The *New York Times* described Romero as a leader "whose compassion won him a wide following. He "was known as a man who acted from the heart."¹⁹⁹ Though repressive government may have tried to hide the deaths of other liberationist leaders, Romero's death would not go unnoticed. With his international recognition, Romero became the symbol of a church that was under oppression, and his death had an impact on not only the Latin American church, but also the international community. Congregants in first world nations most likely did not hear about the deaths of some of the other priests killed by the El Salvadorian government, but Romero's name and reputation had become internationally known.

In El Salvador, the liberationist movement became even stronger as the result of Romero's death. As the death of Rutilio Grande had inspired a change in Oscar Romero,

¹⁹⁷ James R. Brockman, *Romero: A Life* (Orbis Books: 1989), 148-149.

¹⁹⁸ James Nelson Goodsell. "Salvador Slaying Stirs Talk of 'Full Civil War'." *The Christian Science Monitor*, March 26, 1980.

¹⁹⁹ Edward Schumacher. "Church in El Salvador Now Follows the Middle Path." *New York Times*, March 22, 1981.

Romero's death gave a new vision to the El Salvadorian church and people. Jon Sobrino describes it as Romero "rising again..in the Salvadorian people....All martyrs rise again in history, each in their own way. Archbishop Romero's (resurrection) is exceptional and unrepeatable."²⁰⁰ He had become a "venerated saint...by the poor in El Salvador."²⁰¹ He had chosen to stand with them in their struggles and turn his back on the powerful oligarchy. To this day, one can find pictures and murals of Oscar Romero throughout El Salvador and Central America right next to revolutionary figures such as Che Guevarra.²⁰² He is seen as the priest of the people. Though many of the poor did not keep to a stance of complete non-violence and were drawn into the Civil War that ravaged El Salvador throughout the early 80s and 90s, they held onto Romero's message of a God who sided with them in their struggles and who ultimately desires peace and justice in the world. The fact that Romero is still so highly revered by the El Salvadorian people shows that his message of liberation still resounds with many.

El Salvadorian church leaders continued to speak the message of liberation after Romero's death though the persecution from the government continued. One of the most vicious examples of this persecution occurred nine years later on November 18, 1989 when six Jesuit priests from the University of Central America were gunned down by military forces for their political involvement on behalf of the poor.²⁰³ As Fr. Jose Maria Tojeira states, "they were assassinated because they sought truth and spoke the truth-

²⁰⁰ Jon Sobrino, *Companions of Jesus: The Jesuit Martyrs of El Salvador* (Orbis Books: 1990), 53.

²⁰¹ Penny Lernoux, *People of God* (Penguin Books: 1989), 145.

²⁰² Filip Mazureczak, "Oscar Romero's Exaggerated Critics," *First Things*, March 7, 2013.

²⁰³ Jon Sobrino, *Companions of Jesus: The Jesuit Martyrs of El Salvador* (Orbis Books: 1990), xi.

because their truth favored the poor.”²⁰⁴ This was another event which sent shockwaves around the international community and helped to further spread the liberationist message. Fellow Jesuit, John Sobrino, states the “human and Christian reaction to this murder has been unique, only comparable perhaps to the reaction to Archbishop Romero’s murder.”²⁰⁵ Romero’s assassination had not been a singular event. It was part of a greater campaign of systematic violence against those who preached the message of a preferential option for the poor. The resistance to this message would grow even stronger after Romero’s assassination as the tension in El Salvador increased.

To this day, Romero’s life and liberationist message have been at the heart of El Salvadorian society. When Barack Obama went to visit El Salvador in 2009, one of the first places that the El Salvadorian President from the leftist National Liberation Front, Mauricio Funestook, took Obama was to the tomb of Oscar Romero. Robert White, who was ambassador to El Salvador when Romero was killed, stated that this ceremonial event was extremely significant. It legitimized the historical narrative of Romero as a national hero struggling for the rights of the poor while portraying the right wing governments and oligarchy as repressive.²⁰⁶ There were some who wished that President Obama had issued an apology for the U.S. involvement with the right wing governments in El Salvador.²⁰⁷ Though he did not go that far, the visit did in a small way show the U.S. recognition of the history and impact of Oscar Romero. The visit to the tomb did anger some on the El Salvadorian right. As one former right wing leader stated, many

²⁰⁴ Jose Maria Tojeira cited by Ibid, xxvi.

²⁰⁵ Ibid, 9.

²⁰⁶ Interview with Robert White, February 27, 2014.

²⁰⁷ Manuel Perez Rocha, “Obama in Latin America: Another Missed Opportunity,” *Foreign Policy in Focus*, March 24, 2011.

