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Oscar Romero: A Theology of Symbol*

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Abstract: This article explores the concept of symbol from the perspective of liberation. It applies the notion of symbol to the people who participate in the processes of liberation of those who are poor and excluded from society. They are symbols of God the liberator. In this sense, our study understands the person of Oscar Romero as someone who represents the people who struggle for their liberation, and therefore, as someone who is a symbol of God the liberator. Methodologically, as a first step, this article defines what a symbol is, especially from the perspective of Karl Rahner. Hence, this study understands a symbol as a reality that represents or makes present another reality. As a second step, this article applies the concept of symbol to the figure of Romero in three ways. Firstly, Romero is a symbol of the crucified people, which includes, on one hand, those who are passive and innocent victims of social injustice, and on the other hand, those who actively give their lives and are killed for defending the rights of the poor. Secondly, Romero symbolizes the spirituality of liberation. Having the option for the poor as a basic principle, this spirituality includes love for the poor, the integration between prayer and praxis, the discernment of the signs of the times, and the work for justice and reconciliation. Finally, Romero is a symbol of God's self-communication in grace. God reveals God's self in and through symbols. Thus, Romero is a symbol of God the liberator, that is, a God who loves and cares for the poor. However, Romero is a symbol of his people. Therefore, the crucified people represented by Romero are also symbols of God. This analysis concludes that God the liberator, in and through the symbolic figure of Romero, invites all men and women to be symbols of liberating grace.

Key Words: Symbol; *Óscar* Romero; Crucified people; Spirituality of liberation; Liberation theology.

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Óscar Romero: una teología del símbolo

Resumen: Este artículo explora el concepto de símbolo desde la perspectiva de la liberación. Aplica la noción de símbolo a las personas que participan en los procesos de liberación de los pobres y excluidos de la sociedad. Ellas son símbolos del Dios liberador. En este sentido, el presente estudio comprende la persona de *Óscar* Romero como representante de un pueblo que lucha por su liberación y, por tanto, como símbolo del Dios liberador. Metodológicamente, como primer paso, este artículo define qué es un símbolo, especialmente desde la perspectiva de Karl Rahner. De ahí que el estudio entienda al símbolo como realidad que representa o hace presente otra realidad. Como segundo paso, aplica ese concepto de símbolo a la figura de Romero de tres maneras. Primero, Romero es un símbolo del pueblo crucificado, que incluye –por un lado– a los que son víctimas pasivas e inocentes de la injusticia social y, por otro, a los que dan su vida y son asesinados por defender los derechos de los pobres. Segundo, Romero simboliza la espiritualidad de la liberación. Al tener la opción por los pobres como principio básico, esta espiritualidad incluye el amor a los pobres, la integración entre oración y praxis, el discernimiento de los signos de los tiempos y el trabajo por la justicia y la reconciliación. Finalmente, Romero es un símbolo de la gracia de la comunicación de Dios mismo. Dios se revela por medio de símbolos. Por tanto, Romero es un símbolo del Dios liberador, es decir, el Dios que ama y cuida a los pobres. Sin embargo, Romero es un símbolo de su pueblo. Por consiguiente, el pueblo crucificado representado por *él* también es símbolo de Dios. Este análisis concluye que el Dios liberador, por medio de la figura simbólica de Romero, invita a hombres y mujeres a ser símbolos de la gracia liberadora.

Palabras clave: Símbolo; *Óscar* Romero; pueblo crucificado; espiritualidad de la liberación; teología de la liberación.

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This article explores the theology of symbol in relationship to the figure of Oscar Romero, the spirituality of liberation, and liberation theology. Therefore, this is neither another biography of the Salvadorian archbishop,[1] nor a theological analysis of his homilies and writings.[2] Rather, this study interprets the person of Romero theologically through the concept of symbol. This analysis also deals with the question of how can we use and apply a theology of symbol in liberation theology.

Liberation theologians have used the notion of symbol especially in their studies of the sacraments.[3] This is not a surprise, because, indeed, the sacraments have a symbolic structure.[4] However, is this the only way in which we can use the concept of symbol in liberation theology? I suggest that the notion of symbol can be applied also to the people involved in the process of liberation of those who are poor and excluded from society. In this sense, the figure of Romero is appropriate and propitious to understand the concept of symbol from the perspective of liberation.

My thesis is that Romero is a symbol in a threefold way. Firstly, he is a symbol of the crucified people. Secondly, he symbolizes the spirituality of liberation. Finally, he is a symbol of God. To understand these three interrelated dimensions of Romero as a symbol, it is important to explain first what a symbol is. Hence, in the following section, I will explain an understanding of symbolic reality, especially from the viewpoint of Karl Rahner. Thus, methodologically, as a first step, this article explains a notion of symbols, and secondly, it applies such a notion to the figure of Oscar Romero.

The Dynamic Structure of Symbols

Several disciplines—such as Anthropology, Sociology, Philosophy, and Theology—have developed some theories of symbols. In their understanding of symbols, these disciplines have some points in common, but also, they have their differences. Even

[1] We already have some good biographies of Oscar Romero. See, for example, Brockman, *Romero. A Life*; Delgado, *Óscar A. Romero. Biografía*.

[2] Although Romero was not a professional theologian, he had implicitly a theological understanding in his written and oral messages. For theological interpretations of Romero's preaching and writings, see Romero, *A Prophetic Bishop Speaks to his People. The Complete Homilies of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero*; Romero, *Voice of the Voiceless. The Four Pastoral Letters and Other Statements*; Lee, *Revolutionary Saint. The Theological Legacy of Oscar Romero*; Colón-Emeric, *Oscar Romero's Theological Vision. Liberation and Transfiguration of the Poor*.

[3] For studies of the sacraments from the perspective of liberation, see, for instance, Codina, "Sacraments"; Floristán and Maldonado, *Los sacramentos. Signos de liberación*.

[4] For an analysis of the symbolic structure of the sacraments, see Ferrándiz García, *La teología sacramental desde una perspectiva simbólica. En los teólogos españoles del posconcilio*; Borobio, "¿Qué es un sacramento?", 409-434.

in the same field, such as Theology, sometimes authors concur in their comprehension of symbols, but sometimes they differ. Therefore, as James Buckley says, "a study of the language game played by the notion [of symbol] in each of these areas [and authors] is needed before any generalizations can be made."[5]

My goal here is neither to reconcile these different approaches nor to elaborate a comprehensive theory of symbols. My purpose is more modest. Drawing on the theories of some theologians, and considering their differences, I will explain some aspects of the dynamic structure of symbols that are useful and applicable for understanding the figure of Archbishop Oscar Romero as a symbol.

As we analyze the dynamic structure of symbols, it is important to distinguish three interrelated elements: the reality symbolized, the symbol itself, and the active recipients of symbols. The relationship between these three elements is what makes the structure of symbols be dynamic. I explain these three elements as follows.

