

Un Testimonio:

Monseñor Oscar Arnulfo Romero Galdámez

Traducido al inglés,

por: Dr. Knut Walter

To Saint Romero of America
To Margara
To my children
To my grandchildren
To my family, kin and friends alike

Ever since the overwhelming news of Monsignor Romero’s death – and having given thought to the incredible gift that the Lord bestowed upon me to be near a saint – I have not been able to calm my conscience for not writing about the moments I had the privilege to share with him. My wife, Margara, and my children, Aıda Veronica, Jorge Jose, Rebeca and Florence, were witnesses to many of these moments when Monsignor came to our home.

When I remember Monsignor Romero, I have come to understand what it is like to live in sanctity, to practice humility and commitment, to convert to God every day and to do whatever He asked during the times when it was not clear what road the country should take. Monsignor Romero never aspired to become a prophet and mediator, as he indeed became; instead, his objective was to serve the Church and feel for its mission as the archbishop that he was.

I have given testimony of my experience with Monsignor Romero in North Carolina, at the Riverside Church in New York City, at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, at La Trobe University in Australia and in New Zealand. But I did not keep records of these testimonies, given that I find it difficult to express myself in writing.

Thanks to interviews by Hector Lindo (2002) and Ricardo Jose Valencia (2005), of *El Faro* (2005), as well as the editing that Ana Marıa Nafrıa undertook of these interviews and other conversations that expanded on some of the points, it is now possible to present my homage to the memory of Monsignor Oscar Arnulfo Romero.

San Salvador, August 15, 2007.

Monsignor Romero and José Simán

José Simán, who was a personal friend of Monsignor Romero, is a successful Salvadoran businessman. After studying economics and philosophy, he received a Master's in Philosophy at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. He has held a variety of posts, including: director of merchandising and retail for ADOC, vice-president of the university accreditation commission, board member of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of El Salvador, secretary of the Salvadoran Industrial Association, professor of the Central American University (UCA) and the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, president of the Salvadoran Institute for the Promotion of Industry (INSAFI), president and coordinator of the Peace and Justice Commission (a group of Catholic lay people). He has been a consultant for various international organizations, private firms and governments, as well as director and member of a number of commissions and councils that provide community services.

In this interview – based on the ones given to Ricardo José Valencia (from *El Faro*, an Internet newspaper) and Héctor Lindo – Mr. Simán reveals some of his experiences with one of the most important figures in Salvadoran history: MONSIGNOR ÓSCAR ARNULFO ROMERO Y GALDÁMEZ.

How did you meet Monsignor Romero?

The first time I talked with him, in the early Seventies, we ended up arguing; we had a respectful disagreement. Monsignor already was auxiliary bishop of San Salvador (Monsignor Chávez was still the archbishop); he was very close to my uncle Emilio Simán, both of them active supporters of Catholic journalism. Monsignor Romero was at the head of *Orientación*, a newspaper published by the archbishop's office. In those days, I was president of the Catholic Film Board (founded in 1963 with the support of all the bishops in El Salvador); the Board organized round table discussions and published newspaper columns on the most important films, in order to provide guidelines for moviegoers and to contribute to

their personal growth. But Monsignor, who was very conservative, criticized our work because he considered that our proper role was to censor instead of educating. Then, a representative of the International Catholic Movie Board – América Penichet, a Cuban film director – and I went to have an interview with Monsignor Romero, in an official capacity, to talk about our work and explain our points of view on this matter. We discussed the Film Board's function. His opinions angered me so much that I placed a recorder on the table and told him: "Look Monsignor, I want your words recorded because I really feel let down by what you are saying about film and the duty of the Catholic Film Board". Obviously, I did not record his words, but this says a lot about the tension generated during the talk and the distance between us.

After that I did not see him in quite a while because he was appointed bishop of Santiago de María. In April 1975, Monsignor Chávez – archbishop of San Salvador – appointed the Justice and Peace Commission, of which I was coordinator. Three months later the members of this commission (including Héctor Dada Hirezi, Rubén Zamora, Román Mayorga, and Antonio Orellana, accompanied by Jorge Contreras, a journalist) attended a session of the Episcopal Conference – that always met at the end of July – and asked them to consider a document we had prepared requesting that the Church take a stand against violence, whatever its origins and perpetrators, including structural violence mentioned by the Latin American bishops' conference in Medellín. We met with the bishops at the seminary, among whom were Monsignor Aparicio and Monsignor Álvarez (who, by the way, rejected my criticism of certain things and said: "Ahh! Pepito, you don't know the peasants; they are happy eating their little plate of beans and tortillas!").