Salvadorians “do not believe Romero is worthy of sanctification.” He went on to say that Obama “should also go to the grave of Major Roberto D'Aubuisson” the man who was responsible for Romero’s death.²⁰⁸ Despite the resistance from some, it is clear that Romero has become a national hero, His message had not only touched the church, but in time, had even reached to the El Salvadorian government that had once been responsible for his death.

Romero also helped to preserve and spread the message of liberationist thought beyond El Salvador to the rest of Latin America. Romero’s influence over the church in Latin America had begun long before his death. His radio programs and message had spread far beyond the borders of El Salvador. He was especially influential among other Central American nations who had access to his radio broadcasts. He also had been instrumental in the decision of the bishops at the Puebla Conference to reaffirm many of the ideas that had begun at Medellín.²⁰⁹ However, in his death, his influence and vision became more powerful. In his death, he served to strengthen the voice of resistance to oppressive governments and reinforced the ideas of liberation theology in the midst of an increasingly conservative papacy. As Gustavo Gutiérrez stated shortly after his death, “I think the life and death of Monseñor Romero divides the recent history of the Latin American church in a before and after.”²¹⁰ The liberationists movements in Latin America now had a well-known and highly respected martyr who the Vatican and more conservative bishops could not easily defame.

²⁰⁸ Mario Valiente cited by Linda Cooper and James Hodge, “Obama at Romero’s Grave: ‘Missed Opportunity.’” *National Catholic Reporter*, March 23, 2011.

²⁰⁹ Penny Lernoux, *People of God* (Penguin Books: 1989), 95.

²¹⁰ Gustavo Gutiérrez cited by Scott Wright, *Oscar Romero and the Communion of Saints* (Orbis Books: 2009), 136.

Romero ultimately facilitated the spread of the liberationist message of peace and justice beyond Latin America, even to wealthier first world nations such as the United States. Even before his death, Romero had become well known in certain circles within the United States, particularly in more progressive Catholic communities. Romero wanted to stress to these first world communities the essential doctrine of the preferential option for the poor. A year and half before his death, Romero had reiterated to students at Georgetown University where he received his honorary doctorate that it was “a theological, transcendent perspective that inspired the Latin American bishops at Medellín ...toward the service of human rights and the betterment of human beings.”²¹¹ Romero wanted to make it clear that despite the opposition and propaganda the people in first world countries may have been hearing against liberation theology, it was not about violence but about defending the rights of the poor and identifying with the values of the Kingdom of God. Romero reasserted this same message when he spoke sixth months before his death at the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium. He wanted to remind his first world audience that, “it is the poor who tell us what the world is, and what the Church’s service to the world should be.”²¹²

More specifically, Romero’s death caused many Christians in the United States to re-examine the U.S. foreign policy in light of the liberationist teachings of justice and peace. Many had been deeply shocked by Romero’s death. They were also profoundly outraged by the brutal rape and murder of four American nuns in El Salvador in 1981. They had gone to El Salvador to help assist refugees that were fleeing from the Civil

²¹¹ Oscar Romero cited by Ibid, 73.

²¹² Oscar Romero cited by Ibid, 115.

War, but had become targets themselves for their affinity towards the poor. The government of El Salvador blamed the right wing militias.²¹³ However, former U.S. ambassador, Robert White, believed that General Vides Casanova, who was later promoted to Minister of Defense and worked closely with the U.S. military, along with his cousin, Coronel Oscar Edgardo Casanova Vejar, were behind the killings. Furthermore, he believed the U.S. officials were fairly certain these men “were all guilty of either ordering or then covering up the killing.”²¹⁴ The Secretary of State under Ronald Reagan, Alexander Haig, revealed U.S. indifference to the incident by simply stating, “the nuns may have run through a roadblock or may have accidentally been perceived to have been doing so, and there may have been an exchange of fire.”²¹⁵ The four men who were convicted of the killings later confessed they had carried out the murders based on military orders, a military that was highly backed by U.S. military aid.²¹⁶ As the international director of the U.S. Catholic Conference, Reverend J. Bryan Hehir, put it, Romero’s assassination and the murder of the nuns caused “many American Catholics to feel a personal connection to El Salvador and a personal responsibility for the U.S. policy in Central America.”²¹⁷

Cynthia Arnson sees the “persecution of the Church and of the poor” as the “taproot” that led to much of the religious opposition to the U.S. foreign policy in Latin

²¹³ “Bodies of 4 American Women Are Found in El Salvador: Peasant Discovers Bodies.” *New York Times*, December 5, 1980.

²¹⁴ Robert White cited by Larry Rohter, “4 Salvadorians Say They Killed U.S. Nuns on Orders of Military,” *New York Times*, April 3, 1998.

