Jon Sobrino, S.J.

Archbishop Romero: Memories and Reflections. Translated by Robert R. Barr, J. Matthew Ashley, and Margaret Wilde. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016. Pp. xi + 243. Pb, \$24.

This is a most versatile book. In one sense, it is incredibly informative, since the author of the text, Jon Sobrino, S.J., is among the most significant living theologians as well as one who has labored for many years in El Salvador, much like the subject of the text. In another sense, reading this book is like one long prayer; it is perhaps even more about Catholic, Christian spirituality than it is an academic work. On a third level, this book is a primer on the things that were most important in the life and ministry of Blessed Oscar Romero. In the preface to the original edition (1990), Sobrino explains, “we are under an obligation to Archbishop Romero’s memory. To forget him would be ungrateful” (ix). What follows that preface is a beautiful collection of essays and a testament to Romero’s holiness from a fellow co-worker in the Lord’s vineyard—and a most grateful one, at that.

The book is comprised of an introductory chapter and three parts. The first chapter, entitled “Some Personal Reflections,” comprises the heart of the text, because it shows the reader Sobrino’s intent in writing the volume. While he does not set out to write a hagiography of Romero, it is quite clear that Sobrino is not a neutral author in any way; his love for Romero almost jumps off the page. Even though this chapter was written nearly thirty years ago, and the “reflections” are on events and interactions that occurred forty years ago, the words still have quite an impact. Readers today might notice the resonances between Romero’s life and ministry and Pope Francis’s. For example, Sobrino recounts Romero’s first days as archbishop of San Salvador: “He refused the beautiful palace and went to live in Divine Providence Hospital, in a little room next to the sacristy” (7). The reader will note other commonalities as well, such as the reaction of some Catholics, who had formerly been very pious, to Romero’s actions on behalf of the poor: “They promptly began to criticize, attack, and disobey him, thereby showing their true colors. Their apparent loyalty to the hierarchy did not go so far as to agree with their archbishop when he said things no longer to their liking, or when their particular interests were somehow threatened” (9). Since Pope Francis’s election, many Vatican watchers have noticed precisely the same phenomenon sweeping the church universal, whereby Catholics who would never have disagreed with Pope John Paul II or Pope Benedict XVI have no problem questioning Francis.

As with the first chapter, the first two parts of the book remain intact from the original edition. In the first part, Sobrino examines Romero’s theological

contribution in the life of the church, all the while explaining that Romero was not a theologian, *per se*, but rather that his life was a “theological event” (143–48). More important, though, Romero’s life had a profound impact because of how close he brought God to his people and because of what he saw in those people. For Romero, God’s love “is made manifest in the poor, in the oppressed, and in the repressed of God’s people. In their faces Romero saw the disfigured countenance of God” (57). In a subtitle of Chapter Two, entitled “His Episcopal Ministry” (59–67), Sobrino reflects on what made Romero such an outstanding bishop in the church. These pages should be reproduced and sent to every apostolic nuncio in the world; they should be required reading for every man currently leading a Catholic diocese. As Sobrino so eloquently puts it, Romero “taught to the extent that he went on learning” (66). For most Catholics, it is quite clear that this commitment to learning is missing in many bishops today.

The second part of the book is only twenty pages, but it packs quite a punch, precisely because of its genre. These two chapters are homilies that Sobrino gave while reflecting on Romero. Because this book is not a biography, the homilies fit in nicely with the larger outlook of the volume. More than anything, they describe who Romero was and what motivated him. In a particularly poignant description of the slain archbishop, Sobrino reflects on the gospel recounting the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple: “this is what Jesus was: *good news*. And this is *what Archbishop Romero was*” (173; author’s emphasis). From there, Sobrino explains precisely how, where, and why Romero was still “alive” at that time (the homily was preached in 1985, five years after Romero’s martyrdom). Reading these words in 2017, one has true hope that Romero is just as alive today.

Scholars of Jesuit studies will be most intrigued by the third part of the text, which (along with the brief postscript) accounts for the revisions to the original text. Chapters Seven and Eight, developed from lectures Sobrino delivered in 2014 and 2013 respectively, extensively consider Romero’s relationship with another martyr: Ignacio Ellacuría, S.J. For those interested in knowing more about Ellacuría, the last chapter is absolutely indispensable. In fact, the phrase that Sobrino reflects most on throughout these final two chapters is part of Ellacuría’s eulogy for Romero after the archbishop’s death: “God came through El Salvador in Monseñor Romero” (183). As Sobrino explains, “for Ellacuría it is difficult to talk about Monseñor Romero without finding oneself compelled to talk about God” (220). Sobrino cites at great length from a letter Ellacuría wrote to Romero, in which Ellacuría makes it clear that St. Ignatius’s *Spiritual Exercises* had a most profound effect on Romero’s discernment (223). Sobrino also reminds the reader throughout the text that Romero’s confessor was the Jesuit

Segundo Azcue. Sobrino also makes it clear that Ellacuría shared a more personal and loyal relationship with Romero than any other person except Jesus, explaining that Romero “appeared” to him by analogy to how Jesus appeared to his disciples after his resurrection (229). Finally, Sobrino argues that while this great Jesuit, Ellacuría, struggled mightily with his faith, he was often “carried” by Romero’s witness; or in other words, in Romero, Ellacuría and all others “caught sight of the God who liberates” (238).

Even though this is a stellar volume, there are a couple of drawbacks. First, and most significantly, this book is filled with the sort of repetitions that often appear in collections of essays. Since Sobrino clearly has identified key themes in Romero’s life and ministry, when he writes essays, homilies, or lectures, it is only natural that he revert to these key themes. When a reader encounters them in successive chapters of the same collection, however, this seeming redundancy could be distracting. Because Romero was such an incredible figure, though, the repetitions might conversely be considered as resounding reminders of his holiness. Also, there are a few times in the book when it might have been helpful for the revision to have clarified a point that has become dated in the intervening quarter-century since the original publication. These are only very minor quibbles, however.

While predicting future events in the life of the church is a foolhardy pastime, it seems reasonably obvious that Oscar Romero—already beatified as a martyr of the church—will soon be raised to the altars of the church universal as a saint. While there are available many good books and other resources on Romero’s life in the church and with the poor, none will have the combination of so personal a connection as well as so thoughtful and refined a theological analysis as this volume. It would behoove every Catholic to prepare for that happy canonization by reading, reflecting upon, and praying with these pages. And if it comes to pass that Romero is not canonized anytime soon, the enriched readers of this book will know that he is, in fact, already a saint. This book and these memories will stand as a relic to this great prophet of God.

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