We discussed the declaration that we wanted published in all the newspapers as a message from the bishops of the Episcopal Conference. The bishops approved its publication (in spite of the antipathy that Monsignor Aparicio and Monsignor Álvarez felt towards Héctor Dada and Rubén Zamora, who were present during the discussion) and agreed to send the document to the newspapers as an expression of their rejection of violence. But Monsignor Fredy Delgado, secretary of the Conference, who was charged with publishing it *as soon as possible*, did not do it, even though the document had the *imprimatur* of the bishops and was classified as *urgent*. It seems that he forgot to send it to the newspapers. That very same day a demonstration of students of the University of El Salvador had taken to the streets; it was repressed violently and many students were killed.

So, what was your reaction when Romero was appointed archbishop?

At that time I was president and coordinator of the Justice and Peace commission. Our opinion had been requested about who might replace Monsignor Chávez as archbishop (because of his age and frail health); in a letter to the papal nuncio's

office, we suggested that Arturo Rivera y Damas be considered, as he had also been auxiliary bishop to Monsignor Chávez after Romero and we knew him to be an intellectually and spiritually gifted man. We were aware that the women's association of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Cardinal Casariego of Guatemala and Cardinal López Trujillo of Colombia – who were very conservative – wanted Monsignor Romero for the post. But, as I said, the members of the Justice and Peace Commission believed that the ideal choice was Rivera y Damas and I think that he was also the choice of most Salvadoran Catholic laypeople who were trying to live within the spirit of the Second Vatican Council and Medellín. Thus, you can imagine the surprise and fear we experienced when Monsignor Romero was appointed precisely when the country faced such hard times, with elections around the corner, and the Church's position was most important: it had to relinquish its role as the third leg of the table, so to speak, together with the military and the private sector, and try to implement the issues raised during the Second Vatican Council and Medellín. The *Diario de Hoy* – overjoyed that Romero been chosen – ran a front page with Monsignor's photo on the very same day he was to be invested as archbishop of San Salvador. My friends kidded me so much that one of them even came to my home to leave the newspaper and told me: "There is your archbishop, Pepe, you who only believe in the Church."

I was discouraged because of this and because, even when it was obvious that things in the country had to change, I could not see how it might be done in a constructive way, but I began to reflect and remembered what Jon Sobrino had said so many times: that God is greater than us, that we should not try to manipulate him. This allowed me to reflect and I thought that if God had chosen Monsignor Romero, who was I to question Him? So I went to see Romero at the archbishop's offices and knelt before him and said: "Monsignor, we had our differences but you are the pastor and I'm here to serve". He asked me to stand and told me: "Don Pepe, what joy!" He went looking for Monsignor Rivera and Father Cortés, and they showed me a document they were about to publish in which the Church would now begin to condemn what was really happening. They had set up an Executive Committee (within the episcopal conference) that was following the course of events in the country and were ready to start to denounce some of them.

A week later, Father Rutilio Grande was killed. I went to the funeral Mass and he told me: "Look, Don Pepe (he always called me 'Don Pepe' even after I asked him not to), please, come with me, let's have a meeting. I need help." And he began to look for capable people, even though he knew some of them did not like him or considered him an obstacle. This took us by surprise; it was something we did not anticipate. That sense of humility and such a responsible understanding of the situation inspired us all and drove us to do our best in helping him. A group of laypeople and priests began to meet at breakfast every week to analyze what was

happening in the country. So began, at his request, a meeting of minds that would seal our friendship. I sought him out frequently and asked him to lunch at my house, which he used to call "my Bethany". And following Rutilio's death, I was with him every time another murdered priest was buried, as well as during those most difficult times he faced.

Some people talk about a conversion of Monsignor as a result of Father Rutilio Grande's death. What do you think about that?

Look, unfortunately, people talk about this as if some kind of magic wand touched him and, at that very instant, had converted him. I believe that conversion is a continuous process in every real Christian. And Monsignor gave evidence of this from the beginning, even though I was not aware of it then. Soon enough his style became clear: research every case thoroughly in order to be completely sure about what had happened. He personally visited towns to talk with the people. Back at the offices of the episcopal conference, as we walked down the stairs of the seminary, Monsignor Romero would tell about the violent events that were occurring: "Look, I went to Tres Calles (where a massacre was supposed to have happened), and I learned that no guerrilla fighters had been killed, as the news reports said; instead, it was the town drunk who had been murdered."

Monsignor Romero was in constant conversion, because Christians live in conversion. He placed himself in God's hands, and that gave him great freedom and placed great demands on him for seeking out the truth, either personally or through the opinions of honest and truthful experts. Besides, in his small quarters at the Divina Providencia Hospital, where terminally ill cancer patients lived out their final days, he had his little short wave radio set to listen to the news that he would later confirm. He employed his faculties to discover, he let God make him an instrument so that the truth should be known. And it is this reality that marked him in his conversion process.