²¹⁵ Alexander Haig cited by Charles Pierce, “The Price of America’s Secret Wars, Then and Now,” *Esquire*, December 6, 2011.

²¹⁶ Larry Rohter, “4 Salvadorians Say They Killed U.S. Nuns on Orders of Military,” *New York Times*, April 3, 1998.

²¹⁷ Bryan Hehir cited by Christian Smith, *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement* (University of Chicago Press: 1996), 149.

America from the 1970s to the 1990s. She believes that this activism “swelled dramatically” as the result of the death of Romero and the nuns.²¹⁸ As Christian Smith states, “Romero and the four women came to serve as ‘sacred icons’ in the Central American peace movement...ever inspiring in activists a renewed resolve, hope, and readiness to sacrifice.”²¹⁹ Many were first inspired to join in the peace movement as a result of Romero and the nuns. They could no longer blindly support the foreign policy of the United States in Latin America when there were such blatant human rights abuses. Romero had been a bishop who had stood for peace and reconciliation, and he still been gunned down by government backed forces in El Salvador, forces that had been funded by U.S. tax dollars through the military aid to El Salvador. As one peace activist and Presbyterian minister stated, “The assassination of Oscar Romero began my awareness of Central America specifically. After that event I became involved in worship, organizing, and protests.”²²⁰ These protests went beyond the U.S. policy in El Salvador to also include protests against Ronald Reagan’s backing of the Contras in Nicaragua and the overall “anti-Communist” policies of the U.S. throughout Latin America.

Romero’s life and death also contributed to the creation of the Sanctuary Movement in the early 1980s, in which some U.S. churches gave shelter and protection to undocumented immigrants and refugees. The movement specifically began after El Salvadorian refugees were largely denied asylum in the United States and forced to return immediately to their war torn nations, where they were often particularly at risk for their

²¹⁸ Cynthia Arson cited by Ibid, 149.

²¹⁹ Ibid, 150.

²²⁰ Ibid, 149.

political stances.²²¹ There was also a feeling that the U.S. with its backing of the Central American regimes was responsible for creating the refugee crisis in the first place. This movement served as a direct representation of liberation theology in the United States where people were willing to defy national immigration policy for the defense of the refugees coming from Central America. There is little doubt that Romero's life and assassination helped to create more devotion for this movement and convince those weary of defying government policy of the greater Christian commitment to side with the poor in their struggles. The leader of the Sanctuary Movement in Boston, Jane Guise, cited the killing of Romero and the four nuns as the primary reason for her involvement in the "subversive" political action which the Sanctuary Movement represented.²²²

Romero's vision of a church which sides with the poor also spread to other places around the world where there was wide spread oppression. Kevin Dowling, who was a bishop during the apartheid regime of South Africa in the 1980s, describes the deceased Romero as "my brother, my mentor, whose witness challenged me to take a prophetic stance and to walk with the poor-even if this meant to danger to my life."²²³ Today, liberation theology has spread far beyond Latin America and is present in different forms throughout the world. Romero's life was one of the great factors in its spread. He showed that liberation theology was not about violence, revenge, and hatred; it was ultimately about giving up one's own life for a more just society.

²²¹ Sophie Pirie, "The Origins of a Political Trial: The Sanctuary Movement and Political Justice," *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities*: Vol. 2: Iss. 2, Article 7, 1990, 382-383.

²²² Jane Guise cited by Christian Smith, *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement* (University of Chicago Press: 1996), 150.

²²³ Kevin Dowling cited by Scott Wright, *Oscar Romero and the Communion of Saints* (Orbis Books: 2009), 142.

Romero has become a type of iconic figure even outside of Latin America. There is no other liberationist theologian with a motion picture made about his life.²²⁴ There is actually a Romero Center in Camden, New Jersey where ever March “hundreds of people from around the country” come to celebrate Romero’s life and try to understand how his message relates to modern day issues.²²⁵ One of the goals at the center is understanding how the church can move from its “unparalleled track record in charity and service” to embracing the more cumbersome issues of “peace, justice, and the ‘option for the poor.’”²²⁶

Perhaps most importantly, Romero’s life and message had a large impact on the Catholic Church’s relationship with liberation theology. Though the Vatican and the overall church today largely see Romero as a type of spiritual martyr, there were many in the church, both inside and outside of El Salvador, who were skeptical of Romero’s aims during his life. Though the Vatican did not want the knowledge becoming public after his death, Pope John Paul II was supposedly making plans to have him recalled as archbishop shortly before his death.²²⁷ This was not necessarily surprising. John Paul II was known to be critical of many of the aims of liberation theology. While often publically confirming the need for a more just society, he was deeply “concerned about Marxist influence on the theology’s analysis of Latin America’s political economy.” Though he did not openly attack liberation theologians and sometimes even adopted liberationist language, there was a large “breach” between the Latin American church

²²⁴ Romero, directed by John Duigan, (1989: Worchester, PA.; Vision Video), DVD

²²⁵ Pilar Hogan Closky et al., *Romero’s Legacy: The Call to Peace and Justice* (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers: 2007), ix.

