

Romero Beatified

Much profound reflection can be--and much has been--written about the beatification of Monseñor Romero.

I'll share a couple of those fine reflections with you here:

<http://luterano.blogspot.com/>

<http://paceebene.org/2015/05/27/honoring-oscar-romero-of-el-salvador/>

I did attend the beatification ceremony . . . barely. My housemates / colleagues / solidarity friends chose not to, so I headed out alone. Not being a "pomp and ceremony" kind of guy, I was satisfied with getting "close enough" . . . but surrounded by Romero's people. 1,300 men in priestly garb and sunhats, all processed and seated in good order, wouldn't inspire me, I was quite sure--even if some of those were cardinals and many more were bishops, all ostensibly honouring a global model and mentor. I could see and hear much of what was happening on the big stage, though on a big screen. I found all that was happening around me more intriguing--vendors of the informal economy drowning out those Vatican voices, trying their darnedest to get me, an inveterate veteran non-consumer, to buy their wares, their artistry, and their souvenirs. However, if these vendors couldn't make a few Romero \$\$'s at this event, they really shouldn't be in business. They needn't rely on me and my \$\$'s.

Most of the 3 km from my house to the "El Salvador del Mundo" square, the site of the beatification, was blocked to traffic, so it provided a pleasant walk - a meaningful pilgrimage - almost a procession, considering the hundreds of pilgrims whom I joined on their journey. While crossing the first major intersection, I was moved to thanksgiving, given that the newly-elected mayor and city council had just rescued this major thoroughfare from being re-named by the outgoing mayor (previous presidential candidate) for Mayor Roberto d'Aubisson, widely understood, and named by the UN Truth Commission in 1993, as being the intellectual author behind the assassination of the hero we were on our way to beatify. The street will retain the name of another venerable saint, San Antonio Abad. The faithful are most grateful. The ARENA mayoral candidate, who lost this municipal election on March 1, has since resigned from city council.

Very appropriately, the first friend to greet me on this short but meaningful pilgrimage was a guy distributing free water bags. We have been friends for 20 years, and have enjoyed hundreds of chats in a variety of settings. This was only the second time I had seen him outside of one of his prison homes in those 2 decades, however. I had invited him for pizza at the mall the Saturday before, since he was out on day parole, a long-suspended adventure. As I had driven him from the mall to his bus terminal, to head back to prison, we passed a public bus whose driver had just been shot. The driver's dead head lolled out his driver's window, his bus surrounded by police agents and police tape. "Welcome back to 'free' El Salvador", I mumbled, sardonically, not without a dose of chagrin. My friend assured me, with sufficient

detail, that he was quite accustomed to such scenes from his pre-prison years. This beatification day, one week later, was practically free of crime, remarkably. This friend, and the next friend I met up with along this street, along with 700 of their prison-mates, were out on "beatification parole", cleaning the ditches along the airport highway the day before, helping with logistics and clean-up this momentous day.

I certainly felt Romero's presence with us as we chatted and celebrated in this serendipitous encounter. I wasn't sure how much closer even Romero would get to the official action. He had vowed that he would not attend any official event until the scandal of his close friend and mentor's--Padre Rutilio Grande--assassination, had been investigated. Of course, Salvadoran justice hasn't yet gotten around to that, in these brief 38 years since that tragic 12 March, 1977. I trust Romero stuck to his word . . . though one photographer claims to have captured his image in the clouds within the circular rainbow or aureola which appeared at the sacred moment of his official beatification.

I might have captured such an image myself, if my camera hadn't taken leave from my house a couple weeks before this photo-worthy event, without permission and without leaving me any itinerary. It hasn't yet returned. So I was left seeing the world through my own eyes, storing images on my internal memory card. There were a few other photos being taken around me. Innumerable images remain with me, embedded in my head.

The previous night had proven to be passionately "Romeresque". Along with several friends, I had attended one of the vigils ,prior to the official beatification. We didn't attend the official vigil, but the one put on by those excluded from the "real" one, particularly the base Christian communities, which would have been Romero's preferred company, I'm sure--especially for being "the excluded". We listened more to wise, senior lay women and to passionate, invigorated and invigorating young musicians than to official, pre-approved voices. Three cloudbursts, woven together with a persistent drizzle, did more to draw us together than to dampen our spirits, sharing whatever inadequate shelter we could hold over our huddled heads. A babe-in-arms became a member of our spontaneous inner circle. A family of 4 young siblings spent a few early a.m. hours in my home, since without jackets or umbrellas they couldn't endure being soaked and chilly the entire night. This event echoed, recaptured, the poetic and musical passion and eloquence of a couple events I had attended the previous week, though those were shorter, and we were seated comfortably in adequate--albeit over-crowded--auditoriums.

For me, Romero's beatification is not an isolated event, but must be taken in context, understood in the light of all that is happening around us. Romero dedicated himself to a ministry of truth and justice, peace and reconciliation. His urgent message was dedicated as much to economic violence and justice as it was to military violence. He recognized the inseparable link between the two. He spoke forcefully against the idolatry of riches, the absolutization of wealth. Of the 300,000 - 500,000 "faithful" honouring Romero at the pompous ceremony in the plaza of "El Salvador del Mundo", I am sorry to suppose that not enough were aware of this element of his prophetic pronouncements. At the commemoration Mass, held on 24 March, the 35th anniversary of Romero's martyrdom, in the "*Divina Providencia*" chapel where he was assassinated while celebrating Mass, it seemed to be the Brazilian and Mexican bishops who spoke this

prophetic economic message most forcefully. On this occasion, it seemed to be the Vatican which best understood and proclaimed this message.

