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Richard Rohr, O.F.M., Center for Action and Contemplation, Albuquerque, New Mexico

Just Spirituality

How Faith Practices Fuel Social Action



MAE ELISE CANNON


IVP Books

An imprint of InterVarsity Press
Downers Grove, Illinois

Varsity Press
Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL 60515-1426
Wide Web: www.ivpress.com
Email: email@ivpress.com

3 by Mae Elise Cannon

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Design: Cindy Kiple

Interior design: Beth Hagenberg

Photos: The photograph of Watchman Nee on the cover (far left) is used by permission of Living Stream Ministry, 2431 W. La Palma Ave., Anaheim, CA 92801. All rights reserved.

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ISBN 978-0-8308-3775-5

Printed in the United States of America ∞

Green Press Initiative
InterVarsity Press is committed to protecting the environment and to the responsible use of natural resources. As a member of Green Press Initiative we use recycled paper whenever possible. To learn more about the Green Press Initiative, visit www.greenpressinitiative.org.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

28 27 26 25 24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13

Dedicated with sincere appreciation and gratitude

to my spiritual mentors in Christ:



Brother Romuald, Diane Grant, Gilbert Bilezikian, Greg Jao,

Sister Francis, Sibyl Towner, Tamarin Huelin and Thomas Getman.

They are truly heroes of the faith and caretakers of my soul.

where people could go to sit and pray, journal or otherwise reflect on the presence of God.

After about thirty minutes, we invited the seminarians to enter into an exercise of submission. Our final station was set up outside the doors of the room where we had been meeting. As the inmates came out of the room, they were invited to have their feet washed by our team.

One might ask how foot washing is an exercise of submission. Submission may be defined as the process of yielding power or authority to another or as being subjected to some kind of treatment or influence.¹ Foot washing exemplifies submission in several ways. As someone washes another person's feet, that person is yielding power by showing respect and authority for the recipient of the act. During the New Testament era, foot washing was a tradition of hospitality typically performed by a slave or a servant for special guests and those visiting a home. How radical it must have been for the disciples to see Jesus prepare to wash their feet. No wonder Peter was so reluctant! Yet Jesus responded to Peter, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me" (Jn 13:8). As Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, he was entering into a physical posture of submission. He took the position of a slave, modeling humility and service. The disciples, however, in the act of receiving Christ's service, also submitted. They were subjected to the service of Christ's actions. At first, Peter was unwilling. As he heard the corrective words of Jesus, Peter responded emphatically, "Then, Lord . . . not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!" (Jn 13:9).

In Angola that day, several of us sat on the floor. One by one, we washed the feet of the inmates who were willing. As we washed, we prayed over them. As we prayed, the Spirit of God moved powerfully. Several of us, both our team and the inmates, were overcome by tears as we entered into the act of submission together. In this ritual, we submitted to one another through an act of service and

the act of receiving. Regardless of our circumstances, we all have small choices of submission to God and to one another. I learned a great deal that day from my friends in Angola. They regularly teach me about what it means to be faithful to the call of Christ under challenging circumstances.

OSCAR ROMERO

As I considered who would be an appropriate model of the spiritual practice of submission, Oscar Romero immediately came to mind. Oscar Arnulfo Romero was a twentieth-century Roman Catholic archbishop who worked tirelessly for social justice and in defense of human rights.²

Romero was born on August 15, 1917, in Ciudad Barrios, a small town in El Salvador.³ From a very young age, Romero wanted to be a priest. At fourteen years old, he headed to San Miguel, where he could attend school and pursue his vocation. At the age of twenty, Romero went to the national Jesuit seminary in San Salvador.⁴ He eventually attended the Gregorian Pontifical University in Rome and in 1943 received his degree in theology.⁵ At twenty-four years old, Romero was ordained in Rome.⁶ After ordination into priesthood, he returned to San Salvador, where he began his vocational ministry and served as a parish priest in a small community called Anamoros. Soon thereafter, he was appointed to the position of the diocesan secretary in San Miguel, where he served in different capacities for twenty-three years.⁷ In 1967, Romero became known as "Monseñor" and was named the secretary general of Salvadoran Bishops' Conference. For the remainder of his life, his primary residence would be the capital city of San Salvador. In 1970, Romero received his Episcopal ordination as auxiliary bishop.⁸ Up until this point in his life, Romero was known for his fairness and honesty and his overt support of the Catholic Church and the wealthy individuals who supported it.