²²⁶ Ibid, 12.

²²⁷ John Dear, “Romero’s Resurrection,” *National Catholic Reporter*, March 16, 2010.

leaders who often wanted the church to become more involved politically on behalf of the poor and the Vatican which was opposed to such actions.²²⁸

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger who later became Pope Benedict XVI was more openly hostile to the aims of liberation theology as he served as the head of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which Penny Lernoux describes as “a latter-day version of the Inquisition.”²²⁹ An example of this opposition occurred in 1983 when Ratzinger sent “ten critical observations” regarding the writings of Gustavo Gutiérrez to the Peruvian Bishop’s Conference. In the end, the Peruvian bishops refused to condemn Gutiérrez. However, Ratzinger found other individuals to target including the well-known Brazilian liberation theologian, Leonardo Boff, and the Nicaraguan priests who were serving in the Sandinista government in Nicaragua.²³⁰ Ratzinger actually wrote two works in opposition to liberation theology, *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the "Theology of Liberation"* and *The Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation*. As he states, “This conception of Christ as a political figure, a revolutionary, as the subversive of Nazareth...does not tally with the church’s catechism.”²³¹ At times he put it even more bluntly in stating that “the phenomenon of liberation theology reveals that it constitutes a fundamental threat to the faith of the Church.”²³² As Pope Benedict XVI, he

²²⁸ Penny Lernoux, *People of God* (Penguin Books: 1989), 96.

²²⁹ Ibid, 12.

²³⁰ Ibid, 98-100

²³¹ Joseph Ratzinger cited by Nikolas Kozloff, “The Pope's Holy War Against Liberation Theology.” *Council of Hemispheric Affairs*, April 30, 2008.

²³² Joseph Ratzinger, “Liberation Theology,” *The Ratzinger Report*, Fall 1984.

continued to stand against the movements of liberation theology that existed in Latin America particularly in the countries of Ecuador, Brazil, and Paraguay.²³³

Pope John Paul II and Benedict XVI also worked to diminish the spread of liberation theology in North America and Europe. A prominent example of this was the case of Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen of Seattle who was removed from his position after his more “radical stances” on issues such as nuclear proliferation, the Sanctuary Movement, and most controversially telling Catholics to withhold half of their federal income taxes to protest against the massive arms race of the 1980s.²³⁴ The Vatican wanted to make sure that the radical elements of liberation theology were not spread to the more conservative European and American congregations.

Largely due to their fear of the growth of liberation theology, both Pope John Paul II and Benedict XVI held up Romero’s canonization. Both men were concerned that Romero had become a type of political martyr and to work for his canonization would have been promoting the “radical” interpretations of his life. Though the case of his canonization was officially opened in 1997, those involved in the case openly admitted that little to no progress was being made towards his sainthood.²³⁵ Neither Pope was openly hostile to Romero’s legacy and would not openly deny his martyrdom, but both “thought the devotion to Romero was too closely tied to left-leaning causes like liberation theology.”²³⁶ They may not have necessarily had a personal problem with his sainthood,

²³³ Nikolas Kozloff, “The Pope’s Holy War Against Liberation Theology.” *Council of Hemispheric Affairs*, April 30, 2008.

²³⁴ Penny Lernoux, *People of God* (Penguin Books: 1989), 207-209.

²³⁵ David Gibson, “John Paul II, Oscar Romero and the Politics of Making Saints,” *Religion News Service*, April 25, 2013.

²³⁶ *Ibid*, par. 5

but if he were to become a saint, they wanted to make sure that they would control the narrative of his life and work. They did not want him to become the saint of the liberationist movement.

There were certainly those who had a great desire to paint liberation theology in solely negative and violent terms. Whether it was coming from conservative priests or government officials, if the theology could be portrayed as dangerous and destructive, the social and economic impact of the theology could be negated. Many tried to paint liberation theology as a philosophy which would destroy “societal unity, by undertaking sinful, divisive actions.”²³⁷ It was portrayed as nothing more than a philosophy which pitted the poor against the rich and divided the unity of the church. It was also defined as a philosophy which created an unjustified resentment of the poor towards the rich for their situations of poverty²³⁸ which many of the anti-liberationist saw as at least partially self-inflicted. They felt there was too much emphasis on poverty being attributed to structural injustice without looking at the personal and moral issues which led to poverty.