Just prior to the beatification, the Treasury Ministry had published a list of tax-evaders in El Salvador. Business tax evasion added up to \$372,000,000--which may have something to do with why the nation's marginalized and excluded youth feel the need to charge their own taxes, for their own survival and that of their families. The response of the business sector to such a publication was indignation. They blamed the government for "abuse of power", and threatened to charge any journalists involved in spreading such "rumours". Honouring Romero in such a context seems somewhat hypocritical on the part of many, especially since the event itself was said to bring in \$30,000,000 in profits. In those same days, it was Oxfam which was pointing out and publishing the reality of the gross economic inequality dragging this society into insecurity and violence--160 persons controlling 87% of its wealth. The "socio-economic" provisions of the 1992 Peace Accords were never implemented. The entire society continues to suffer from such oversight and neglect.

While the beatification event was palatial, it also seemed to me quite "Pilate-ial". I sensed much hand-washing, when perhaps there should have been more hand-wringing. It was, ironically, after all these years of resistance, the Vatican which reminded the Salvadoran church hierarchy that Romero's martyrdom was provoked by hate for the Gospel, not so much love of the Gospel, which was the theme selected by Romero's compatriot colleagues.

I experienced some profound Romero moments in the days following his beatification. On Sunday, the day after, five of us ventured into the remote hills of San Vicente Department (province), seeking old friends, former residents of "*Fe y Esperanza*" refuge and orphanage, some 25 years ago, seeking to build up our "*Fe y Esperanza* Historical Memory Association". We heard numerous impacting life-stories of tragedy and triumph. Sadly, the tragedy persists. One woman, now 40, lamented repeatedly that the only happy years of her life had been those she spent at "*Fe y Esperanza*". Her life both before and since has been more of a nightmare. The trauma of war, from personal involvement to losing all 5 siblings to the war, seems impossible to overcome. Jesus, through Romero, through us, brings her some hope--at least a chance to unburden herself from all those years of pained isolation. In another remote rural home a few days later, feasting in moving and life-renewing simplicity, listening to the passion for justice emanating from aging grandparents, being passed on to their children (my friends and colleagues) and me, recounting the friendships and experiences--and yes, the horrors--of those memorable Romero years, brought the formalities of beatification to life in a way that couldn't be captured in any massive crowd setting.

Our prison seminars also regularly inspire Romero-like moments and comments, particularly now that our focus is on human rights. Last week, one participant was unfazed when a prison guard entered our space, interrupting his rant against abusive prison conditions. Without skipping a beat, the inmate graciously included the guard as compatriot and brother. Due to his low-income, high-risk job, he acknowledged, the guard was also suffering the violation of his human rights. The next day, an inmate commented on the auxiliary bishop's assessment that the assassination of a state attorney should surely warrant a thorough

investigation and trial. So why this particular victim, and not the 15-20+ other victims murdered each day, he wondered aloud? Are they less human? Are they worth less? Are they worthless? Another inmate assured me that he would have his self-initiated Romero rap ready for me next week.

Tragically, as in the days of Romero, society has become fixated on the body count--nothing new, but non-stop in these past weeks. Verbal battles are waged over such statistics. "Homicide" and "crime" are used synonymously in the media, as if there were no other type of crime worth mentioning. The same auxiliary bishop mentioned above has stirred debate by drawing attention to some mysterious "diabolical" element in society capable of ratcheting up the homicide count, seemingly for political or economic expediency. Is 5 per day best (beatification weekend)? Or 20+, as seen throughout the month of May? June 1, the 1-year anniversary evaluation day of President Sánchez Cerén, tallied the deaths in the mid-30's. Was there some message? Directed to whom?

So who has the answer? National government, police or military? National politicians, analysts or commissions? The business community? Church leaders? The UNDP? The Organization of American States? The European Union? Washington, D.C.? Former NYC mayor Rudy Giuliani, contracted by the Salvadoran business sector for \$4M - 6M to give us the answer? The mayor of Los Angeles, who some believe has a more credible--and much less expensive--solution?

Or our newly-beatified Oscar Romero, who modeled prophetic denunciation and gospel pronunciation, truth (the day of his assassination, March 24, has been declared "World Truth Day" by the UN--<http://www.un.org/en/events/righttotruthday/>), dialogue with the entire spectrum of society, especially "taking into account" "the least of these" . . . walking in the footsteps of Jesus of Nazareth, alongside the marginalized, the excluded?

I hope and pray that the May 23 beatification of Romero was not simply an event, albeit historic and huge and memorable and inspiring, but rather a step along an ongoing faith-journey, a pilgrimage, a following in the footsteps of Jesus of Nazareth, together as Romero's people, as Jesus' people, people of faith and hope.

Hopeful, in spite of . . .

Brian

Rev Brian Rude, DD, "In Mission with El Salvador" / *"En Misión con El Salvador"*, Synod of Alberta and the Territories of the ELCIC