

# That You act Justly

[Br Vincent Kingston](#)

Since this is the last issue of the '06 -'07 volume of Lasallians GB & M, I would like to end on a positive and heart-warming note...! I trust you will find the following reflection on the life and martyrdom of Archbishop Oscar Romero interesting and inspiring. It is reproduced here with the kind permission of *Progressio*, and appeared in the Spring issue of *'Interact'*, their magazine, under the heading *"Living Simply for the Poor"*.

## Living simply for the poor

Julian Filochowski reflects on the life and martyrdom of Oscar Romero.

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ARCHBISHOP OSCAR ROMERO of San Salvador was assassinated 27 years ago. He is already esteemed and venerated as a contemporary martyr, a champion of human rights, a tireless defender of the poor, and an implacable enemy of the violence and repression that enveloped his country precariously balanced on the verge of civil war.

On the evening of 24 March 1980 Archbishop Romero was shot dead with a single marksman's bullet as he celebrated mass in the chapel of the cancer hospital where he lived. His sermon was a reflection on St John's gospel, chapter 12: 'Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies it remains only a single grain; but if it dies it yields a rich harvest.' He concluded: This body broken and this blood shed for human beings encourage us to give our body and blood up to suffering and pain as Christ did – not for self but to bring justice and peace to our people...' The assassin fired. Romero slumped to the floor at the foot of the crucifix. He was taken to the hospital in the back of a pick-up truck but he was dead on arrival.

Romero was a very ordinary priest who did quite extraordinary things. Trained in a traditional environment, he was bookish, shy and self-effacing. Yet he became a great preacher and orator who, with colossal courage, faced up to and denounced the horrible sufferings of his people. He lived a life of great simplicity -indeed austerity. As Archbishop he refused the blandishments of the wealthy and simply could not be co-opted. Instead he continually pointed to the scandal of hunger and malnutrition in a country whose agricultural potential brought fabulous riches to a tiny – Catholic – oli-

garchy while the landless peasants in the countryside remained in abject misery.

In identifying with the most marginalised Salvadorans, seeing Jesus Christ present in their torture and deprivation, Romero made his fundamental option for the poor. He stood alongside them in word and lifestyle, in prayer and projects of solidarity. He continually urged the rich to share their wealth with the poor. Take off your rings and give them to the poor before your fingers are cut off,<sup>1</sup> he said in a moment of frustration when land reform was sabotaged even though hunger stalked the countryside.

He would not stay silent when the response of the elites to the ensuing unrest was cruelty, killings and disappearances at the hand of their death squads. He would not preach a deferential piety to the church communities, but became 'the voice of the voiceless'. The fury of the military and land-owners was demonstrated in a popular bumper sticker – 'Be a Patriot: Kill a Priest'. And six priests were slaughtered before Romero himself.



The Anglican church has already recognised his sanctity and heroic sacrifice when it placed his statue side by side with Martin Luther King's at Westminster Abbey. One day the Catholic Church will surely acknowledge him as a saint.

He lived simply and begged others to shun greed and materialistic excess so that his people, whom he dearly loved, might simply survive and perhaps one day enjoy a sustainable living in peace. And for that he died.

But Archbishop Romero is alive today in the hearts of millions of Latin Americans. He has inspired Christians across the world. His homilies are full of timeless evangelical wisdom for a Church in pursuit of justice in this globalising world. His example shows that we cannot endlessly talk of 'the option for the poor' and yet avoid engagement in the messy crises of the world.

Archbishop Romero stands out as a great prophet and a Christian witness of towering integrity.