Firstly, let us see the dynamic structure of symbols from the perspective of the reality symbolized. To understand this first aspect, Karl Rahner's article "The Theology of the Symbol" is especially helpful and relevant. His study has two parts. In the first part, he explains an ontology of symbols. In the second part, he applies this ontology of symbols to theological realities, that is, he develops a theology of symbols.[6] According to Rahner, a symbol "is the self-realization of a being in the other, which is constitutive of its essence."[7] Therefore, a being (i.e., the reality symbolized) realizes itself in the other (i.e., the symbol), which is constitutive of the essence of such a being. Another way to explain this self-realization of a being in the other is through the notion of "expression." For Rahner, "all beings are by their very nature symbolic, because they necessarily 'express' themselves in order to attain their own

[5] Buckley, "On Being a Symbol: An Appraisal of Karl Rahner," 453.

[6] Likewise, here I am explaining a theory of symbol first, and later, in the last part of this article, I will apply this theory to a theological reality, namely, God's revelation through the person of Romero.

[7] Rahner, "The Theology of the Symbol," 234. In this short but dense definition of symbol, Rahner is following Thomas Aquinas, and through Aquinas, he is using Aristotelian categories. A being is a unity of form and matter. As form, a being realizes itself in the "other" (i.e., that which is not form but matter). However, this "other," which is matter, is constitutive of the essence of such a being. In this sense, all beings realize themselves in the "other," which is constitutive of their essence. The "spirit" is the form of human beings, understanding spirit as consciousness and freedom. Human beings are a unity of spirit and matter. As spirit, human beings realize themselves in the "other" (i.e., that which is not spirit but matter). However, this "other," which is matter, is constitutive of the essence of human beings. Therefore, form and matter, or spirit and matter, are not two entities existing prior to their union. For Rahner, there is an original unity between them (Rahner, "The Theology of the Symbol," 225-228; Rahner, "The Unity of Spirit and Matter in the Christian Understanding of Faith."

nature."[8] Therefore, a being (i.e., the reality symbolized) expresses itself in the other (i.e., the symbol), in order to attain its own self-realization.

Secondly, let us consider the dynamic structure of symbols from the perspective of the symbol. According to Rahner, a symbol is

> …the highest and most primordial manner in which one reality can represent another […]. We call this supreme and primal representation, in which one reality renders another present (primarily "for itself" and only secondarily for others), a symbol: the representation which allows the other "to be there."[9]

In other words, a symbol is a reality (i.e., something or someone real) that makes present another reality (i.e., something or someone else real as well). A symbol is something (or someone) that "re-presents" something else (or someone else). To be sure, here we are understanding the noun "representation" and the verb "representing" in an ontological way, that is, as making the other *really* present. That is why Rahner originally uses the term "*Real symbol*."[10] A symbol really makes present the reality symbolized.

To understand better this definition of symbol, Rahner explains the difference between symbol and sign.[11] On the one hand, a sign is a mere indicator that points to another reality. On the other hand, as we have already said, a symbol is a reality that makes present another reality. Therefore, on the one hand, a sign is not constituted by the reality signified. A sign "indicates the object but does not contain it." On the other hand, "a symbol is not something separate from the symbolized."

Rather, a symbol is constituted by the reality symbolized. Again, the notion of "expression" is helpful to understand this intrinsic connection between a symbol and the reality symbolized. For Rahner, all beings "are or can be essentially the expression

[8] Rahner, "The Theology of the Symbol," 224. Likewise, Louis-Marie Chauvet uses the analogy of human language in order to explain the expressive dimension of the sacraments as symbols. He says: "To express oneself is not to give an exterior covering to a human reality already there interiorly […]. For there is no human reality, however interior or intimate, except through the mediation of language or quasi-language that gives it a body by expressing it" (Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament. A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, 90).

[9] Rahner, "The Theology of the Symbol," 225.

[10] Rahner, "Zur Theologie des Symbols," 279.

[11] Rahner recognizes that sometimes it is difficult to distinguish a symbol from a sign because the "margins are fluid" between them (Rahner, "The Theology of the Symbol," 225). According to Ferrándiz García, it is impossible to declare "this is a symbol" and "that is a sign" because both are mixed in the concrete (Ferrándiz García, *La teología sacramental desde una perspectiva simbólica. En los teólogos españoles del posconcilio*, 61).

of another."[12] In this sense, a symbol is a reality that is the expression of another reality. As an expression of the reality symbolized, a symbol is "constituted by the thing symbolized as an inner moment of itself." Hence, a symbol "is itself full of the thing symbolized, being its concrete form of existence."[13]

A symbol is generally a reality that is material and perceptible through the senses. As a perceptible reality, a symbol sometimes makes present another reality that is material and perceptible as well. However, a symbol can also represent a reality that is not perceptible, visible, or tangible in or by itself. Precisely, one of the powers of symbols is that they can represent immaterial, spiritual, or abstract realities and make them perceptible and concrete. Moreover, according to Paul Ricoeur, a symbol has a double intentionality or two levels of meaning.[14] The first meaning of a symbol is more immediate, full of human experience, more anthropological and of this world. The second level of meaning takes up the first meaning and elevates it to a fuller dimension, a fuller meaning that is generally not perceptible through the senses.[15]

Finally, let us consider the dynamic structure of symbols from the perspective of the active recipients. According to Rahner, the representation and expression of a

[12] Ibid., 225-226.

[13] Ibid., 251. Rahner's definition of symbols is different from Paul Tillich's. When Tillich compares signs and symbols, he says that "symbols have one characteristic in common with signs: they point beyond themselves to something else." However, there is also a difference between them: "signs do not participate in the reality of that to which they point, while symbols do" (Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 41-42). See also Tillich, "The Meaning and Justification of Religious Symbols," 3-6. For Rahner, symbols are not mere signs that "point beyond themselves," as Tillich claims. For Rahner, symbols are not pointers, but re-presentations of another reality. It is true that Tillich also says that symbols "participate in the reality" symbolized, which is correct. However, he does not explain why or how that "participation" of the symbol in the reality symbolized occurs. He does not say that symbols are constituted by the reality symbolized, as Rahner asserts. In my judgement, Tillich's notion of "participation" does not express well enough the ontological relationship between the symbol and the reality symbolized. Thus, the attempt to equate or reconcile Tillich's and Rahner's theories of symbols—like Roger Haight tries to do—is mistaken (Haight, *Dynamics of Theology*, 129-135).

[14] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 15.

