

# *A Fateful Destiny of Faith*

John 12:20-34

A couple of weeks ago, on the 7<sup>th</sup> of March, the Vatican announced that Pope Francis had authorized the canonization of Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was assassinated on March 24, 1980 while presiding at Mass in a small hospital chapel in San Salvador. This news is certainly welcomed by millions of El Salvadorians and many more around the world, as Archbishop Romero is considered a Christian hero and martyr for the cause of the poor and oppressed in Latin America. Soon, he will be named a modern-day saint.

Romero's last days were as compelling as any part of his story, not unlike those of Martin Luther King, Jr. The archbishop knew he was targeted by right-wing militias—"death squads" funded by the wealthy landowners and powerful businesspeople of El Salvador and protected by the National Guard and army. Romero, as a prophet of the people, had called out the death squads and the corruption of government as great evils in their society. What sealed his fate, though, was when he sought international attention by sending a letter to then President Jimmy Carter, imploring him to stop the flow of U.S. military aid to the government of El Salvador, as it was being used against the people themselves. In the days leading up to his death, he pleaded with the army, National Guard, and police in his homeland to cease the repression.

As the story is told:

On another typically hot evening in San Salvador, the Carmelite sisters had kindly left the wing-shaped chapel doors open, hoping for a breath of air to cool the congregants inside. Through the open doors of the Divine Providence chapel the assassin had a clear view of Archbishop Oscar Romero at the altar as he made his way through the homily he had prepared for this requiem Mass, one he agreed to celebrate for the mother of a friend.

“My dear sisters and brothers,” the archbishop was saying, his homily gathering steam. “I think we should not only pray this evening for the eternal rest of our dear Doña Sarita, but above all we should take to ourselves her message...that every Christian ought to want to live intensely. Many do not understand; they think Christianity should not be involved in such things,” Archbishop Romero said, referring to the “things” of the physical world, the problems of the times in which we live. “But to the contrary,” he continued, “you have just heard in Christ’s Gospel that one must not love oneself so much as to avoid getting involved in the risks of life that history demands of us and that those who try to fend off the danger will lose their lives, while those who out of love for Christ give themselves to the service of others will live, live like the grain of wheat that dies, but only apparently. If it did not die, it would remain alone.” He was wrapping up yet another memorable homily for those gathered in the church and those who would listen to his words later on the radio. “The harvest comes about,” he said, “only because it dies, allowing itself to be sacrificed in the earth and destroyed. Only by undoing itself does it produce the harvest.”

Soon he would elevate the host above the altar, and he would speak the words of consecration; his eyes, as so many hundreds of times before, would be on the host held high before him. If for a second then he had glanced through the open doors of the chapel, would he have seen the young man taking aim? Would he have been afraid? Would he have been tempted to flee? It hardly matters.

We know Archbishop Romero was focused on prayer at the moment of his death, preparing for that prayer said during the Eucharist at Masses each day all over the world. We know also that as he spoke his last homily the archbishop knew that death was seeking him out; he knew his words were pulling death closer to him. He surely knew, too, that if he were only to remain silent, to stop speaking out about the killing and the oppression and the poverty, death just might lose interest in him. There were so many others on death lists in El Salvador in those days on whom it could slake its thirst. But he would not be silent.

...Though he dismissed the concerns of others, he was acutely aware that he could be preparing the ground for his own martyrdom, and he knew in all likelihood that his death would be violent. He had already seen what had become of many who had threatened the political order in El Salvador, and that specter of his own fate filled him with dread as it would any person. He loved life; he loved his people. He was not eager to leave either behind.

In his last retreat, he made a note of one of his final discussions with his spiritual director. “It is not easy to accept a violent death, which is very possible in these circumstances, and the apostolic nuncio to Costa Rica warned me of imminent danger just this week. You have encouraged me, reminding me that my attitude should be to hand my life over to God regardless of the end to which that life might come; that unknown circumstances can be faced with God’s grace; that God assisted the martyrs and that if it comes to this I shall feel God very close as I draw my last breath; but that more valiant than surrender in death is the surrender of one’s whole life—a life lived for God.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Clarke, “Death Comes for the Archbishop: The Martyrdom of Oscar Romero,” *America*, March 23, 2015.

We'll never know for certain what was in Romero's mind when the assassin's bullet struck his heart, but if his own words offer any solace, there could well have been a sense of peace, wellbeing, and grace, even in the split second of realizing his life was now being surrendered wholly to God. He had already confronted the demons of death and won his freedom.

The demons of death are real, very real. Most people encounter them at some point, even if they do not recognize what they are. Demons are the fears, anxieties, regrets, depression, and similar challenges to our souls when we realize we are, in fact, facing death. Mortality has a way of confronting us through a sobering medical diagnosis, in the split seconds of an accident, or in the recognition that an aging body wears heavy on the spirit. Even though we're aware of the inevitability of death, by nature humans possess an inherent will to live—a survival instinct that blocks it out of our mind and steers us away from harm, if possible. This is largely why most people don't want to talk about death until it can't be avoided. Confronting the demons requires doing battle with them—with the haunting fears and anxieties that well up within us when we project or realize the end of life. It is, by all measures, an ultimate existential battle between holding onto what we've known and letting go once and for all. Though it's easier to imagine one will “rage, rage, against the dying of the light” as the poet Dylan Thomas beckoned his father—fighting death to the bitter end, most will encounter it restlessly or quietly, surrendering to the steady and unconscious lessening of their breath.

