

PRAY Jesus, you give a blind man new eyes that bring him to faith in you. Free us from judgments that blind us. Open our eyes and hearts to peaceful, respectful friendships with those different from us. Amen.

4th Sunday of Lent

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SPIRIT

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Forty years ago on March 24, 1980, an assassin killed Archbishop Oscar Romero as he celebrated Eucharist. Today March 24 is a new saint's feast day. In October 2018, Pope Francis canonized the archbishop, naming him St. Oscar Romero, Bishop and Martyr.

His most basic work as archbishop—preaching the gospel and celebrating the sacraments—cost Oscar Romero his life. He heard in the gospel a call to peace and nonviolence to which he called his nation.

“Let no one take it ill that in the light of God’s words read in our Mass, we enlighten social, political, and economic realities. If we did not, it would not be Christianity for us.” Archbishop of San Salvador Oscar Romero preached these words in his sermon for the 5th Sunday of Lent, March

23, 1980. The diocesan radio station YSAX carried his words throughout the nation. He pleaded with the army, government, and landowners to stop the violence and work for the common good.

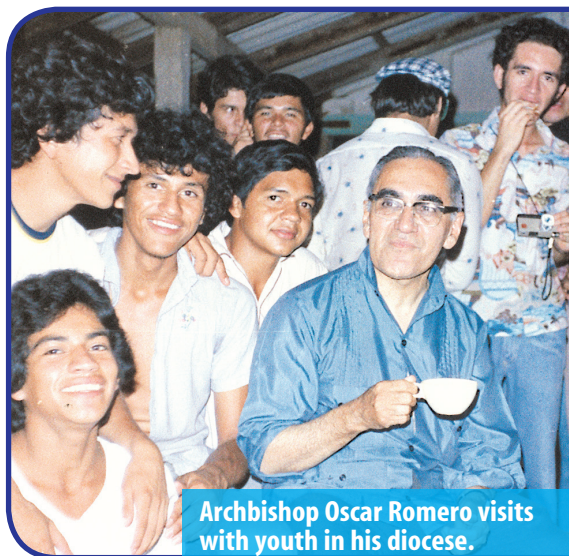
During the previous week, six people had died from bombs and machine gun fire during a general strike, nine *campesinos* were killed, and two groups occupying the cathedral captured, beat, and tortured a policeman.

To those in government Romero said during his broadcast, “Without roots in the people, no government can avail, much less so when it wants to impose its program through bloodshed and sorrow.”

To soldiers, he said, “Brothers, you are part of your own people. You kill your own *campesino* brothers and sisters. No soldier is obliged to obey an order against the law of God.”

Romero never preached again. The next day during a 6 p.m. Eucharist, a gunman shot the archbishop dead, silencing a leader who heard in the cries of his suffering people the voice of God and made their cries for justice his own.

Romero stood behind the altar, facing the people. The shot hit him in the chest. Blood covered his vestments. Oscar Romero had been Archbishop of San Salvador for only three years.



Archbishop Oscar Romero visits with youth in his diocese.

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Government officials and large landowners had approved Romero’s appointment because he was a seminary professor who had never gotten involved in politics. The same week Romero became archbishop, an election riddled with fraud put a president in office to stop the land reform begun the year before. The reform law

Grownd

divided 150,000 acres among 12,000 subsistence farmers—*campesinos*. The land was bought at market value from 250 landowning families.

To many priests and sisters working among the poor, the new archbishop seemed specially chosen to stop the *campesinos* from working together to better their lives. His appointment disheartened them.

The new archbishop had been in office only three weeks when government forces murdered one of his most respected priests and a close friend, Rutilio Grande, S.J. Father Rutilio was pastor of Aguilares, an area in which 35 large farms used all the flat land for raising sugar cane and 30,000 *campesinos* survived on the rocky hillsides. Father Rutilio, his altar boy, and an old man were shot on the road as they drove to celebrate Mass.

Archbishop Romero pressed for an investigation into the three murders and called his friend's killers to reconciliation. "We want to tell you, murderous brethren, that we love you and that we ask of God repentance in your hearts, because the church is not able to hate; it has no enemies."

Those in the diocese who worked among the poor wanted to stand together against the persecution they saw in the murders of Father Rutilio, the boy, and old man. They wanted to celebrate a single Mass at the cathedral the following Sunday as a sign of unity. Romero made the controversial decision to do this. One hundred thousand people, most of them *campesinos*, gathered at the cathedral.