From the early years of his ministry, in spite of his allegiance to the church and its supporters, Romero was also known for his genuine concern for the poor. He was politically and theologically conservative, which explained some of his allegiances to organizations and people in authority. Romero was a friend of the government and of the rich landowners, many of whom were coffee growers.⁹ As divisions between the rich and poor in El Salvador increased, Romero preached good news for the poor and sought to draw them closer to God while at the same time preaching a message of salvation to the rich and encouraging them to draw closer to the poor. He was influenced by the birth of liberation theology, which burst onto the scene in Latin America in the mid-1960s.¹ Although he didn't adhere to the theology personally, he paid close attention to others who were involved in the movement. Around the same, in 1968, the Conference of Latin American Bishops gathered in Medellín, Colombia, as a part of the global response to the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). Romero was present at the Medellín meetings and was very influenced by the Pope's statement regarding "Evangelism in the Modern World."¹⁰ In 1977, as El Salvador was in the grip of social and political repression, Oscar Romero became archbishop of San Salvador.¹¹

TWENTIETH-CENTURY EL SALVADOR

Romero's home country was a place of turmoil throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. After coffee-growing was introduced in 1828, peasants were thoroughly exploited and their pay was derisory. El Salvador increasingly became a police state, and respect for human rights was almost nonexistent. Many trace the seeds of violence to 1932, when military dictators took over

¹Liberation theology, with streams founded by Gustavo Gutierrez and James Cone, emphasizes Christ's death on the cross as a source of liberation for people who are disinherited and suffer oppression.

after killing almost thirty thousand people and crushing a communist-inspired peasant uprising.¹² An impoverished, suffering population longed for relief, but anyone who said anything about justice was thrown into prison or killed. In this context, Romero grew up desiring to become a priest in order to provide comfort and care to the people of El Salvador.¹³

In the 1930s, when Romero was still a student, the Roman Catholic Church aligned with the military and wealthy coffee-plantation owners. By the 1960s, there was a widening gap between the rich and the poor and increased military oppression.¹⁴ Formally, the Catholic Church continued to support those in power, while individual parish priests often sided with the people most affected by unjust policies. Many clergy were conflicted about the growing intensity of oppression. Romero empathized with the poor but did not overtly challenge the wealthy. He taught about God's love but did not directly address the growing injustice. By the 1970s, the tumult was continuing to escalate.

On July 30, 1975, forty university students were killed by the Salvadoran military in San Salvador. Many priests and religious people joined the student protest movement when they occupied the cathedral in San Salvador. Romero, however, criticized "the occupation of churches as a form of protest."¹⁵ For Romero, 1976 marked a year full of events that would begin to shift his perspective and allegiance from the militaristic government and land-holding elites to those suffering at their hands. He returned to work directly with the people as the bishop of Santiago de María. His ideological convictions and theological underpinnings began to shift. Romero was particularly troubled by the massacre of five peasants in his diocesan village of Tres Calles at the hands of the Salvadoran National Guard.¹⁶ By 1977, according to a biographer of Romero's, the bishops in El Salvador "expressed their concern for the violence against the peasants, for the deaths and disappear-

ances, for the publicity campaign, threats, and intimidation against the church, and for the expulsion of priests in particular."¹⁷ The lack of social justice and the overt state of suffering for many Salvadorans was intense. El Salvador was ridden with overt human rights abuses directed at the poor and at those in the church who tried to protect them.

On February 20, 1977, Romero was installed as archbishop. He was considered a safe choice because of his allegiance to the wealthy and to the government. Only a few weeks after his installation, his perspective on the coffee growers and the military began to shift drastically.