Those against liberation theology also saw liberationist beliefs as something that would pull the church away from its spiritual focus and instead give it a solely secular and economic focus which would eventually draw people away from the faith and their personal moral obligations.²³⁹ If sin was primarily a societal issue, personal moral failures were rather insignificant. There was also the argument that those who were the biggest proponents of liberation theology were not really listening to the voice of the poor, but

²³⁷ Edward A. Lynch, “The Retreat of Liberation Theology” *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, February 1994, 5.

²³⁸ *Ibid*, 2.

²³⁹ *Ibid*, 3-5.

were rather theorists and academics who did not really have the good of the poor in mind. As Enrique Dussel states. "After having tried to lose themselves within the people, to identify with the people, [liberationists] come to understand that they must shake the people."²⁴⁰ Though there were obvious distortions of the goals of liberation theology by those opposed to its message, there were also real examples of the theology being distorted to justify all types of violent action. Though the theologians themselves may not have officially "blessed" this violence, their message was interpreted by many of their congregants in ways which gave credence to violent revolution.²⁴¹ This was even the case in El Salvador where some used the teachings of liberation to justify violent revolution against the entrenched oligarchy.²⁴²

However, while liberation theology's message has been skewed both by those opposed to it and those who have used it as a license for violence, the message of Romero and martyrs like him has also spread and shown the world a different way of viewing the message of the theology. Romero's life and death could be compared to a seed that was planted in the church. The recognition of his message was not necessarily immediately accepted. It took years, even decades, for the impact of his life on the liberationist movement to be truly seen. In fact, many could argue that the prominence of the theology was severely weakened in the immediate decades following the death of Oscar Romero due both to the opposition from the Vatican, the end of the Cold War, and changing geo-political factors. As Edward Lynch stated in 1994, "by the end of the

²⁴⁰ Enrique Dussel cited by Ibid, 6.

²⁴¹ Penny Lernoux, *People of God* (Penguin Books: 1989), 59.

²⁴² Oscar Romero, *A Shepard's Diary* (Novalis: 1993), 117.

1980s, liberation theology was noticeably in retreat.. its supporters lost ground from both above and below. Nor has the theology created new creators.”²⁴³ Liberation theology had certainly been weakened, but it had not been destroyed. Romero’s legacy and message had been muffled, but they had not been silenced. Sometimes it takes a few decades for a message to truly take root and flourish. There is a parallel here with Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement. Immediately after Dr. King’s death, his message and life were still mired in great controversy, and many of his former followers had also abandoned his teachings of non-violence for more radical action. It was not until several decades later that King’s message on Civil Rights and non-violence were more widely embraced and King’s legacy was largely seen as one of a prophet and martyr rather than a troublemaker. Romero’s message of peace and justice would see its revival over thirty years after his death under the new papacy of Pope Francis.

When Pope Benedict XVI decided to step down from his position as pope, it took many in the Catholic world by surprise. When Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Argentina took Pope Benedict’s place, many were not expecting large changes within the church either on social issues such as gay marriage and abortion or on the relationship of the church with economic issues and liberation theology. In the days after his nomination as pope, outlets such as the *New York Times* were quick to point out that Francis “is also a conventional choice, a theological conservative of Italian ancestry who vigorously backs

²⁴³ Ibid, 9.

Vatican positions.” They also noted how Pope Francis is “averse to liberation theology, which he views as hopelessly tainted with Marxist ideology.”²⁴⁴

It is easy to see why many had these early perceptions of Pope Francis. Though he was a Jesuit priest in Argentina, he was not a liberationist priest. In fact, some rumors were spread during his ascension to the papacy that he had actually turned in fellow radical priests to the past military government in Argentina. These are claims that Pope Francis vehemently denies and one of the priests allegedly betrayed by him, Francisco Jalics, also refutes.²⁴⁵ Nevertheless, it appeared that Francis would continue with the policies of Pope Benedict XVI when it came to the issue of liberation theology.

What many were not expecting was the strong economically tinged message that Pope Francis began delivering on a quite consistent basis. Pope Francis states boldly that, “Just as the commandment ‘Thou shalt not kill’ sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say “thou shalt not” to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills.”²⁴⁶ He also showed his discouragement with the economic system in which, “everything comes under the laws of competition and the survival of the fittest, where the powerful feed upon the powerless.”²⁴⁷ He went on to decry the idea of trickle-down economics which “has never been confirmed by the facts” and creates a system based on selfishness and indifference to the needy in the world. Pope Francis sees unbridled capitalism as a system in which

²⁴⁴ Emily Schmall and Larry Rohter, “A Conservative with a Common Touch,” *New York Times*, March 13, 2013.