Monsignor underwent his own process in his search for how to best exercise his role as archbishop. At first, he did not want to make his inquiries public, but Rutilio Grande's death made him change his discreet attitude; he wanted to know who killed him and denounce it publicly. And from that moment on, he denounced every violent act, whoever the perpetrators might have been. For example, during Sunday's homily, along with Rutilio's death, he denounced the execution of a foreman in Nejapa who had been killed by the FPL because –according to them – he was partial to ORDEN and the government. These homilies became required listening as they originated from a truthful person, someone who reported what was really happening; the media, on the other hand, described a country which did not exist and distorted the news or only printed what made the Government look good. He prepared his homilies on the basis of reports of people he trusted, who

researched events, such as Jesuit Father Rafael Moreno, who, in spite of his ideological bent, was always transparent and loyal to Monsignor Romero.

Now that you mention the Jesuits, is it true that they had an enormous influence on Monsignor Romero?

Monsignor never allowed anyone to manipulate him, but he had the greatest of virtues and intelligence to seek out different people, who were experts in analyzing current affairs and had done research, to listen to different opinions and receive all the available information on every case or situation. After that, he decided what would be published, what would be said in his homilies and what would not. In his quest for the truth, it would have been extremely vain and a terrible mistake on his part not to take advantage of the wealth of knowledge of members of the Church, both laypeople and priests, and consider their diverse points of view. And not only members of the Church but people from civil society, too. A group of us met with him regularly to discuss different topics, for example, the message that the Salvadoran Church, in the voice of its archbishop, should take to the gathering of bishops in Puebla, Mexico. To prepare this document, he listened to the opinions of expert analysts, including clergy of the likes of Nicolás Mariscal, Ignacio Ellacuría, and Jon Sobrino, as well as laypeople. In addition, he had asked me to organize breakfast meetings at the seminary every week or fortnight to discuss current national issues with thoughtful and committed people such as Héctor Dada, Antonio Orellana and Román Mayorga. They, together with clergy like Fabián Amaya, Cristobal Cortés, Monsignor Ricardo Urioste, Father Paco Estrada (at the time president of the presbytery), and César Jerez (head of the Jesuit province in Central America and very loyal to Monsignor), presented Monsignor with their opinions and analyses about what was happening. But to jump from there to say that the Jesuits and others influenced him... I would say it was the other way around. Monsignor inspired all these people. The Jesuit priest Jon Sobrino explained to me: "The fact is that Monsignor was always a step ahead of us." Many of these met Monsignor along the way; his attitude touched them, inspired them, and made a mark on them. Ellacuría himself, who did not believe in Monsignor at the beginning, ended up saying: "With Monsignor Romero, God passed through El Salvador."

As it happens, that sense of humility, of great responsibility, of awareness of the heavy cross that God had placed on his shoulders, made him ask for help from the beginning, even of people that – as I said – used to consider him an obstacle, someone who was not to our liking.

Did these meetings influence him a lot, in his actions?

More than the influence of the opinions that he received, what determined his course of action was that he felt what people were going through, he suffered with them. Monsignor had a quality that I think is a quality of saints: the freedom to place oneself in the hands of God and let Him act. Monsignor saw and analyzed what was happening in the light of the Gospel; and that was the determining factor, not someone's influence. It's just that it was impossible for a Christian who lived in El Salvador in those days – in these days, too, without a doubt – not to be moved by the poverty and the suffering of the people. And Monsignor Romero, a Christian among Christians, kept finding ways to help these people in their pain, from his position as archbishop, as leader and shepherd.

One of these ways was, as I said, his homilies, in which he analyzed current reality from a Gospel perspective, thus denouncing sin, injustice, and abuses that were being committed. At the beginning of his role as archbishop, he did not want to speak out in public; instead, he went directly to the institution that had overstepped its bounds. "Look, Don Pepe," he said. "I don't believe in making waves, that's why I talked directly with those ministers and asked them to take steps so those things don't happen again." But Father Rutilio's murder, as I have said, convinced him that he needed to speak out, as the most effective way to help the victims, to reveal the truth of what was happening, to pressure for an agreement that would lead to a respect for human rights, so that the atrocities committed against so many people, mostly humble folk, be known, so that others might become aware of their suffering and that these horrors come to an end; that is why it is said that Monsignor was the "voice of the voiceless." And that's how people related to him. Look, I'll give you an example: when Monsignor was killed – I was at a meeting of the board of directors of a foundation involved in low-cost housing (the Fundación de Vivienda Mínima) when I got the news – I rushed to the seminary and as I was climbing the stairs, I came across a humble elderly woman who was crying. I approached her and said: "Lady, place your faith in God". She replied: "Oh, sir, our father has died, my father has died. Now, who do we have to defend us?" This woman made me aware of the sense of abandonment that many people felt at Monsignor's assassination, who by then had become the Prophet of Hope. That's how people felt. If they'd thought that Monsignor was taking sides, he would not have had the credibility that he acquired. They saw that he acted with a spirit of freedom which is that of a man of God, of a prophet who can say: "Listen to me – as he addressed the FPL – life is sacred, you should not have killed that foreman." Or as he used to say during his Lenten sermon, at the Heart of Mary church, speaking to the powerful, "If you don't give up your rings, they're going to cut off your fingers to take them."