ROMERO'S CONVERSION AT THE DEATH OF FATHER RIO GRANDE

Father Rutilio Grande was a Jesuit priest and close friend of Bishop Romero. Grande had been an outspoken defender of the rights of the poor and, in the words of Scott Wright, a leader in the Jesuit mission of "the proclamation of faith and the defense of justice."¹⁸ Around this time, the landowners engaged in a countermovement to continue the repression of the poor. A right-wing death squad appeared on the scene and messages of "Be a patriot: kill a priest" were announced on radios and appeared in newspapers.¹⁹ As tensions escalated, the right-wing military and wealthy elite increased their mechanisms of terror to squelch any opposition to their dominance and control. On March 13, 1977, Rutilio Grande was on his way to Aguilares, the community where he had been a pastor, to perform an evening mass, when he, an elderly man and a boy were shot and killed in an ambush.²⁰

Many biographers argue that the murder of Father Grande, Romero's dear friend, was the watershed moment for the shift in Romero's convictions.²¹ After Grande's death, Romero's message and response to the church's partnership with the powerful and

elite waned. Throughout his life, Romero was loyal to the church. When he witnessed the death of his dear friend and the traumas enacted upon the poor throughout El Salvador, however, Romero didn't hesitate to be a prophetic voice declaring injustice. He proclaimed in one of his sermons: "[The church] is not to be measured by the government's support but rather by its own authenticity." As government soldiers tortured and executed innocent people, Romero boldly stated, "Like a voice crying in the wilderness, we must continually say no to violence and yes to peace."

Romero made a controversial and bold decision after Grande's death. He chose to have one singular mass for the region and to close the Catholic schools for three days in protest of the death of Father Rutilio Grande.²² At a liturgy celebrated in front of the cathedral, 100,000 people gathered and the Archbishop condemned the actions of El Salvador's leaders. He called on government officials to exercise human rights and stop committing crimes of injustice toward the population.²³ This was seen as an overt statement against the dictatorial regime and those perpetrating the violence against the peasants. Romero's response to Grande's assassination sounded an alarm at the Vatican.²⁴ From that time forward, Romero became the leading voice for the end of violence and oppression to the poor. He preached and used his influential position as archbishop to stand up against the gross injustices occurring throughout El Salvador.

Presiding over Grande's funeral, Romero began to incarnate his theological understanding of submission. Some say the spirit of Father Grande and his concern for the gross injustice against the poor was transferred to Romero in his death. One biographer wrote: "One martyr gave life to another martyr. Before the cadaver of Father Rutilio Grande, Monseñor Romero, in his twentieth day of archbishop, felt the call of Christ to overcome his natural human timidity and to be filled with the fortitude of an apostle."²⁵ At the funeral, the

archbishop preached a sermon on John 15:13: "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." The sacrifice of one's life, for Romero, was the ultimate act of submission.²⁶ Romero taught that the church must be inspired by faith, engaged in the struggle for liberation of the poor and motivated by love.²⁷

On May 11, 1977, a few months after Grande's murder, another priest, Father Alfonso Navarro, was assassinated. Romero spoke of Navarro's message to reject violence: "They kill me because I point the way to follow. And we, the church, repeat once more that violence resolves nothing, violence is not Christian, not human."²⁸ Romero continued to preach love and care for the poor with an emphasis on evangelization. He taught about God's concern for justice and against the persecution of the church as the "light of the Gospel."²⁹ He also continued to view the harsh conditions in El Salvador with a perspective of hope and encouragement. He believed persecution against priests was a sign of God's presence and favor. He preached: "Today in his Gospel [Luke 9:18-24] Jesus told us that those who wish to come after him must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow."³⁰ Suffering, even to the point of martyrdom, was a part of taking up the cross of Christ. Romero believed: "Christians who live out their baptism become saints and heroes."³¹ By 1979, Romero's work on behalf of the poor in El Salvador led to his nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize. That year, Mother Teresa received the prestigious award.