²⁴⁵ “Imprisoned Priest Francisco Jalics Breaks Silence over Pope Francis,” *New York Daily News*, March, 21, 2013.

²⁴⁶ Pope Francis, “*Evangelii Gaudium*,” *Vatican Holy See*, November 24, 2013, 45.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 45.

“human beings are themselves considered consumer goods to be used and then discarded.”²⁴⁸

He also echoes Romero’s theme that the greed of the economic system is simply a new form of idolatry. The “ancient golden calf” of the Israelites had returned in the worship of an “impersonal economy lacking a truly human purpose.” For Francis, like Romero, this unbridled capitalist system is not merely an amoral economic structure, it is based on human sin and greed, a system where the “thirst for power and possessions knows no limits.” It is an evil system, “which tends to devour everything which stands in the way of increased profits.”²⁴⁹

In addition to his message which certainly brings out many of the ideas of liberation theology, he has also made some very symbolic gestures showing that the church is once again taking a more open position to the ideas of the liberationists. One of the first actions that Francis took after becoming Pope was to invite Gustavo Gutiérrez to Rome. They celebrated mass and then had a short breakfast together.²⁵⁰ With the often embittered history between Gustavo Gutiérrez, other liberationist leaders, and the Vatican, this was a very significant action on behalf of Pope Francis. Though it does not mean that the Church has officially embraced all the ideas that Gutiérrez put forward, it does show that the church is now open to these ideas and that Gutiérrez is seen as a legitimate voice in the discussion of how the Catholic Church should move forward. Liberation theology is not simply a heresy that needs to be uprooted from the church. It is

²⁴⁸ Ibid, 46.

²⁴⁹ Ibid, 47-48.

²⁵⁰ Harvey Cox, “Is Pope Francis the New Champion of Liberation Theology?” *The Nation*, December 18, 2013.

a very strong and important perspective to consider in the church's economic and social policy.

Perhaps one of the most telling indications of Pope Francis' new vision for the Catholic Church was his very early decision to "unblock" the canonization of Oscar Romero after his canonization had been held up by John Paul II and Benedict XVI. As Bryan Cones put it, "Romero's rehabilitation is no doubt a signal of a change in politics at the Vatican."²⁵¹ His canonization is more important than an insignificant church alteration on the position of a saint. It represents an ideological shift and recognition of the need for the church to work towards justice for the poor and marginalized. For the Catholic Church to "celebrate Romero as an official martyr of the church is to acknowledge that what we call the 'preferential option for the poor' is at the very heart of what it means to follow Christ."²⁵²

I recently interviewed the former U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador, Robert White, who was very sympathetic to Romero's teachings and the plight of the peasants of El Salvador. Because of this concern for human rights in Latin America in contrast with the strictly anti-Communist policies of the U.S., he was forced to resign when Ronald Reagan was elected. When commenting about the relationship of Pope Francis with the teachings of liberation theology, he seemed to believe that liberation theology itself was a type of historical phenomenon. However, he believed that the core ideas of liberation theology have been carried on by the teachings of leaders such as Pope Francis.²⁵³ Pope

²⁵¹ Bryan Cones, "Oscar Romero: A Saint for the Poor," *U.S. Catholic* 78 (2013): 8.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁵³ Interview with Robert White, February 27, 2014.

Francis might not use the same language that was conveyed by the Medellín Conference or Gutiérrez. Obviously, the differences in the world between 1968 and 2014 are great. There is no longer a Cold War raging, and the economic structure of the world has undergone many radical changes. However, the essential ideas of the preferential option for the poor, the evil of great inequality, and the spiritual, economic, and social freedom in the teachings of the Kingdom of God are still as relevant as ever. Pope Francis does not need to use the exact vocabulary of liberation theology. His words and actions have helped to strengthen the ideas behind the theology.

Because of the words and actions of Pope Francis, the focus of liberation theology has been heightened both within the Catholic Church and the larger world community. In December of 2013, *The Nation* released an article entitled, “Is Pope Francis the New Champion of Liberation Theology?” In the article, Harvey Cox argues that Pope Francis has not only “revived” the “spirit and language” of the II Vatican Council, but “he has also revived the message of Medellín.”²⁵⁴ In *The Telegraph*, Ambrose Evans-Pritchard states that, “liberation theology is taking over the Vatican a quarter of a century after John-Paul II systematically sought to stamp out the "singular heresy" in the radical parishes and dioceses of Latin America.”²⁵⁵ Though it may not be accurate to say that Pope Francis has truly brought back the liberation theology of the 60s and 70s, the revived interest in liberationist ideas under Pope Francis certainly shows the obvious

²⁵⁴ Harvey Cox, “Is Pope Francis the New Champion of Liberation Theology?” *The Nation*, December 18, 2013.