[15] Borobio, "¿Qué es un sacramento?" 422. We find an example of these two levels of symbolic meaning in the Eucharist, as it is expressed in the prayer: "Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation, for through your goodness we have received the bread we offer you: fruit of the earth and work of human hands, it will become for us the bread of life," and "the wine we offer you: fruit of the vine and work of human hands, it will become our spiritual drink." At the first level of meaning, bread and wine symbolize the fruitfulness of our planet Earth, the work of women and men, the dignity of human labor, etc. At the second level of meaning, bread and wine symbolize the presence of Jesus Christ. This second level of meaning is fuller than the first. However, the second level of meaning is reached through the first, and it elevates the first meaning to another and fuller dimension. Therefore, it is not only the bread and wine that symbolize Christ, but also it is the fruitfulness of our planet Earth and the work of human beings that symbolize Christ.

being in a symbol is "primarily 'for itself' and secondarily for others."[16] These "others" are the active recipients of symbols, who are invited to know the realities that are made present in and through symbols. The realities that are represented in symbols can be known through the active participation of the recipients. For Avery Dulles, a symbol gives "participatory knowledge."[17] That is to say, a symbol "communicates by inviting people to participate in its own meaning, to inhabit the world which it opens up."[18]

A symbol is effective in human beings when they are open to relate to it existentially. As Dulles observes, "symbols do something to us."[19] They have a "transformative effect"[20] that affects the whole person. First, as Ricoeur asserts, a "symbol gives rise to thought."[21] It helps us to find new ideas. Second, Dulles says, a symbol "stirs the imagination."[22] It allows us to envisage things differently. Third, symbols "change our perspectives and values."[23] Thus, they have an influence on our moral behavior. And fourth, a symbol "arouses the will to consistent and committed action."[24] It can move people to act. Thus, a symbol implicates existentially its active recipients, and provokes a response from them.

Therefore, the dynamic structure of symbols has three elements, namely, the reality symbolized, the symbol, and the active recipients. Firstly, the reality symbolized expresses itself in a symbol. Secondly, a symbol is a reality that makes present another reality. It is a perceptible re-presentation and expression of a reality that can be perceptible or non-perceptible. Sometimes a symbol has "two levels of meaning, the lower and more obvious being the key to the higher, latent meaning."[25] Finally, the realities represented in and through symbols can be known through the active participation of the recipients. When human beings are open to relate to a symbol existentially, a symbol can produce a human transformation that might be expressed in action.

This definition of the dynamic structure of symbols should be taken analogically and flexibly when we apply it to different realities. According to Rahner, "the

[16] Rahner, "The Theology of the Symbol," 225.

[17] Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 136.

[18] Dulles, *The Craft of Theology: From Symbol to System*, 65.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 136.

[21] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 347.

[22] Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 137.

[23] Dulles, *The Craft of Theology: From Symbol to System*, 65.

[24] Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 137.

[25] Dulles, *The Craft of Theology: From Symbol to System*, 27.

concept of a being is 'analogous', that is, it displays the several types of self-realization of each being, and [of] being in itself, and hence also the concept and reality of the symbol are flexible."[26] Therefore, as we turn to analyze how this structure of symbols appears in the figure of Oscar Romero, it is important to keep in mind that this notion of symbol is applied analogically in each case.

Romero as a Symbol of the Crucified People

The first reality that is symbolized in the person of Romero is the crucified people. Romero is not only an individual. He symbolizes a "people."[27] This first dimension of the symbolic figure of Romero is important to highlight because today, especially in western cultures, the individual is so emphasized—and idolized—that the communal and social dimensions of our humanity are sometimes overlooked and even misinterpreted as opposed to personal freedom.

Romero understood himself as someone who represented his people, especially the poor. Even though he was born and raised in a modest family, this self-understanding was a process for Romero.[28] As a priest, and later as a bishop, he often visited the people in rural areas, and the poor came to visit him in the diocesan curia. The closer he became to the poor, the more he identified himself with them, their suffering, and their struggles.

When Romero spoke in public, he talked as someone who represented his people, as a voice of the voiceless. When he had interviews with journalists, he did not speak about himself, but about the situation of the poor in El Salvador. When he received an honorary degree from Louvain University, he began his speech with

[26] Rahner, "The Theology of the Symbol," 234.

[27] The word "people" is ambiguous. Here, "people" means especially the poor. Maybe some middle classes would identify themselves as people. The elite—those who have economic, social, and political power—would not see themselves as part of the people. In this sense, the word "people" is translated in Spanish not as *gente*, but as *pueblo* (Ribeiro de Oliveira, "An Analytical Examination of the Term 'People,'" 81-88).

[28] Romero's father had a job as a telegraphist. His family had a little farm where they grew coffee. However, they struggled to pay Romero's studies when he was in the seminary. In his book, Martin Maier tells a revealing conversation between Romero and César Jerez, provincial of the Jesuits in Central America. Both were in Rome. One evening, strolling on a street, Jerez asked Romero: "*Monseñor*, you have changed […]. What happened?" Romero answered: "I ask myself the same question […]. One has roots. I was born in a very poor family. I endured hunger, and I knew what it means to work since I was a child." But, Romero continued, he started to forget about his origins when he was a seminarian, and even more when he became a priest and a bishop. However, when he was sent to the diocese of Santiago de Maria, he encountered people's reality of poverty again. This experience was for him like a wind that rekindled the fire from the embers. Romero concluded: "Indeed, I have changed. But it has been also like a coming back [to my origins]" (Maier, *Óscar Romero. Mística y lucha por la justicia*, 97. Author's translation).

these words: "I would like to use your own language, but unfortunately I cannot. I will speak, then, in my own language, the language of the poor of my people, *whom I wish to represent*"[29].

Romero was not self-referential; he always referred to the reality of the poor. Thus, the reality of the poor was symbolically present and expressed through Romero and his words. Indeed, the people felt represented by Romero. During his homilies, the people sometimes applauded as a sign of approval because he was expressing their experience; he was articulating in words what they thought and felt.

As a bishop, he understood himself as a shepherd who took care of his flock. When security forces killed many priests, religious, and lay people who were accompanying the poor in their struggles, Romero felt that they were murdering the people whom he was meant to protect. The maximum expression of Romero's identification with his people was his own death. It symbolized the fate of many people who were killed unjustly in El Salvador.

"Crucified people" is a theological term that can help us to understand the symbolic dimension of Romero's death as representative of his people's unjust deaths. The term "crucified people" is an analogical expression that compares, on the one hand, the event of Jesus's death on the cross and, on the other hand, the reality of a people who suffer the deadly consequences of structures of social injustice. Therefore, one element of the analogical expression "crucified people" is the crucified Jesus.

In this regard, it is important to point out that the event of Jesus's death on the cross has two dimensions—a passive dimension and an active dimension—that should always be held in tension. The passive dimension consists in the fact that Jesus's death on the cross was something inflicted on him. Jesus was killed by those who had religious and political power and who did not welcome Jesus's proclamation of the Kingdom of God. Jesus was a victim of a religious and socio-political structure.