He was a man of great freedom. What happened was that the country was not used to that kind of freedom, because the Church had always been seen as an institution at the beck and call of the system. I'm not fully in agreement with that

perception. The Church has been through different historical moments and we must examine its attitudes in each one of these moments before venturing such a strong statement. Without a doubt, the Church also goes through this constant process of conversion, and that's what the prophets and the saints are for, when they denounce the state of things, when they proclaim truth in the light of Scripture.

You say his Sunday homilies acquired great credibility. Was this means of communication with all Salvadorans a strategy previously planned by a communications and merchandising team or was it completely spontaneous?

It emerged naturally in response to the need to inform people about what was happening in the country. He listened to the radio and to the testimonies that were sent in audio cassettes, then he had the facts verified by his assistants or personally, as I mentioned. And he started to tell the truth about what was happening in his homilies. In the beginning, only three or four percent of his homilies referred to events in the country, because one did not know very well what was happening, the media did not say much, and events were distorted. Thus, the fact that a public figure spoke out with independence and truthfulness produced a huge impact in a context of extreme polarization.

The credibility that he achieved through his analyses and the trust people thereby had in him led lot of people to try to manipulate him, like Terence Todman, Under Secretary of State for Latin America – whom we accompanied to meet with Monsignor – who told us: “ If we can reach an agreement with Monsignor Romero, the problem is solved.” But Monsignor told him: “Look, it's not with me that you have to come to terms, it's with the people. There's no problem with me, the problem is with the people and that's where the solution lies.”

I don't think he had a merchandising strategy in mind or anything like that, but he did know that interviews, the use of the media, the Church's publications, and other channels were indispensable to inform about what was happening and what the Church had to say about it. Father Gregorio Rosa (now a bishop), a graduate in communications at Louvain University, used to arrange the interviews.

You had to listen to his homilies to know what was going on. I used to spend Sundays at the beach with my family and friends, but listened to his homily from 9 to 11 while I walked on the beach. Later, one would get together with people who said “Did you hear what Monsignor Romero said?” and then proceeded to criticize him. Then I would ask: “Did you hear him say that?” “No – they answered – but I was told that he did...” “Oh! Then don't give me this nonsense” I would say. Because they would take a phrase of Monsignor out of context and proceed to

manipulate it; you have to realize those were very polarized times. Some people also said that Monsignor was concerned only about the problems of the poor. That's not true; he often repeated that the Church was a mother for everyone and that he was a pastor equally concerned for everybody. The fact is that he helped anybody who asked for assistance, regardless of his or her political leaning, as in the case of Mauricio Borjonovo, minister of foreign affairs, and other businessmen and public figures who had been kidnapped by leftist organizations. And this can be verified just by reading or listening to his homilies. The fact is that the poor needed him the most, it was they who suffered the most: kidnappings, murders, tortures... When Borjonovo was kidnapped, Ricardo Castaneda, vice minister of foreign affairs, arrived at the offices of the archbishop to ask Monsignor if he could do something. Monsignor said he could and prepared a statement asking for Borjonovo's release and, simultaneously, requesting that the lives of the South African ambassador and of all others who were kidnapped and deprived of freedom be spared. His message was broadcast just twice on television. They only cared for denunciations from one side.

And these powerful people, including the United States embassy – which frequently sent the homilies to Rome the next day – managed to have the Vatican investigate him, because they said Monsignor was not being orthodox enough and wanted him disqualified. As you can see, he was being pressured from all sides. The first one to arrive from the Vatican (in late 1979) was Monsignor Antonio Quaraccino. Monsignor Romero asked me to go to the papal nuncio's offices to talk to him: "Look, Don Pepe, you know full well what is happening and you also know the Church. Go and talk with him and explain things". So I went to see him and told him about the peace gatherings that the Commission for Justice and Peace was organizing in the cathedral, to be held in the first week of January. I talked with him, I answered his questions and told him what was happening... As I had lived through all of this, I did not have to refer to the opinions or interpretations of others.

Did he also stay in touch with the business sector?