SOURCE OF POWER AND CONVICTION

Oscar Romero practiced Ignatian spiritual exercises.³² He believed in the power of prayer and sought to submit himself fully before God.³³ In 1955, Romero spent a month engaging in the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola under the spiritual direction of Miguel Elizondo. He found the exercises deeply meaningful and spent several hours a day in prayer and an hour or so conferring

with his spiritual director. He wrote of the experience: "The material offered for meditation and prayer is designed to lead to a more generous following of Christ, who invites the person to help extend his reign through service in the church."³⁴ These exercises and his direct connection to God played, as one biographer put it, "a fundamental force in his life."³⁵

Romero believed that Christ is not distant from human suffering but that he manifests himself as Emmanuel—God with us—in the midst of the challenging political circumstances of the day. Romero believed that followers of Christ must embrace suffering. In 1980, he preached that people should pray not to be delivered from pain and suffering but rather to "embrace it."³⁶

Romero called people to live in community and to depend on one another.³⁷ Faith is not separate from the daily reality of their lives. Romero called people to pious devotion and commitment in the midst of their circumstances. He exhorted: "All practices that disagree with the gospel must be removed if we are to save people. We must save not the soul at the hour of death but the person living in history."³⁸

PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR

Oscar Romero emphasized God's preferential option for the poor. He believed the lives of the priests who had been killed underscored this truth. In presiding over Holy Communion, he shared these words: "When I celebrate the Eucharist with you, I feel them present. Each priest killed is for me a new concelebrant in the Eucharist of our archdiocese. I know that they are here giving us encouragement by having known how to die without fear, because each one's conscience was committed to this law of the Lord: the preferential option for the poor."³⁹

Romero called the church to solidarity with the poor. He identified the effects of poverty in El Salvador as the fate of the poor "to

be taken away, to be tortured, to be jailed, to be found dead.”⁴⁰ Increasingly, Romero’s ministry became characterized by his solidarity with those who suffered. He traveled the countryside meeting the brokenhearted and visiting garbage dumps to comfort the suffering and reclaim the dead.⁴¹ In 1979 he preached: “My position as pastor obliges me to solidarity with everyone who suffers and to embody every effort for human freedom and dignity.”⁴²

Romero had a rich theological interpretation of poverty. He viewed poverty as the Christian spirit of openness to God. He believed “the poorer you are, the more you possess God’s kingdom.”⁴³ He highly valued the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:3). Poverty, for Romero, “awakens consciousness” and leads people to be more open to the kingdom and presence of God. Romero lived his life among the poor. He resolved that he would do whatever it was that the Lord asked. Increasingly, his life exemplified a spirit of submission to speak truth boldly to those in power. Romero resolved to be faithful even in the midst of horrendous violence.

AGAINST INJUSTICE AND CORRUPTION

Bishop Romero not only argued for solidarity in suffering with the poor. He also overtly stood up against injustice. He spoke boldly against the powers of his day. The world does not welcome a prophet. The powers that practice injustice do not welcome reproach or correction, and they resist a call to conversion. They respond with violence and increased fervor. Romero never gave up on calling the unjust to conversion. He boldly invited them to repentance: “I cry out against injustice, but only to say to the unjust: Be converted! I cry out in the name of suffering, of those who suffer injustice, but only to say to the criminals: Be converted! Do

not be wicked!”⁴⁴ He spoke to them with love and accepted their hatred as a part of his cross. Romero loved his enemies while attempting to lead them to an alternative way of life. He prayed for them and called his enemies to conversion: “Therefore, dear brothers and sisters, especially those of you who hate me, you dear brothers and sisters who think I am preaching violence, who defame me and know it isn’t true, you that have hands stained with murder, with torture, with atrocity, with injustice—be converted. I love you deeply. I am sorry for you because you go on the way to ruin.”⁴⁵

All the while, Romero desired for the perpetrators of violence to be drawn to Christ. Romero accompanied the poor in their suffering and directly confronted the powers that oppressed them.