The active dimension consists in the fact that Jesus freely accepted the death on the cross as a likely consequence of his proclamation of God's Kingdom. Jesus remained faithful to the mission that he had received from the Father of proclaiming the love of God for all women and men, especially the poor and the excluded from society. Jesus did not shrink from announcing the Kingdom even when he faced the threat of being killed by those who did not accept his message. Therefore, Jesus gave his life freely for a good cause, that is, the cause of the poor as the cause of God.

Thus, the second element of the expression "crucified people"—that is, the reality of a people who suffer the deadly consequences of structures of social

[29] Quoted by Brockman, *Romero. A Life*, 225 (emphasis added).

injustice—has analogically the passive and active dimensions of the event of Jesus's death on the cross. To see these two dimensions in the reality of a people who suffer the lethal consequences of structural injustice, it is important to realize that here we are not talking about an individual, but about a people.

On the one hand, some of these people suffer the deadly repercussions of social injustice as something that is inflicted on them. They are victims of structures of social exploitation, exclusion, and indifference. This is the passive dimension of the reality of a people who suffer the deadly consequences of material poverty and social exclusion. On the other hand, some of these people are actively struggling to overcome their situation of poverty and exclusion. They actively participate in social and political movements that practice non-violent resistance, fight for human rights, and work for justice and reconciliation. Some of these people freely accept the likely consequence of being threatened and killed by those who do not accept the demands of the poor and marginalized. This is the active dimension of the reality of a people who suffer the fatal effects of social injustice.

These two groups are mutually interrelated. On the one hand, the passive group needs the active group to fight for their human rights. On the other hand, the active group needs the passive group in order to exist. Without the passive group, the actions of the active group would lack a concrete reference to the reality of the people, and their protests would be driven by mere ideology in the pejorative sense of the term.

Jon Sobrino explains the mutual relationship between these two groups through the image of the Suffering Servant in the book of Isaiah. This ambiguous figure might refer to an individual or to a people. First Christians compared Jesus—especially his death on the cross—with the Servant. Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría compare the people who suffer today the deadly consequences of social injustice with the Servant as well[30].

Therefore, the Suffering Servant works as a third element in the analogy between Jesus's death on the cross and the reality of the people who are oppressed and killed by social injustice. There is an analogical likeness between Jesus and these people because the image of the Servant can be applied to both. Regarding the comparison between the Servant and the people who suffer the fatal effects of structural injustice, Sobrino says:

> In fact, today too many die formally like the Servant for trying actively to establish justice: all kinds of prophets, priests and bishops, nuns and catechists, peasants and workers, students and lecturers […]. But among the crucified people there are also many—the majority—who end up like the Suffering

[30] Ellacuría, "The Crucified People," 257-278; Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator. A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth*, 255-264.

> Servant but not directly for what they actively do, [but] simply for what they are. They are killed *passively*, for just being what they are.[31]

For Sobrino, "without the active Servant, the passive Servant would have not voice, and unless the passive Servant existed, the active Servant would have no reason to exist."[32] Romero is a symbol of both groups. Romero represents the passive group of the crucified people because he identified himself with the poor, their suffering, and their struggles. Like the poor, Romero was a victim of structural injustice. As Sobrino says, Romero "died as one more member of the crucified people," whose deaths are "the product of personal and especially structural injustice."[33] He also represents the active group of the crucified people because, like many others, he actively accompanied the poor in their struggle to overcome their situation of poverty and oppression. He denounced the murders of many innocent people and claimed for justice. He advocated unity and reconciliation in society and in the Church. He was not intimidated when he received threats against his life. Romero freely accepted the consequence of being killed by those who did not accept his message. Indeed, Romero is a symbol of the crucified people.

Romero as a Symbol of the Spirituality of Liberation

The second reality that is symbolized in the figure of Romero is the spirituality of liberation. However, when we say that Romero is a symbol of this spirituality, we should remember that Romero is a symbol of a people, that is, a crucified people. Thus, the spirituality of liberation is not only the spirituality of an individual—that

[31] Ibid., 258.

[32] Ibid., 259. Sobrino sometimes uses the term "Jesuanic martyrs" to name those who actively lived and died like Jesus and for the same cause, that is, the cause of the Kingdom. Thus, Sobrino distinguishes two groups: the crucified people (i.e., the *passive* and innocent victims of social injustice) and the Jesuanic martyrs (i.e., those who *actively* died like Jesus). According to Sobrino, it is the crucified people that gives meaning to the life and death of the Jesuanic martyrs (Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom. The Martyrs of El Salvador and the Crucified Peoples*, 119-133). It is important to acknowledge the category "Jesuanic martyr" used by Sobrino. However, I will not use or analyze this concept here for three reasons. Firstly, Sobrino also calls the crucified people martyrs. Therefore, the distinction between the crucified people and the Jesuanic martyrs is not sharp. Secondly, naming those who actively died like Jesus as "martyrs" is complicated because it changes or expands the concept of martyr. Finally, an analysis of Sobrinos's understanding of martyrdom is beyond the limits of this article. For an analysis of Sobrino's theology of martyrdom, see Thiede, *Remembering Oscar Romero and the Martyrs of El Salvador. A Cloud of Witnesses*; and Valiente, "Renewing the Theology of Martyrdom," 112-127.

[33] Sobrino, "El pueblo crucificado. Ensayo con ocasión de los aniversarios de la UCA y El Mozote," 62, 76 (author's translation).

is, Romero—but the spirituality of a people. Indeed, the spirituality of liberation is a collective spirituality.[34]

Here we are understanding "spirituality" in a broad sense. A spirituality is more than a set of "spiritual practices," such as prayer, meditation, and rituals. It includes those practices, but it is more than that. A spirituality is the attitude or group of attitudes with which one assumes life. As Gustavo Gutierrez says, a spirituality is "a vital attitude, all embracing and synthesizing, informing the totality as well as every detail of our lives."[35] A spirituality is the spirit with which one faces reality and its different aspects (for example, one's personal reality, the reality of the world, etc.). A spirituality is the disposition with which one relates to reality (including our relationship with oneself, others, the world, and God).[36]

These attitudes or dispositions shape one's life. Thus, a spirituality shapes a way of being human. Ultimately, as Gutierrez says, "a spirituality is a manner of life."[37] A spirituality is a reality that is not perceptible in itself (attitudes and dispositions are not perceptible in themselves), but it takes shape, and becomes concrete and perceptible in the actions and lives of those who have this or that kind of spirituality. People—their lives and actions—are symbols of their spiritualities.

A spirituality of liberation is the spirituality that shapes the lives of those who are involved in processes of liberation. Wherever and whenever there is a socio-political and/or religious movement that fights to defend the rights of those who are poor and excluded from society, that movement gives rise to and is sustained by a spirituality.[38] Therefore, a spirituality of liberation is the spirituality that supports a socio-political and/or religious movement of liberation. It is the spirituality that sustains those who accompany the poor in their struggles.[39]

[34] Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells. The Spiritual Journey of a People*, 29, 73. The spirituality of liberation does not eliminate the personal dimension. On the contrary, it gives to the personal dimension its authentic meaning (Ibid., 89).