What made Romero dangerous was his commitment to the poor, but in this he did not stand alone.

At a 1968 meeting in Medellin, Colombia, the bishops of Latin America committed themselves to a preferential option for the poor.



"When we say 'preferential option for the poor,'" Romero wrote, "we do not mean exclusion of the rich, but rather a call to the rich also to feel as their own the problems of the poor and to study in dialog with the government, with specialists, with those who can resolve this dead end in El Salvador."

As archbishop, Romero took the motto, "To be of one mind and heart with the church." As a man of the church he opened his heart to the poor. Just as Jesus reached out to the outcasts of his time, Romero understood "the church must prefer the outcasts of the present—the *campesinos*, the slum dwellers, the exploited laborers, the prisoners, those abused by the powerful."

To empower the poor, priests and sisters trained lay leaders among the people. These catechists and "delegates of the Word of God" gathered *campesinos* in small Christian communities, reflected on the Word of God, and worked together for justice according to the vision of faith.

Teaching *campesinos* that God did not will them to be poor created trouble in the eyes of landowners. It threatened the social order. After Rutilio Grande, four more priests were

murdered for their work among the poor. "How long are we to endure these crimes without any just atonement?" Romero asked in one of his broadcasts.

Oscar Romero could not be silent even to save his own life. A few days before he was shot, he wrote to Jose Calderon Salazar:

"I have often been threatened with death. Nevertheless, as a Christian, I do not believe in death without resurrection. If they kill me, I shall arise in the Salvadoran people. I say so without meaning to boast, with the greatest humility.

"As pastor, I am obligated by divine mandate to give my life for those I love—for all Salvadorans, even for those who may be going to kill me. If the threats come to be fulfilled, from this moment I offer my blood to God for the redemption and for the resurrection of El Salvador.

"Martyrdom is a grace of God that I do not believe I deserve. But if God accepts the sacrifice of my life, let my blood be a seed of freedom and the sign that hope will soon be reality."

Today many Salvadorans regard Oscar Romero as a martyr and saint. Others see him as a troublemaker. Certainly he was a man whose heart belonged to the poor. He could find no safe middle ground in his divided society. He could not witness violence against his priests and his people without speaking out against it.

QUESTIONS 1 Why can't the archbishop find middle ground? 2 What is Romero's message? 3 How do the questions the neighbors and teachers ask help the man born blind see who Jesus is? 4 Why do his parents insist the man speak for himself? 5 How is believing like seeing?

SUNDAY GOSPEL

4th Sunday of Lent

A man born blind speaks for himself.

SCENE 1

NARRATOR: As Jesus walked along with his disciples, they saw a man who had been born blind. Jesus spat on the ground and made some mud. He rubbed the mud on the man's eyes.

JESUS: Go wash your face in the Pool of Siloam.

NARRATOR: Siloam means sent. So the man went, washed his face, and came back seeing.

SCENE 2

NEIGHBOR 1: Isn't this the man who used to sit and beg?

NEIGHBOR 2: No, he just looks like him.

MAN BORN BLIND: I am the man.

NEIGHBOR 1: How were your eyes opened?

MAN: The man named Jesus made some mud, rubbed it on my eyes, and told me, "Go to Siloam and wash." So I went, and as soon as I washed, I could see.

NEIGHBOR 2: Where is he?

MAN: I do not know.

SCENE 3

NARRATOR: They took the man who had been blind to the Pharisees. The day that Jesus opened the man's eyes was a Sabbath.

PHARISEE 1: How did you receive your sight?

MAN: Jesus put mud on my eyes, I washed it off, and now I can see.

PHARISEE 2: The one who did this cannot be from God. He does not obey the Sabbath law.

PHARISEE 1: But how could a sinner do such mighty works as these?

NARRATOR: They were sharply divided about Jesus. They spoke again to the blind man.

PHARISEE 3: You say Jesus opened your eyes. What do you say about him?

MAN: He is a prophet.

SCENE 4

NARRATOR: These teachers were not willing to believe that the man had been born blind and received his sight, so they called his parents.

PHARISEE 2: Is this your son? If he was born blind, how is it that he can now see?

FATHER: This is our son. We know he was born blind. We do not know how he can see now, or who opened his eyes.

MOTHER: Ask him. He can speak for himself.

NARRATOR: His parents feared the Jews who had agreed among themselves that anyone who believed Jesus was the messiah would be put out of the synagogue.

SCENE 5

NARRATOR: A second time these Jews called in the man born blind.