ULTIMATE ACT OF SUBMISSION

Romero’s life exemplified Romans 12:1: “I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.” Romero was willing to offer his position, power, influence and life for the sake of those who suffered. He regularly thought and preached about God’s call to submission. He considered Romans 12 an opportunity for all people, regardless of status or position: “Here, you see, the Bible gives our bodies, our lives, a meaning of sacrifice, of holocaust, a divine meaning that is proper to every person, even the lowliest.”⁴⁶ The opportunity to sacrifice and suffer alongside of others gave life meaning and purpose.

Romero opposed all types of violence except that which allowed one to suffer for the sake of someone else. In 1979 Romero preached about the violence of love that occurred on the cross: “The only violence that the gospel admits is violence to oneself. When Christ lets himself be killed, that is violence—letting oneself be killed. Violence to oneself is more effective than violence to others. It is very easy to kill, especially when one has weapons, but how hard it

is to let oneself be killed for love of the people!"⁴⁷

Increasingly, Romero spoke out boldly in opposition to the rampant murders throughout El Salvador. He used his position as archbishop to call attention to the suffering of his people. Romero did not fear the consequences of his own suffering. He once said, "I must tell you, as a Christian, I do not believe in death without resurrection. If I am killed, I shall arise in the Salvadoran people."⁴⁸ He openly criticized his country's military for its role in the violence and murder. He cried out against them: "In the name of God, and in the name of this suffering people whose laments rise to heaven each day . . . I beg you, I ask you, I order you in the name of God: Stop the repression!"⁴⁹

On March 24, 1980, Romero was conducting mass and had just finished giving the homily. He was speaking these words:

This holy mass, this Eucharist, is an act of faith. With Christian faith we know that at this moment the wheaten host is changed into the body of the Lord, who offered himself for the world's redemption, and in this chalice the wine is transformed into the blood that was the price of salvation. May this body immolated and this blood sacrificed for humans nourish us also, so that we may give our body and blood to suffering and to pain—like Christ, not for self, but to teach justice and peace to our people.⁵⁰

At that moment, a shot rang out from the back of the church. Romero was shot in the chest. Blood covered his vestments and he gasped for breath. He died moments later.⁵¹

ROMERO'S LEGACY

The funeral of Oscar Romero was itself an occasion of further violence. As thousands gathered to pay their respects to the archbishop of San Salvador, the military and police fired shots into the crowds of people who had gathered. In addition to those who were

killed by the gunfire, others died as they were trampled by the crowd of people trying to take refuge in the cathedral.⁵²

The situation in El Salvador got far worse before things began to improve. While workers, peasants, students and teachers organized in massive grassroots organizations, the nation teetered on the edge of civil war. The government responded by increasing violence and oppression. In 1980, the year of Romero's assassination, more than twelve thousand people were killed.⁵³ El Salvador entered into twelve years of overt war between 1980 and 1992, with a litany of suffering that included more than 1.5 million people forced into exile, 7,000 disappearances and 75,000 deaths.⁵⁴ According to the U.N. Truth Commission, the Salvadoran government and the death squads accounted for the vast majority of these deaths.⁵⁵

Oscar Romero's life and death are examples of ultimate submission. He embraced his call to serve the church and God's people even unto death. While directly confronting injustice, he suggested that one should never tire of teaching love, for it is a force that will "overcome the world."⁵⁶ The violence of love was the only type of violence he promoted. He stood up to the institutions of the church and the oppressive militaristic regime of El Salvador. Empowered by God and working with the poor in the name of Christ, he stood tall against the brutal death brigades funded by the wealthy and elite. Romero's submission to Christ bears witness to life. Just as Christ was resurrected on the third day, Romero, as he promised, has been resurrected in the lives of the Salvadoran people.

ALEXIA SALVATIERRA: NO MATTER WHAT THE COST

I first met Alexia Salvatierra a few years ago at a gathering in Washington, D.C., that focused on domestic poverty and called lawmakers to address the devastating effects of poverty in the United States. I was familiar with Salvatierra's reputation as one of the