[35] Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation. History, Politics, and Salvation*, 117.

[36] Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation*, 13-14; Sobrino, "Spirituality and the Following of Jesus," 236. If we understand spirituality in this wider sense, then we can say that some spiritualities have an explicit connection with a religion or a divinity, but other spiritualities do not have this explicit relationship necessarily. See Casaldáliga and Vigil, *The Spirituality of Liberation*, 1-14.

[37] Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells. The Spiritual Journey of a People*, 88.

[38] Some authors, like Casaldáliga and Vigil, underline the Latin American identity of the spirituality of liberation. However, they accept that this spirituality belongs to the spirit of liberation "in any part of the world and at any time" in history. See Casaldáliga and Vigil, *The Spirituality of Liberation*, xxvii-xxviii.

[39] The relationship between praxis and spirituality is mutual. As Sobrino says, "spirituality has need of the practice of liberation in order to have the proper channel and appropriate material for its evangelical and relevant self-realization in current history. Practice has need of spirit in order to maintain itself precisely

The socio-political and/or religious movement that is related to the figure of Romero is the movement that Gutierrez calls the "irruption of the poor". Several popular movements appeared in different countries in Latin America especially during the sixties and seventies of the last century. Gutierrez described this social phenomenon with these words:

> The breakthrough of the poor […] is finding expression in the consciousness of the identity and organization of the oppressed and marginalized of Latin America […]. An entire people […] has taken to the path of building a world… in which all can live with dignity, a society that respects human freedom when it is in the service of a genuine common good […].
>
> All this we call the historical process of liberation, and with its ideas and its impetuosity it is sweeping all Latin America.[40]

This popular movement in Latin America was sustained by a spirituality that some liberation theologians called the "spirituality of liberation."[41] Romero is a symbol of this spirituality. His life and actions were a concrete and perceptible expression of the spirituality that sustained those who were accompanying the poor in their struggles, not only in El Salvador, but in many other Latin American countries.

According to Gutierrez, a Christian spirituality is a "way of being Christian," or a "way of living the faith."[42] All great Christian spiritualities include different aspects of Christian life, but they synthesize those elements in different ways. Each spirituality organizes the fundamental aspects of Christian life based on a central insight.[43] The fundamental intuition of the spirituality of liberation is the option for the poor.[44] This option is a spiritual attitude; it is the most characteristic attitude of the spirituality of those who accompany the poor in their processes of liberation.

According to Martin Maier, for Romero, the option for the poor was not an abstraction; he applied it in his life.[45] Likewise, Sobrino says, "Archbishop Romero's behavior was guided by his option for the poor."[46] Based on this central attitude, the

as a liberation of the poor, while becoming, ever more creatively and powerfully, a liberation that is truly comprehensive" (Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation*, 29).

[40] Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells. The Spiritual Journey of a People*, 27.

[41] For studies on the spirituality of liberation, see, for instance, Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells. The Spiritual Journey of a People*; Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation*; Casaldáliga and Vigil, *The Spirituality of Liberation*; Néstor Jaén, *Toward a Liberation Spirituality*.

[42] Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xxxii.

[43] Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells. The Spiritual Journey of a People*, 88-89.

[44] Sobrino, "Spirituality and the Following of Jesus," 242-243.

[45] Maier, *Óscar Romero. Mística y lucha por la justicia*, 123.

[46] Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom. The Martyrs of El Salvador and the Crucified Peoples*, 37.

spirituality of liberation—that is, the spirituality of Romero—organizes or synthesizes different elements of Christian life. I will explain four aspects of Christian life according to the spirituality of liberation as we see them in the life of Romero: the love for the poor, the integration between prayer and praxis, the discernment of the signs of the times, and the longing for justice and reconciliation.

A first aspect of the spirituality of liberation that we see in Romero's life is the love for the poor. Romero had friends among people of humble conditions. Romero treated the poor with respect and love. He cared for them. In a relationship of love, persons are equal in dignity; there are not a superior and an inferior; there is not one that is more valuable than the other. In this sense, Gutierrez asserts, "love exists only among equals."[47] Love implies also recognizing the other and the dignity of the other. Love does not consist only in giving, but also in receiving from the other.

In this sense, Sobrino notes, Romero "fairly rushed to the poor in order to receive from them, to learn from them, and to enable them to impart to him the good news."[48] Gutierrez calls this love for the poor "friendship." This love is necessary to accompany the poor in their struggles: "If there is not friendship with them and no sharing of the life of the poor, then there is no authentic commitment to liberation."[49]

Another word to name the love for the poor is "mercy." However, there is the danger of misunderstanding mercy in a patronizing way, as an attitude of superiority of one person over the other. Here, we understand mercy as joining one's heart with those who suffer from poverty and social exclusion. As Walter Kasper explains,

> Augustine and later Thomas Aquinas interpreted the word *misericordia* in its linguistic sense: to have one's heart (*cor*) with the unfortunate (*miseri*), with those who, in the widest sense of the word, are poor and in distress. They defined compassion […] as feeling or suffering with (*compassio*): *miserum cor habens super miseria alterius* (having an unhappy heart on account of the misery of another). Such compassion and such mercy are for Augustine and Thomas not only a feeling that is elicited by the experience of another's suffering. They are not only affective, but also at the same time effective dispositions, which strive to combat and overcome the deprivation and suffering.[50]

[47] Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xxxi.

[48] Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom. The Martyrs of El Salvador and the Crucified Peoples*, 34.

[49] Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xxxi.

[50] Kasper, *Mercy. The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*, 23.

In this sense, Sobrino says, mercy is an act of love, that is, "an *action*, or more precisely, a *re-action* to someone else's suffering, now interiorized within oneself."[51] Romero's life and "all of his activity was steeped in this compassion, this mercy."[52]

Liberation theologians observe that love for the poor has a political dimension. Hence, they coin the expression "political love." This does not mean that love for the poor excludes or disregards the personal dimension. As Gutierrez asserts, "the solidarity is not with 'the poor' in the abstract but with human beings of flesh and bone."[53] Of course, it is impossible to have personal relationships of friendship with all the poor. But it is necessary to have some friends among them, to know their names and stories, lest they become an ideological object of our intellectual reflections and actions.

Nevertheless, the love for the poor goes beyond a private "me and you" type of relationship. The love for the poor is a love for a socio-economic and cultural group.[54] In this sense, Sobrino says, "Romero genuinely loved his people."[55] This love has a political dimension. Those who love the poor participate in socio-political movements of liberation because they want the good of the poor. They fight against the structures of social injustice because it is one of the causes of the suffering of the poor. As Sobrino says, "the only correct way to love the poor will be to struggle for their liberation."[56]

A second aspect of the spirituality of liberation that we see in Romero's life is the integration between praxis and prayer. On the one hand, praxis means the praxis of liberation, that is, concrete actions that help the process of liberation of the poor. We can see this praxis in Romero as he accompanied the poor in their struggles and denounced social injustice. On the other hand, prayer means the personal encounter with God, in which a "loving dialogue"[57] between God and human beings takes place. Romero was a "man of prayer."[58] He spent time in prayer, and he often did the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola. Praxis and prayer are mutually interrelated in the spirituality of liberation. Néstor Jaén says,

> …liberating prayer should lead to a liberating action, and liberating action should invite prayer. If a particular sociopolitical action distances me from God

[51] Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy. Taking the Crucified People from the Cross*, 16.