Monsignor knew I was a businessman and many times told me: "Don Pepe, I'm not against businessmen, put me in touch with some of them so we can talk." On a number of occasions he tried to contact businesspeople and I know he talked with some of them. He was interested in their analyses, their reasoning and discourse about what we were going through. But I think these contacts were very limited.

In general, they considered him an enemy and tried to distort whatever he said or did. Look, here's an example. I was on my way out of a job at ADOC (where I worked as director of merchandising and retail) and I learned that there would be

a Mass at the cathedral for Raúl Molina, a recently deceased businessman. They had planned that Monsignor, who had celebrated Masses for murdered or disappeared workmen or students, would not appear at the cathedral to celebrate Mass for the aforementioned business man (who some people at first said had been murdered by the guerrillas, but later versions attributed his death to health problems or, according to others, to a romantic involvement). And I also learned that businesses were asked to send their employees to the Mass at the cathedral and to hold a demonstration protesting the violence in the country. That very same evening I went with my wife to see him at the little hospital to tell him that he had to be at that Mass the next day. He told me: "Don Pepe, I can't; I have to go to Santiago de María; days ago I agreed to meet with Arturo Rivera y Damas to talk about what was happening there; everything is arranged." Since I insisted and he called Rivera y Damas for a change of plans and told me: "So, Don Pepe, I'm celebrating the Mass." The next day the demonstration got under way with people screaming that Romero is Beelzebub, but then they got to the cathedral and found that Monsignor was there to officiate. The newspapers photos did not show Monsignor's face; they were sure some other priest would show up to officiate and that way they could headline "Where is the Archbishop? He only gets together with laborers" and so on. In short, they tried to set him up, but their plans were ruined when he presided at the Mass. They did not count on Monsignor being completely free of political influences, a person who was above any attempt at manipulation by any group; he wanted to follow and practice the word of God.

To say that he was influenced by this or that person belittles his true worth. If anything, he was manipulated by reality, he was manipulated by God as an expression of reality. He was free in his decisions, he found his way by reading the Bible, by reflecting on the word of God and observing the signs of the times.

Did he know that there were businessmen involved with the death squads?

I would say he did. The *Sacramento Bee*, a United States newspaper, reported about this a lot. They carried out a number of interviews on this issue. But Monsignor did not go around pointing people out, saying: "That is a bad person". That was not his attitude; he did not like to quarrel with anybody. The businessmen were against him because they didn't like what he said in his homilies. We all knew that what Monsignor said was true but nobody dared to express it openly; we only did so in private.

Did the business sector criticize you for your relationship with Monsignor Romero?

Obviously. They knew I was not seeking any political appointment at all or, even less, to join a political party. I'm political like any human, but I don't belong to any party. However, since I frequently went for Monsignor to have lunch at my house with my family, when I was with him in the car they gave us an ugly look and frequently said: "There goes the communist."

Did Monsignor Romero have the support of the Episcopal Conference, of all of the bishops? Who influenced him the most when a decision had to be made?

There are a number of institutions within the formal structure of the church, like the Presbyteral Senate and the Conference of Bishops, that met on a regular basis with Monsignor to provide information and opinion; these were important inputs for him. But, on the other hand, he had problems with the Conference of Bishops; he told me they didn't understand him. As his profile grew in the country and his homilies were listened to by so many people, some bishops started to feel jealous (particularly Monsignor Revelo) and that caused him a lot of anguish. He was attacked a lot from within the Church. At first, they were happy that Monsignor Romero was the archbishop because they thought he would not be a fitting replacement for his predecessor, Monsignor Chávez, and that they, the older bishops, would thus have a larger role to play. Nobody dared to challenge Monsignor Chávez's leadership, but once he retired, every bishop – Álvarez, Aparicio – wanted to be the leader. They are human, after all!

Besides the grief he suffered every time he had to bury a murdered priest, besides the anguish in trying to prevent so much destruction and in seeing the suffering of so many poor people, his greatest pain was caused by the criticisms he received from within the Conference of Bishops. There were rumors that he should be removed from office because the circumstances were right to do so. In those days, Julian Filochowski, who was in charge of aid coming from England, came to El Salvador; he admired Monsignor Romero a lot. One day we were talking in my house about this – Monsignor Rivera and Monsignor Urioste were there, too – and Monsignor Romero said: "Look, I don't care about this; I don't have to be archbishop, send me to a parish; but I'll say the things I have to say."

He didn't care about the position he held or being above the rest. But, surely, he was absolutely conscious of his responsibility as archbishop, of the huge burden that this entailed in such a context and of the implications involved in making certain decisions. And he did this with absolute freedom, without pressures from anyone and regardless of what others thought. If he thought that something needed to be done, he did it. For example, his decision not to attend any religious ceremony with government authorities present until Rutilio Grande's murder was

solved, or that only one single funeral mass be held in the cathedral for this murdered priest.