Most people will not confront those demons of death long before they must, though martyrs will. Martyrs realize that their lives are in the hands of God who will use them for greater purposes than a mere passing existence on earth. When those who will be sacrificed for a cause greater

than their own life recognize their destiny—the path they’ve chosen, they come to terms with its consequences long before they take their final steps into the unknown. In that way, when every instinct that tells them to flee is finally confronted and silenced, then and only then can they know the amazing freedom on the other side of fear. They are free to live without the alarm of death—to confront even its sting with uncanny resolve, divine assurance, and inner peace. That freedom of spirit is expressed in prophetic boldness and courage living out their final days with willful significance and purpose, unfettered by fear. That is what those in company with Romero saw in him; it’s what followers of Dr. King observed in him in Memphis the night before his death; it’s the testimony of those who were with Dietrich Bonhoeffer before he reached the Nazi scaffold; it’s what the Gospels record about Jesus in his final week before his crucifixion. It is the accepted sacrifice of their lives for a greater good. It is a fearless confidence of one’s destiny inspired by faith.

Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

Though you and I may not imagine ourselves facing martyrdom, we do experience a similar confrontation with the demons of death when it comes to be our time. Our text today from John has Jesus confronting his demons, not in the Garden of Gethsemane, as it is traditionally portrayed by the other Gospels, but soon after he enters Jerusalem, characterized by the phrase, “The hour has come...”. It was a moment of intense reckoning (“Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from his hour?’...). The writer presents it at the beginning of the extended farewell instruction Jesus is yet to give his disciples that carries through the next five chapters in John. Knowing his fate, Jesus was free to address

those who would survive him with wisdom and counsel that would sustain them in his absence.

Certainly, none of that would have occurred unless Jesus had already accepted the inevitability of his death; otherwise, he would have spent his final waking hours trying to escape harm. This is the point I want us to ponder: how do we prepare ourselves mentally, emotionally, and spiritually to accept the reality of our own deaths so that, when the time comes, the wrestling with fear and anxiety is largely over and it's possible to experience the grace-filled freedom to express to others wisdom and love from our hearts? As people of faith, we are invited to trust God through this destined path, so that we can be assured no ultimate harm comes to us, even if we may suffer pain in the process of dying. What is it that allows martyrs to stand fearlessly in the moment of their deaths or for any of us not to be overwhelmed by the unknown when we close our eyes for the final time? How do we know that God is with us without at some point along the way preparing ourselves—mentally, emotionally, and spiritually—for this inescapable reality? Is it not a part of living to take account of dying?

I do believe we can learn from those who conquered their fears while living, so they would experience spiritual strength at death. It is a spiritual reckoning all of us can do and must do to be able to experience the freedom that comes when the fear of death no longer has power over us. It's something that we can confront before we must, so that we are mindful and at peace when it comes to be our time. Maybe it comes through a soulful, honest conversation we have with a spouse or close friend; perhaps it's a prayerful dialogue we have internally with ourselves and God. But to face those demons of death proactively allows us to imagine walking into the unknown with God, so to experience the freedom and spiritual confidence

in the time we have left. Yes, our hearts will be troubled for a time, our souls will suffer the agony of sorrow and loss, as did Jesus; but the tears that fall are far more preferable to fears that rise to paralyze us from trusting God in the moment of death.

It is said that Dietrich Bonhoeffer viewed death as the last station on the road to freedom. I suppose that's a good mental image to live with, in that it makes death not the final end in life, but merely the last station before we make our way onto freedom. Bonhoeffer, who was hanged in 1945 in a Nazi concentration camp, is reported to have viewed his impending death in this way:

Death is only dreadful for those who live in dread and fear of it. Death is not wild and terrible, if only we can be still and hold fast to God's Word. Death is not bitter, if we have not become bitter ourselves. Death is grace, the greatest gift of grace that God gives to people who believe in him. Death is mild, death is sweet and gentle; it beckons to us with heavenly power, if only we realize that it is the gateway to our homeland, the tabernacle of joy, the everlasting kingdom of peace.

How do we know that dying is so dreadful? Who knows whether, in our human fear and anguish we are only shivering and shuddering at the most glorious, heavenly, blessed event in the world? Death is hell and night and cold, if it is not transformed by our faith. But that is just what is so marvelous, that we can transform death. <sup>2</sup>

Confronting the demons with faith is what transforms the reality of death. This is the way we're told Bonhoeffer approached the end of his life. This is likely the way Dr. King and Oscar Romero did as well in a different time and place. It is how I imagine Jesus of Nazareth grasped his fate when his death on the cross became his certain destiny. Once they were free from the demons of death, they could face their fate with courage and grace and peace, divinely blessed.

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<sup>2</sup> Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*, Thomas Nelson, 2010.

For us, every time we come to Lent we're reminded of this journey that does, and does not, end with death. We may be acutely aware of our own mortality when we attend a funeral or may ponder it in our prayers when we let go of someone we dearly love. An essential question of our human existence lies before us all: *Will we be ready to die when our time comes?* When we face the unknown with faith and embrace death as a part of our own life, we are then able to silence the demons who would keep us frozen with fear, rather than let us experience the final freedom of life that awaits us when we leave this mortal world with dignity, with grace, and with God.

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