[52] Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom. The Martyrs of El Salvador and the Crucified Peoples*, 34.

[53] Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells. The Spiritual Journey of a People*, 104.

[54] Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 116; Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation*, 82.

[55] Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom. The Martyrs of El Salvador and the Crucified Peoples*, 29.

[56] Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation*, 32.

[57] Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells. The Spiritual Journey of a People*, 111.

[58] Maier, *Óscar Romero. Mística y lucha por la justicia*, 131 (author's translation).

> or makes me feel like not praying, I should be suspicious of it. And if a prayer moves me away from effective love for the poor and encloses me spiritually within myself, I should mistrust it.[59]

Gutierrez uses the terms "gratuitousness" and "effectiveness" to explain the relationship between prayer and praxis. For Gutierrez, this relationship is not a matter of "balancing" the gratuitousness of prayer and the effectiveness of actions. Rather, "gratuitousness is an atmosphere in which the entire quest for effectiveness is bathed"[60]. In this way, Gutierrez is expressing the well-known spiritual maxim of doing as if everything depends on oneself and trusting as if everything depends on God. But also, for Gutierrez, true love (for God and for our neighbor) is born from the experience of the gratuitous love of God that we experience in prayer. Therefore, "a commitment that takes shape in effective action is […] required by the gratuitous love of the Lord."[61] The experience of gratuity generates the gratitude that, in turn, boosts the praxis of liberation.[62]

The integration between prayer and praxis makes it possible to be contemplative as we work for the liberation of the poor. Some authors, such as Pedro Casaldáliga and José Maria Vigil, transform the Ignatian principle of "contemplative in action" into "contemplative in liberation." Being contemplative in liberation does not confuse prayer with praxis, or vice versa. When someone is working for the liberation of the poor, he or she is not praying, and vice versa. Being contemplative in liberation is rather living in a state of prayer during everyday life, which includes the work of liberation for those who participate in such an historical process.[63] In this sense, Maier claims, Romero was a man of prayer and deeds: he was contemplative in action.[64]

A third aspect of the spirituality of liberation that we see in Romero's life is discernment of the signs of the times. According to Maier, Romero tried to respond to God's will time after time in the changing circumstances of history. However, he believed that God showed God's will in history, that is, in the signs of the times.[65] Indeed, the Second Vatican Council exhorted the people of God to "scrutinize the signs of the times," and to "interpret them in the light of the Gospel," which implies

[59] Jaén, *Towards a Liberation Spirituality*, 66.

[60] Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells. The Spiritual Journey of a People*, 109.

[61] Ibid., 113.

[62] See Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation*, 38.

[63] Casaldáliga and Vigil, *The Spirituality of Liberation*, 102-104, 122-123.

[64] Maier, *Óscar Romero. Mística y lucha por la justicia*, 135.

[65] Ibid., 109.

to discern the "authentic signs of God's presence and purpose in the happenings, needs and desires in which this People has a part along with other men [and women] of our age."[66] In other words, discerning the signs of the times consists in finding God in history, because God reveals God's self in history.

Juan Noemi and Eduardo Silva point out that the Second Vatican Council invites us to discern the "authentic signs" of God's presence in history. Therefore, it is necessary to have some criteria to discern the authentic signs of divine presence from those that are inauthentic.[67] The following interrelated criteria can help to discern the true signs of God's presence in history. Firstly, Jesus, his life, and his proclamation of the Kingdom of God in words and deeds, are fundamental criteria for discerning the signs of the times.[68]

Second, the Spirit of Christ, that is the Spirit of life, is a criterion to discern God's presence in history. In this sense, movements that promote a worthy life for the poor are signs of the times.[69] Finally, Christian values, which are also human values, are criteria for discerning God's action in history. In this regard, Rafael Luciani says, the fundamental hermeneutical criterion to discern the signs of the times is "humanization."[70]

Discernment of the signs of the times not only identifies God's presence in history, but also distinguishes the power of sin in historical events. The criteria mentioned above also help us to differentiate the power of evil in history dialectically. Sin is present in those historical events that are against God's Kingdom, that is, events that produce evils such as poverty, social exclusion, enmity, and violence. However, discernment of the signs of the times is not and should not remain as a mere account of the historical events that are against the Kingdom of God. These sinful events are

[66] Second Vatican Council, "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*" 4, 11. We could fittingly use the expression "symbols of the times" instead of "signs of the times" if these do not only point to God's presence in history, but also make God present in history. However, I will keep the expression "signs of the times" used by the Second Vatican Council since it follows the spirit of Jesus' words, in Matt 16: 3, and Luke 12:56.

[67] Noemi, "En la búsqueda de una teología de los 'signos de los tiempos,'" 444, 447; Silva, "Criterios de discernimiento para una teología de los signos de los tiempos latinoamericanos," 175, 183.

[68] Costadoat, "Los 'signos de los tiempos' en la teología de la liberación," 401, 407.

[69] Here, "worthy life" means a life that has the basics to call it worthy, that is, food, a house, a job, access to health services, freedom, etc.

[70] For Luciani, humanization is the creation of historical conditions—personal, as well as structural conditions—that make human fraternity possible (Luciani, "Los signos de los tiempos como criterio hermenéutico fundamental del quehacer teológico," 40).

recognized dialectically in the discernment of the signs of the times, whose main task is the recognition of God's presence in history.[71]

Discernment of the signs of the times includes hearing God's call to collaborate in God's Kingdom. This discernment distinguishes God's voice in and through some human voices; it recognizes God's call in and through some human calls. In this sense, God's voice can be heard in the voice of the poor and the excluded from society who cry out for justice. In this regard, Luciani suggests, facing the reality of the pauperization and dehumanization of millions of people, God calls us to participate in processes of humanization.[72]

A fourth and final aspect of the spirituality of liberation that we find in Romero's life is the longing for justice and reconciliation. What he wanted for his people was a nation in which the rights of the poor were defended. Thus, he claimed for justice, and supported movements of liberation only when they did not resort to violence. Ultimately, what he wanted for his people was reconciliation and peace.

The spirituality of liberation implies a yearning for both justice and reconciliation. Unfortunately, some liberation theologians have focused only on the fight for justice as an essential element of liberation and have overlooked the dimension of reconciliation. The fight for justice, according to some liberation theologians, entails a conflict between groups (named as the rich and the poor, oppressors and oppressed, etc.) that implies sometimes the use of violence.