What can you tell us about his relationship with the parish priests or members of the religious orders?

At first, he seemed to criticize liberation theology in his sermons – and indirectly Jesuit Jon Sobrino and others at UCA who were moving in the same direction – most notably in his sermon of 5 August 1976, the day when services are held in honor of the Holy Savior, the patron of San Salvador. He was also perceived as very close to Opus Dei. You must remember that he was a very traditional priest, within the more conservative branch of the church, so to say. Later he changed, he followed the path that his conscience and his freedom of thought dictated, because – I insist – he placed himself in the hands of God, he let God and his Word lead him. Because of this independence, he was publically criticized by some in the clergy. However, he was very respectful towards all the religious orders and knew how to handle the Church's elite with great effectiveness, Jesuits, intellectuals, parish priests... even though he did not always agree with them. When he learned that a priest was involved with the guerrillas and that he was being held in prison for that reason, Monsignor always came out in his defense and asked that his life be spared. He said: "He is a son of the Church, he is a priest." He defended anyone, whoever they might have been, without trying to hide what they had done if they were, in fact, guilty of some misdeed. He would go to the jails to look for them if they had been arrested and to defend them. He was not ashamed to recognize the priests as his own, no matter if they were guilty or innocent, and he would stand up for them, he would pray for them, and denounce the tortures or murders that they suffered.

Monsignor always had that sense of a father who takes care of his children. And as a good father, he also understood them. You have to realize that the young priests who had labored in parishes saw the poverty of the people whose lives they shared and the barriers to improving their lives; they saw that the peasants had no access to water in their huts but irrigation systems were installed in sugar cane fields; they saw how humble folk were unjustly arrested, how they were tortured or disappeared by the Guardia or the Army, how members of ORDEN accused them falsely just for not wanting to join up. All of this made priests assume certain ideological stances very often. Monsignor understood this and in his homilies asked people to pray for his priests and for himself, so that they might never stray from their commitments and so the Lord should guide them in their actions.

And he proceeded in the same way, even if it involved members of the Guardia; for example, when some workers took over the church of El Rosario, where they were holding a wake for some comrades who had been killed. Two guards dressed

in civies had made their way into the church, but they were discovered and detained by the workers. The Guardia wanted to go in shooting to rescue them. Monsignor was called in to mediate. He was not allowed to enter the church, so he walked around the church and prayed in spite the death threats from the soldiers, who yelled: "That's the son of a bitch we have to kill, he's responsible for this."

For him there was nothing that justified disrespect towards a human being. Many times in his homilies he said: "The end NEVER justifies the means."

Did Catholic intellectuals influence him in some way?

Catholic intellectuals were a really large group and we would have to identify the differences among them. Some were close to the guerrillas for ethical reasons. You must remember that since the days when Neto Regalado was kidnapped, there were some Catholics involved in this; remember, also, that in those days the guerrilla alternative was a real one in Latin America. Remember Allende who, for those of us who were against violence, was perceived as a democratic alternative to violent and repressive dictatorships and whose death was a cold shower for many people. Thus, guerrilla action was considered by many as the only alternative.

And, on the other side of the divide, were the Catholics who didn't want anything to change. If you told them: "But look at what Vatican Council II says," they would respond: "That Pope is a communist."

So, in your opinion, Monsignor was not a political man.

I think he was, in the best sense of the word. He was on good terms with people. Proof of this is that when he was appointed auxiliary to the archbishop he handled power holders pretty well. The same can be said of his tenure as bishop of Santiago de María or his friendship with Prudencio Llach, then ambassador to the Vatican. But, above all, he always was a man of God. One could say that his political dimension, strictly speaking, was defined by a commitment to improving the living conditions of the people, to let them live God's kingdom here on Earth.

He was not a man who thought about the perks that might be obtained when holding high office. It was his lot to live in a completely polarized society and he had to act as mediator, as referee between two forces that were armed, and with the media dead set against him. That's why his homilies were the best instrument available to achieve this objective. He read a lot, he reflected on the Gospels – remember he studied in Rome in the days of Pius XII – and this was the foundation for his homilies. His capacity to speak, to articulate his thoughts, to communicate truth, was truly amazing. And people know who is telling the truth.

Look, during one of the funeral services that he held for a murdered priest, I went to the Mass at the cathedral and stood in the atrium; I liked to be with the people, to observe the faith with which they prayed: workers, barefoot people... We were in the middle of the Lord's Prayer when I heard one person say to another: "Look at what the newspaper says, that in El Despertar [a Catholic retreat center] they discovered the priest in possession of a machine gun and for that reason they had to enter by force with tanks and kill him. Imagine how ridiculous!" In other words, the people were aware that everything reported in the newspapers was a lie.