²⁵⁵ Ambrose Evans-Pritchard, “Liberation Theology is Back as Pope Francis Holds Capitalism to Account,” *The Telegraph*, January 8, 2014.

parallels in his message with those proclaimed by Gutiérrez, Romero, and the bishops at Medellín.

Romero's life and death helped make the strong message of social and economic justice of Pope Francis possible because Romero had helped keep the ideas of liberation theology alive. Without prominent non-violent martyrs such as Romero, it would be much easier for St. Francis' opponents in the church to simply label the ideas he is proclaiming about social justice and the preferential option for the poor as a dangerous and violent ideology. Though there are examples of this that they could surely point to, stories such as Romero's give a much different narrative. Romero creates an image of liberation theology that is much harder to criticize or dismiss. After all, he was a man who was not primarily a political ideologue who used religion to justify his beliefs. He was a deeply religious man, who only became political when the circumstances and the good of the people made it necessary. This deep love for the people and passion for the justice he found in the message of the Kingdom of God has helped to facilitate the spread and revival of the liberationist message throughout the world decades after his death.

Romero has become an international figure for human rights and dignity, much like Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi, or Nelson Mandela. The importance of these figures and icons is not so much their individual lives but the message that their lives represent and the causes they led others to embrace. Romero's message was about the importance of peace in the midst of violence, both structural and revolutionary, and justice for the poor and oppressed. Ultimately, the most important idea he helped others embrace was the message proclaimed at Medellín, that God sides primarily with the poor and therefore

the church should as well. Though liberationist ideas would probably still exist without the life of Romero, they would be more widely discredited with fewer true adherents. Romero helped to keep the message of liberation theology alive and inspire a new generation of leaders to take on its vision of a more just society. Perhaps Romero's legacy is best summed up in his own words that were spoken just two weeks before his death. He states "the force of liberation involves not only those who remain alive, but also all those whom others have tried to kill and who are more present than before in the people's movement."²⁵⁶ While Romero spread the ideas of liberation in his life, in his death, he has altered the very foundations of the church and helped revive the dream of a more just and peaceful society.

²⁵⁶ Oscar Romero, *Violence of Love* (Harper & Row: 1988), 199.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Afflick, Clive Henry. "The History and Politics of Liberation Theology in Latin American and the Carribean." *University of Miami Dissertations*, 1989.
- "Bodies of 4 American Women Are Found in El Salvador: Peasant Discovers Bodies." *New York Times*, December 5, 1980.
<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=9E04E3DE143AE732A25756C0A9649D94619FD6CF>.
- Brockman, James R. *Romero: A Life*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989.
- Brockman, James R. *The Word Remains: A Life of Oscar Romero*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982.
- Closkey, Pilar. *Romero's Legacy: The Call to Peace and Justice*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007.
- Cones, Bryan. "Oscar Romero: A Saint for the Poor." *U.S. Catholic* 78, no. 7 (2013): 8.
- Conference of Latin American Bishops. "Excerpts on Justice, Peace, and Poverty from the Final Document." *Medellin Conference*. Medellin, 1968.
- Connor, Kimberly Rae. *Imagining Grace: Liberating Theologies in the Slave Narrative Tradition*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000.
- Cooper, Linda, and James Hodge. "Obama at Romero's Grave: 'Missed Opportunity'" *National Catholic Reporter*, March 23, 2011. <http://ncronline.org/news/obama-romeros-grave-missed-opportunity>
- Cox, Harvey. "Is Pope Francis the New Champion of Liberation Theology." *The Nation*, December 18, 2013. <http://www.thenation.com/article/177651/pope-francis-new-champion-liberation-theology>
- De Las Casas, Bartolome. *An Account, Much Abbreviated, of the Destruction of the Indies*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2003.
- Dear, John. "Romero's Resurrection." *National Catholic Reporter*, March 16, 2010.
- Evans-Pritchard, Ambrose. "Liberation Theology Is Back as Pope Francis Holds Capitalism to Account." *The Telegraph*, January 8, 2014.
http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/comment/ambroseevans_pritchard/10559802/Liberation-Theology-is-back-as-Pope-Francis-holds-capitalism-to-account.html