In my opinion, this kind of fight for justice is not enough for achieving a true liberation of the poor. We have seen sometimes in history that once the oppressed have made a revolution and achieved political power, they become the new oppressors. Moreover, the use of violence often produces more violence, poverty, oppression, victims, and death. For a true liberation of the poor, it is necessary to achieve reconciliation between the groups that are in conflict. Reconciliation means the return to the state of fraternity and friendship among people, social groups, and nations, that are called to be brothers, sisters, and friends, but have broken their relationship of fraternity and friendship. Justice and reconciliation work in tandem for the liberation

[71] Casale, "Dios acontece en los signos de los tiempos. Algunas reflexiones metodológicas provisionales," 166. Thus, according to Ellacuría, the crucified people are *the* sign of the times (Ellacuría, "Discernir 'el signo' de los tiempos," 57-59). The crucified people, on the one hand, reveal God's presence in history—as I will explain in the next section of this article—and, on the other hand, their suffering manifests the power of evil in history.

[72] Luciani, "Los signos de los tiempos como criterio hermenéutico fundamental del quehacer teológico," 46-47.

of the poor. Justice is necessary for the viability of reconciliation, and reconciliation is necessary for the permanence of justice.[73]

Furthermore, the spirituality of liberation does not easily justify the use of violence.[74] In the fight for justice, Romero claims, "violence ought to be a last resort. All peaceful means must first be tried,"[75] especially dialogue. The spirituality of liberation resists social injustice more properly in a non-violent way. Jaén says:

> …the kind of action most proper to Christians, and thus to be preferred, is that of non-violent action, or what is called active non-violence […]. There was a time when the most radicalized regarded active non-violence as ineffective because it extinguished struggles […]. Today history is showing that peaceful struggles, when they are courageous and steady, can be extraordinarily effective. This is the most characteristically Christian way.[76]

Romero's life manifested all these attitudes that are essential to the spirituality of liberation. Romero loved the poor, he integrated prayer and praxis, he discerned the signs of the times, and he longed for justice and reconciliation. He is a symbol of the spirituality of liberation.

Romero as a symbol of God

The third and ultimate reality that is symbolized in the person of Romero is God. I mentioned above that some symbols have two levels of meaning. The first level of meaning is more immediate, and full of human experience. The second level takes up the first meaning and elevates it to a fuller dimension. In this sense, the first meaning of the symbolic figure of Romero is a people with a spirituality. The second and fuller meaning of the symbolic figure of Romero is God's revelation. In other words, God is made present and expressed through that historical event called Oscar Romero. But again, we should remember that Romero represents a people, that is, a crucified people. Therefore, when we say that God reveals God's self through the person of Romero, we are also saying that God reveals God's self through the people whom Romero represents, that is, the people who embody the spirituality of liberation.

To understand the reality of God's revelation through the symbolic figure of Romero, it is helpful to call to mind the three interrelated elements of the dynamic

[73] Galilea, *El camino de la espiritualidad*, 47-48, 192, 196.

[74] Romero speaks about the reality and use of violence in his third and fourth pastoral letters (Romero, *Voice of the Voiceless. The Four Pastoral Letter and Other Statements*, 105-110, 142-148).

[75] Ibid., 110.

[76] Jaén, *Toward a Liberation Spirituality*, 68.

structure of symbols: the reality symbolized, the symbol itself, and the active recipients of symbols.

Let us consider the person of Romero from the perspective of the first element of the dynamic structure of symbols, that is, the reality symbolized. The infinite reality that is symbolized in and through the person of Romero is God who reveals God's self to human beings. If the revelation of God, who is infinite and transcendent, is meant to be received by finite and historical human beings, then symbols are an adequate mediation of God's revelation. As Dulles says, "God's revelation, if it is to come home to human beings as embodied spirits, must come to expression through tangible […] symbols. The divine self-communication, therefore, has a […] symbolic dimension."[77]

Here Dulles is following Rahner, who understands revelation as the event of God's self-communication to human beings. According to Rahner, "the term 'self-communication' is really intended to signify that God in his own most proper reality makes himself the inner-most constitutive element of man."[78] Rahner distinguishes two modes of the single act of God's self-communication to human beings. The first is the giving of the Spirit or the bestowal of grace to every human being. The second is the incarnation of the Son in Jesus Christ, which "is the uniquely supreme case of the actualization of man's nature in general."[79] Here we should consider God's self-communication in the mode of grace in order to understand God's revelation through the symbolic figure of Romero.

According to Rahner, God's self-communication in grace means that "what is communicated is really God in his own being."[80] Indeed, "God can communicate himself in his own reality to what is not divine without ceasing to be infinite reality and absolute mystery."[81] As God communicates God's self to human beings, "God makes himself a constitutive principle of the created existent, without thereby losing his absolute, ontological independence."[82] Thus, God's self-communication in grace to human beings means that "God is really an intrinsic, constitutive principle of man."[83]

[77] Dulles, *The Craft of Theology. From Symbol to System*, 22.

[78] Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith. An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, 116.

[79] Rahner, "Anonymous Christians," 393.

[80] Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith. An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, 117.

[81] Ibid., 119.

[82] Ibid., 120.

[83] Ibid., 121.

However, as God communicates God's self to a human subject, "the finite subject does not disappear […] and is not suppressed, but rather it reaches its fulfillment."[84]

Therefore, we can see how Rahner's theory of symbol is imbued with his understanding of human beings as the event of God's self-communication. And vice versa, we can see how Rahner's theological anthropology is influenced by his ontology of symbol. As I explained above, for Rahner, a being (the reality symbolized) expresses itself in the other (the symbol). In this self-expression of a being in the other, the symbol is constituted by the reality symbolized. We can see this dynamic structure of symbols in the "graced" reality of human beings. God (as the reality symbolized)—who is not a being among other beings, but who is absolute Being—expresses or communicates God's self in grace to human beings (as symbols). Thus, human beings (as symbols) are constituted by God's grace (as the reality symbolized).

For Rahner, "revelation is itself always mediated categorically in the world."[85] Thus, God's self-communication in grace to human beings is always mediated in and through the finite beings of the world. The "immediacy of God which we call grace"[86] is "mediated by a categorical encounter with concrete reality in our world, both the world of things and the world of persons."[87] Hence, God's self-communication in grace to human beings is a "mediated immediacy."[88] God's self-communication in grace to a human subject occurs in and through the human subject itself, who, as an embodied spirit, experiences himself or herself as a transcendent being in knowledge and freedom.

As Rahner says, "this most radical immediacy [of God] is still mediated in a certain sense by the finite subject experiencing it, and thereby also experiencing itself."[89] But also, God's self-communication in grace to human beings occurs in and through their "encounter with the world and especially with other people."[90] God's self-communication in grace to human beings takes place especially in and through the encounter with other human beings because "the intercommunication of spiritual

[84] Ibid., 84.