How was Monsignor during work sessions? Did he preside, was he the leader?

We prayed before each meeting. And through it all, he listened to everyone very respectfully, he talked, asked... He was constantly attentive to all the information that was given him. His very presence inspired all who were there.

What was the nature of the relationship of the first revolutionary junta (1979) with Monsignor Romero?

At first, Monsignor was full of hope, because he already knew the members of the junta and a lot of the people who were assisting them: Héctor Dada Hirezi, minister of foreign affairs; Guillermo Ungo and Román Mayorga, members of junta; Rubén Zamora... but this affection he felt for us as individuals never let him lose sight of things and when he had to scold us, he would. For example, in November he started to criticize the junta, the government, in his homilies, because the Army continued to act repressively and the junta had not been able to control it. And we all said: "He's right, what can we say!" He was a very honest man, absolutely honest all the time. When we told him we were all quitting the junta's government, he didn't want us to. But soon he realized there was no other way out if we wanted to be consistent.

Monsignor kept working to find a peaceful way out of the conflict, but he accepted the right to struggle for a decent life. And that's when clashes flared up, because no alternative forms of government or public institutions were acceptable. I understand that Colonel García, who had already been appointed minister of defense before the first junta was chosen, was asked directly by Monsignor Romero to resign his post because he was undermining the opportunities for the new Government.

What was all that about the letter to Jimmy Carter, what was the background of that?

Very simply, Monsignor was well aware of the influence of the government of the United States in the country's life, in course of events at the time. And when Carter became president of the United States, Monsignor perceived, in his own words, the president's good will and feelings, and this encouraged him to write Carter a letter giving him his version of events, about the situation in this country.

Did he write it on his own? Didn't he discuss it with someone previously?

This letter was written by him, but logically he listened to opinions, suggestions. He did not write everything that was published. He had assistance, as any person has in such a post. He had aides like Fathers Moreno, Sobrino, Estrada, Amaya, Urioste, César Jerez, in addition to lay people (Roberto Cuéllar and others), but – as Sobrino told me – the decision about the spirit of the document, its contents, what needed to be said and how, the final editing, all were Monsignor's doing. He got information, heard opinions, but he placed everything within the horizon of God's kingdom, within the horizon of all that affected the lives of the most vulnerable.

Concerning the biographies of Monsignor Romero, do you think he has been properly pictured, are they honest or have they tried to manipulate his figure?

The one written by Father Jesus Delgado is one that has impressed me the most; he has written a very balanced and respectful biography. But the one written by Plácido Erdozaín, published shortly after Monsignor's death, is absolutely manipulated; it says things that are not true and that really drive me out of my mind. That Monsignor's figure is manipulated makes me extremely angry. Look, here's another case. I was called to give witness in Monsignor's canonization process. Ten or twelve people asked questions, which we had to answer under oath. The document was put together and a decision was made to hold a ceremony at the offices of the archbishop to hand over the document to the person in charge of the canonization process so that he, in turn, could deliver it to the Vatican. (I had anticipated that a Mass would be held during this ceremony, but I was told it would not; I complained to Monsignor Sáenz and he told me "But look, Pepe, it was no longer possible," as if to underestimate the importance of a Mass in that ceremony.) As I was saying, the ceremony got under way and once the formal speeches had concluded, a group of young men from a political party started to sing something about Monsignor as a hero of I don't know what... anyway, they were manipulating his image to favor their cause. I had arrived in high spirits but I couldn't take it anymore and I left. And it's not only the left that tries to manipulate his image but also the right. And both do so negatively. The left tries to make it look as if he agreed with them, but they make no mention of when he condemned them for the murders and kidnappings they carried out or when the

FPL decided not to heed his pronouncements any more or when they asked how that priest dared to criticize them. But later, when they realized how much the people loved Romero precisely for being an authentic man of the cloth, how the humble folk spoke with him, how Monsignor listened to them with such affection at any moment or place... then these guerrilla groups devised ways to make it look like they were with Monsignor, that they supported him. And they still do so today; you have seen how they show his likeness on television when they want to legitimize what they are doing. I don't think that's correct given their intentions.

On the other hand, there are still many people who attack Monsignor Romero in extreme terms.

You called my attention to that link between liberty and sanctity you mentioned in New York. Is it a concept that you found in theology or is it an idea that emerged from your experience with Monsignor?