- Foroohar, Manzar. "Liberation Theology: The Response of Latin American Catholics to Socioeconomic Problems." *Latin American Perspectives* 13, no. 3 (1986): 37-58.
- Gibson, David. "John Paul II, Oscar Romero and the Politics of Making Saints." *Religion News Service*, April 25, 2013.
<http://www.religionnews.com/2013/04/24/analysis-john-paul-ii-oscar-romero-and-the-politics-of-making-saints/>
- Gill, Anthony. *Rendering Unto Caesar: The Catholic Church and the State in Latin America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.
- Gomez, Jorge. *Farabundo Marti- La Biografia Clasica*. Havana: Ocean Sur, 2010.
- Grandin, Greg. "Barack Obama, Oscar Romero and Structural Sin." *The Nation*, March 23, 2011. <http://www.thenation.com/blog/159405/barack-obama-oscar-romero-and-structural-sin>
- Gutiérrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*. London: S.C.M. Press, 1974.
- Hooper, John, and Dan Collins. "Peru University in Vatican Battle over Right to Call Itself Catholic." *The Guardian*, October 28, 2012.
<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/oct/28/peru-university-vatican-catholic>.
- Huizer, Garret. *Peasant Rebellions in Latin America*. London: Penguin Books, 1973.
- II Vatican Council. "Gaudium Et. Spes." *Pastoral Constitution of the Church*, December 7, 1965.
- "Imprisoned Priest Francisco Jalics Breaks Silence over Pope Francis." *New York Daily News*, November 24, 2013. <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/priest-clears-pope-dirty-war-involvement-article-1.1294897>
- Kertzer, David I. *The Pope and Mussolini: The Secret History of Pius XI and the Rise of Fascism in Europe*. New York: Random House, 2014.
- Kozloff, Nikolas. "The Pope's Holy War Against Liberation Theology." *Council of Hemispheric Affairs*, April 30, 2008.
- Lernoux, Penny. *Cry of the People: The Struggle for Human Rights in Latin America--the Catholic Church in Conflict with U.S. policy*. New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books, 1980.

- Lernoux, Penny. *People of God: The Struggle for World Catholicism*. New York: Viking, 1989.
- Lynch, Edward. "The Retreat of Liberation Theology." *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*. February 1994: 12-21.
- Marx, Karl. "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right Introduction." *Deutsch-Französische*, 1844.
- Mazurczak, Filip. "Oscar Romero's Exaggerated Critics." *First Things*, March 7, 2013.
- Nelson Goodsell, James. "Salvador Slaying Stirs Talk of 'Full Civil War'" *The Christian Science Monitor*, March 26, 1980.
- Pirie, Sophie. "The Origins of a Political Trial: The Sanctuary Movement and Political Justice." *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities* 2, no. 2 (1990): 381-416.
- Pope Francis. "Evangelii Gaudium." *Vatican Holy See*, 2013.
- Pope John XXII. "Mater Et Magistra." *Vatican Holy See*, May 15, 1961.
- Pope John Paul II. "Address of His Holiness John Paul II," Speech, Puebla, Mexico, January 28, 1979. Libreria Editrice Vaticana.
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/1979/january
- Ratzinger, Joseph. "Liberation Theology." *The Ratzinger Report* Fall 1984.
- Rocha, Manuel Perez. "Obama in Latin America: Another Missed Opportunity." *Foreign Policy in Focus*, March 24, 2011.
http://fpif.org/obama_in_latin_america_another_missed_opportunity/
- Rocha, Zilda. *Helder, the Gift: A Life That Marked the Course of the Church in Brazil*. Rio De Janeiro: Editora Vozes, 2000.
- Rohter, Larry. "4 Salvadorians Say They Killed U.S. Nuns on Orders of Military." *New York Times*, April 3, 1998. <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/04/03/world/4-salvadorans-say-they-killed-us-nuns-on-orders-of-military.html>
- Romero, Oscar A., and Irene B. Hodgson. *Archbishop Oscar Romero: A Shepherd's Diary*. Cincinnati, Ohio: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1993
- Romero, Oscar A., and James R. Brockman. *The Violence of Love: The Pastoral Wisdom of Archbishop Oscar Romero*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988.

- Schmall, Emily, and Larry Rohter. "A Conservative with a Common Touch." *New York Times*, March 13, 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/14/world/europe/new-pope-theologically-conservative-but-with-a-common-touch.html?pagewanted=all>.
- Schumacher, Edward. "Church in El Salvador Now Follows the Middle Path." *New York Times*, March 22, 1981. <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/03/22/weekinreview/church-in-salvador-now-follows-the-middle-path.html>
- Smith, Chris. *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Smith, Gary. "The History of the Catholic Church in Latin America and Liberation Theology." *Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute*, January 1, 1982.
- Sobrino, Jon. *Companions of Jesus: the Jesuit Martyrs of El Salvador*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990.
- Valley, Paul. "A Church for the Poor." *New York Times*, September 5, 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/05/opinion/a-church-for-the-poor.html>.
- Vigil, María. *Monsenor Romero: Memories in Mosaic*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2013.
- White, Christopher M. *The History of El Salvador*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2008.
- Wright, Scott. *Oscar Romero and the Communion of the Saints: A Biography*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2009.