[85] Ibid., 172-173.

[86] Ibid., 57.

[87] Ibid., 52.

[88] Ibid., 83.

[89] Ibid., 84.

[90] Ibid., 52.

subjects in truth and in love and in society belongs to the realization of one's own existence."[91]

In this sense, God's revelation is mediated through symbols. As Dulles explains, "what is immediate, for Rahner, is the self-communication of the divine, the experience of grace. But the inner presence of God cannot be known and cannot achieve itself except insofar as it becomes mediated, or mediates itself, in created symbols."[92] Thus, God's self-communication in grace to human beings is mediated in and through finite beings—especially human beings—that function as symbolic mediations of God's grace. In this sense, God communicates God's self to human beings in and through the symbolic figure of Romero.

Now let us consider the person of Romero from the perspective of the second element of the dynamic structure of symbols, that is, the symbol. If we accept that "the world is our mediation to God in his self-communication in grace,"[93] and that "the individual existent in its categorical individuality and limitations can mediate God,"[94] as Rahner asserts, then we can say that the world, finite beings, and especially human beings are symbols of God's self-communication. As C. Annice Callahan says, human beings can be "symbols of that universal grace."[95]

In this sense, Romero is a symbol that mediates God's presence in our world. Romero makes present something of God. He symbolizes a God who loves the poor and the excluded from society. He represents a God who opts for the poor and works for their liberation in history. He is an expression of God's longing for a just world and a reconciled humanity. In this regard, Victor Codina exclaims: "Who can doubt that the life and death of Archbishop Romero are a prophetic symbol of the Kingdom [of God]?"[96]

Finally, let us consider the person of Romero from the perspective of the third element of the dynamic structure of symbols, that is, the active recipients. According to Rahner, if God's revelation to human beings takes place in and through the mediation of the world, then our "knowledge of God […] comes through encountering the world, to which, of course, we ourselves also belong."[97] Therefore, we can know

[91] Ibid., 41.

[92] Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 148-149.

[93] Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith. An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, 151.

[94] Ibid., 84.

[95] Callahan, "Karl Rahner's Theology of Symbol. Basis for his Theology of the Church and the Sacraments," 204.

[96] Codina, "Sacraments," 225.

[97] Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith. An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, 52.

God through the mediation of finite beings—especially human beings—that work as symbols of God's presence.

However, as we said above, the realities that are represented in and through symbols can be known only through the active participation of the recipients. God's self-communication in grace through the mediation of symbols can be received by human beings if they are open to engage with such symbols existentially. In this sense, God's self-revelation through the symbolic figure of Romero can be accepted by human beings only if they are open to relate to such a figure. This relationship with the person of Romero means, for example, to know about his life and to understand his message. Those who are open to be questioned and affected by the symbolic figure of Romero will be able to know a God who loves the poor and the excluded from society.

This encounter with God through the symbolic figure of Romero demands conversion and action. Indeed, when human beings open themselves to relate to the person of Romero, and let his message, life, and death challenge their presuppositions and ideas, they run the blessed risk of being transformed. In other words, the encounter with God—a God who loves the poor and the excluded from society—through the symbol of Romero includes a call to change one's life and to collaborate with God in building a more human, just, reconciled, and fraternal world.

Conclusions

In this article, I have explored the concept of symbol from the perspective of liberation theology. I have applied such a concept to the people who are involved in the process of liberation of those who are poor and excluded from society; those who accompany the poor in their struggles are symbols of God the liberator. In this sense, I have interpreted the figure of Oscar Romero as a symbol of those who participate in the process of liberation of the poor. As Maier says, Romero has become a "symbolic figure" of "the fight for the dignity of the poor and the human rights."[98]

Thus, in this article, I have analyzed what it means to say that Romero is a symbolic figure. I have suggested that Romero is a symbol in three interrelated ways. Firstly, Romero is a symbol of a crucified people, that is, the crucified people in El Salvador. As Sobrino says, "Romero entered the hearts of all poor, simple, and suffering Salvadorans, and he is there today."[99] In this regard, it is significant that a few years after Romero's canonization, the Catholic Church beatified four Christians who lived in the same milieu of socio-political turmoil that Romero experienced.

[98] Maier, *Óscar Romero. Mística y lucha por la justicia*, 83 (author's translation).

[99] Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom. The Martyrs of El Salvador and the Crucified Peoples*, 27.

These four Christians were Nelson Lemus, Manuel Solorzano, Rutilio Grande, and Cosme Spessotto.[100]

Lemus and Solórzano were two lay men who helped in the church. Grande and Spessotto were two priests—a Jesuit and a Franciscan friar—who accompanied the poor in their struggles. They—including Romero—not only as individuals, but also as a group, symbolize a crucified people. Moreover, Romero is a symbol of the crucified people not only in his own country, but also outside El Salvador. That is why Casaldáliga calls him "Saint Romero of the Americas."[101] Sobrino asserts, Romero "has surely become a universal figure" because "throughout Latin America […], as in so many other parts of the world, Archbishop Romero is admired and loved"[102] by those who have known about his life and have welcomed his message of justice and reconciliation.

Secondly, Romero is a symbol of the spirituality of liberation, which is the spirituality of a people. This spirituality includes some attitudes that shape and sustain the way of life of those who accompany the poor and the excluded from society in their struggles. Based on the option for the poor, the spirituality of liberation includes love for the poor, the integration between prayer and praxis, the discernment of the signs of the times, and the longing for justice and reconciliation. This spirituality—that is, the spirituality of Romero—is as relevant today as it was at the time when Romero was alive.

Finally, Romero is ultimately a symbol of God the liberator. Romero makes present a God who loves and liberates the poor and the excluded from society. Human beings can know this God if they relate existentially with the symbolic figure of Romero. As Sobrino says, "the God of the poor and the mystery of God are what Archbishop Romero made present to all who were willing to listen."[103] Those who are willing to know and reflect upon Romero's message, and those who are open to be moved by his life and death, will be able to understand that—using Ellacuría's words—"with Archbishop Romero, God has visited El Salvador."[104] Indeed, in and through Romero, God has been among us, calling us to be symbols of God's liberating grace as Romero was.

[100] Romero was canonized on October 14, 2018. Grande, Lemus, Solórzano, and Spessotto were beatified on January 22, 2022.

[101] Quoted by Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom. The Martyrs of El Salvador and the Crucified Peoples*, 43.

[102] Ibid., 43, 45. Maier mentions some groups of solidarity in different countries that have been inspired by Romero and carry his name (Maier, *Óscar Romero. Mística y lucha por la justicia*, 159-163).

[103] Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom. The Martyrs of El Salvador and the Crucified Peoples*, 22.

[104] Quoted by Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom. The Martyrs of El Salvador and the Crucified Peoples*, 53.

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