PHARISEE 3: Promise before God that you will tell the truth! We know the man who healed you is a sinner.

MAN: I do not know if he is a sinner or not. I do know one thing; I was blind, and now I can see.

PHARISEE 1: What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?

MAN: I already told you that, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples?

PHARISEE 2: You are his disciple; we are disciples of Moses. We know that God spoke to Moses. We don't have any idea where Jesus comes from!

MAN: How strange! You don't know where he comes from, but he opened my eyes. We know that God doesn't listen to sinners; God listens to those who respect God and do what God wants them to do. Since the beginning of the world, no one has heard of someone opening the eyes of a man born blind. Unless this man came from God, he could not have done such a thing.

PHARISEE 3: You were born and raised in sin—and you are trying to teach us? Get out of the synagogue!

SCENE 6

NARRATOR: Jesus heard that the teachers had expelled the man born blind and went to talk to him.

JESUS: Do you believe in the Son of Man?

MAN: Tell me who he is, sir, so I can believe in him.

JESUS: You have already seen him. He is speaking to you now.

MAN: I believe, Lord.

John 9:1, 6-38

Study the gospel in order to describe how the faith and insight of the man born blind grow as he speaks for himself. Underline all the places in the gospel in which the blind man retells what Jesus did for him in the first scene. Circle Jesus' words. Box what the man born blind says at the end of each scene in which he appears.

Faith calls us to action.

Neighbors and local religious teachers question the man born blind over and over in Sunday's gospel. They push him to explain how a man born blind can now see. His parents refuse to answer for him. They insist he must speak for himself. They recognize that believing in Jesus is controversial and may have consequences for them and their son.

The conflict between the man and the teachers reflects tensions in the late first century between Jews that follow Jesus as their rabbi and Jews who followed other rabbis. By speaking his growing faith in Jesus, the man with new eyes comes into conflict with teachers who don't believe Jesus is the messiah.

Like Archbishop Romero the man with seeing eyes lives in a time with no middle ground. By speaking against violence, the archbishop makes an enemy of

government forces. By speaking about his healer, the man born blind identifies as a Christian Jew and infuriates the teachers who follow other rabbis. Christianity and Judaism grow apart in the decades after the Romans destroy the temple in AD 70, when Jews no longer have a common center of worship.

By actively speaking, the man born blind realizes more deeply who his healer is each time he responds. With his new seeing eyes, the man first describes Jesus as a prophet and then as a man from God. This is the response for which Pharisees put the man out of the synagogue.

By actively speaking about his experience, the man comes to understand who Jesus is. He uses his mind to reflect on what has happened to him. His example calls us as Christians to reflect on our experience and actively speak about our values and insights. Speaking out helps



us realize what we believe and calls us into action.

The Church reads this gospel as part of catechumens' preparation for baptism. The man born blind makes a journey into faith in Jesus that is like the journey catechumens make.

The act of faith is of its very nature a free act.

Catechism of the Catholic Church #160, also, 166-167

FAITH in ACTION

Speak out FOR CHILDREN

1 The United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child protects children worldwide, their need for care and secure family life. This treaty affirms the rights of children to life, survival, development, identity, education, and health care. It forbids child labor and trafficking.

All but two of the 192 countries at the United Nations have signed the Convention on the Rights of a Child. The two are the United States and Somalia. The U.S. government explains that it cannot sign a treaty to guarantee children rights because the welfare of children is a state rather than a federal responsibility.

- Contact your state UN Association to work to get your state to agree to the Convention.

2 Search the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals for 2030. The first five goals are basic to life and will affect children: no extreme poverty, zero hunger, good health for people of all ages, quality education, and gender equality. Several goals address climate change which young people care about since they will inherit our planet in crisis.

Explore at CRS.org the needs of refugee children, especially Syrian families who have fled to Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan and

whose children have lost years of schooling. The civil war in Syria has gone on for six years. Some children have to work to help support their families rather than go to school. Visit UNrefugees.org/news.

3 In Africa, deaths from HIV/AIDS have left millions of children orphans. Every village has children who need food, shelter, education, and health care. Many dioceses in the United States and Canada have missions in Africa.

- Find out if your diocese has African missions and how your group can get involved.

4 In its Japanese garden the United Nations has a peace bell made from coins collected by children around the world. The bell is rung twice a year—on September 21, the International Day of Peace; on April 22, Earth Day.

- Consider working as a group to get your parish and other communities of faith to ring their bells for peace on Earth Day this year.

- Earthday.org

- internationaldayofpeace.org