I've never read about it, but there may be someone who has referred to this already. When I talk about the link between liberty and sanctity, I do it to explain what I saw in Monsignor Romero: to put oneself in the hands of God, to be one with God's project; he knew what God was asking of him and wanted to be true to that. There is a statement by Saint Ignatius Loyola that refers to what I am telling you: "Do everything as if God does not exist and then, afterwards, leave everything in God's hands." That is, make all efforts that are humanly possible and when you have done so, let it go and God will take over; you already have done what was expected of you.

Your personal experience with Monsignor allowed you to get to know him much more profoundly than most other people who were close to him. Which of his characteristics would you highlight? Which do you think define him better?

In the first place, as I mentioned, his freedom of criteria and action, his placing himself in God's hands, within a context of great pressures exerted by different sectors and at a time when your life depended on what you said or did, and above all, at a time when so many people asked for his assistance, when the basic rights of so many humble folk were being violated and they saw in him their only support, their only hope. He felt a huge responsibility for the people. He prayed a lot; at critical moments, when he had to make important decisions, he retreated to the chapel to pray. There he found inspiration and help. He let God act upon him, to provide guidance in his analysis of reality. Monsignor had that capacity to see things from a Gospel perspective. He was a man who "who was one with the church" and felt the people's suffering as if it were his own.

Secondly, I would say his humility. For him, being archbishop implied a larger responsibility within the structure of the church, which he respected very much. On the contrary, he placed his authority at the service of others. He was always ready to listen to people, to help them. It made no difference if a meeting with him present was urgent or important, he would get up and leave if he was told that some humble people wanted to see him. When Terence Todman came, as I told you, I went with him to see Monsignor and we had to wait because that morning a poor man had come to talk with him as well as a woman whose daughters had been arrested by the police. For him, these people and their pain were more important than the representative of the United States.

He was modest even in his choice of a place to live. Because he worked at the seminary, when he was named archbishop he continued to live there and, since he had no bed, he slept in a hammock. The women's association dedicated to the Virgin of Guadalupe offered him a house, but he did not accept it. He then decided to live in a room next to the hospital for the terminally ill; in that simple little room, where he was provided for by the same nuns who looked after the patients, his only "luxury" was a hammock where he rested while listening to the news of the day on a little radio. (He was always attentive to all the information about what was happening.) And he did not want a security detail looking after him: "If there is no security for people, I don't want it either," he said.

Thirdly, I should mention his affinity with common folk, his closeness with the needy. During his pastoral visits, he conversed a lot with them, he knew how to listen and understood them. He also came from a humble peasant family and knew how to understand them, he felt close to them, it pained him to see the injustices committed against them, and he suffered along with their suffering.

From your friendship with Monsignor Romero, expressed daily, which are your most treasured memories?

He came frequently to my house for lunch. I used to say: "Monsignor, what will you drink?" And he would answer: "*Una bocatta di cardinale.*" I would then pour him a Campari and he drank it so happily; he would say hello to the cook and to every one of the maids, he talked to my children during lunch, he laughed and joked a lot with them. We have many memories of these occasions, as when he told us about the day (when he was a parish priest in San Miguel) that a peasant came to see him and was invited to stay for lunch. Monsignor served him some lettuce salad, upon which the peasant turned to him and said: "Padre, look, I know I am a poor man but I don't eat grass." And my children would laugh and laugh. I used to poke fun at him, we would joke...

One of the most lovingly remembered moments was when he confirmed my eldest daughter, Aída Verónica, right here in my house. He did not do this as a rule; thus, the ceremony in my house was a great expression of affection on his part.

And we had a special relationship, imbued with much fondness. Look, when the first junta asked me to head INSAFI (the Salvadoran Institute for Industrial Development), because there was corruption there and they wanted somebody who was not just competent but also honest, I went to ask for his blessing and he told me: "Don Pepe, think about it. You have a family." I mean, he was very human and understood all the personal circumstances that led one to avoid situations which involved risks, no matter how important one's contribution to the country might be at the time. But I responded: "Monsignor, look, I can't go on being an observer, I have an obligation towards this country, I must become associated with a project that I believe might help save it from violence." I knelt before him and he blessed me.

My friendship with him led many of my acquaintances to reject me. But, look, I come from a very Catholic family, by tradition: an aunt was a nun, other relatives belonged to the Opus Dei, and so on, and I was and still am a practicing Catholic, imbued with much faith. I was not a politician, I had no party or political affiliations that might have placed obstacles in my relationship with Monsignor Romero, who showed me what being a Christian was all about, what it meant to be free, to be one with the church. He strengthened my faith even more, to the extent that I feel I must contribute to spread the word about someone whose image has been so manipulated by people on opposing sides, according to their political interests. They have not been able to perceive him – or simply not wanted to see him – in his true being: a man of deep faith, a man of the church who wanted to follow God's Word even at the risk of his own life.