

Do We Still Need Reformers in the Church? The Case of Oscar Romero

Dr. Martin Maier SJ

Abstract

Pope Francis wants a reform of the church and he sees Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador as a model bishop, one who smells like his sheep and who was fully committed to a poor church for the poor. Pope Francis and Archbishop Romero agree that the basis for church reform must be the gospel. As Jesus did not preach himself but the kingdom of God, the church must be at the service of the kingdom, she is the sacrament of the kingdom. The first addressees of the good news of the kingdom of God were the poor, so there is an intrinsic relationship between the church and the poor. Church reform means that the church becomes more like Jesus Christ serving the poor, the needy and the marginalized.

There is an intrinsic relationship between church reform and the signs of the times. The Second Vatican Council established a new relationship between the church and the world. Of key importance for this are the signs of the times as signs of the presence and the plans of God in history.

Archbishop Romero's deepest and most creative spiritual and theological insight is his association of the passion of the Salvadoran people with the suffering servant of God and the crucified Christ. He spoke of a crucified people.

Keywords

Church reform, option for the poor, signs of the times, liberation theology, crucified people

Do we still need reformers in the Church? Of course we do! *Ecclesia semper reformanda*. To put in a nutshell what I will try to say: the reference point for any church reform must be the gospel. Reform essentially means bringing the church closer to the gospel. As Jesus did not preach himself but the kingdom of God, the church must be at the service of the kingdom, she is the sacrament of the kingdom.

The first addressees of the good news of the kingdom of God were the poor. Therefore there is an intrinsic relationship between the church and the poor. You find this in paragraph 8 of *Lumen Gentium*: “Just as Christ carried out the work of redemption in poverty and persecution, so the Church is called to follow the same route that it might communicate the fruits of salvation to men.” Church reform means, therefore, that the church becomes more like to Jesus Christ: a church serving humankind and especially the poor, the needy and the marginalized. Church reform must always be a conversion to the kingdom of God – to use the title of a book by Ignacio Ellacuría.¹ A deep intuition of Pope Francis from the very beginning of his pontificate is that a reform of the church necessarily goes through the poor.

Reform and conversion

The church is the object of reform and the subjects are human beings, the faithful. But as the Church is formed by its members, there is a link between the reform of the church and personal conversion. Pope Francis obviously wants a reform of the church but he is well aware that this reform has to start with himself as a Christian and as pope. One thing he certainly has achieved already is evangelizing the papacy. It seems that a model and a major influence for Pope Francis in his project of church reform is Archbishop Oscar Romero. Already a few weeks after his election he had a meeting with Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, who is in charge of the canonization cause of Romero. The pope told him that this cause should be “unblocked” and activated swiftly. In fact Oscar Romero’s beatification was celebrated in El Salvador in May 2015 and I was privileged to participate in the historic event together with Julian Filochowski and more than 300 000 others.

With the overall theme of this conference we are reflecting critically on the significance of the Lutheran Reformation for theology in the churches today. I want to establish a brief parallel between Martin Luther and Oscar Romero. In both it was a dramatic confrontation with death that provoked deep changes in their lives. Young Martin Luther had started studying law in 1505, but after a few weeks he abandoned those studies and entered the monastery of the Order of the Hermits of St. Augustine in Erfurt, a mendicant order founded in 1256. His explanation for this abrupt change of heart was that a violent thunderstorm near the village of Stotternheim had

¹ Cf. I. Ellacuría, *Conversión de la Iglesia el Reino de Dios. Para anunciarlo y realizarlo en la historia*, Santander 1984.

terrified him to such a degree that he vowed to become a monk if he survived.

In Oscar Romero's life also a deep change took place. Before he was appointed archbishop he was rightly considered to be a conservative and anxious man who wanted to keep the church out of politics and conflicts. However, this changed on 12 March 1977 when Fr. Rutilio Grande was killed.² Rutilio Grande, who served as a rural pastor, was assassinated by rich landowners for his commitment to the poor and social justice. Rutilio did not die alone. It was tragic but also significant that an older man, Manuel Solorzano, who served as sacristan, and a young boy, Nelson Rutilio Lemus, who served as an altar boy were killed with him. So Rutilio's blood really mingled with the blood of the poor. The cause for the beatification of all three is going on as it seems that Pope Francis wants to celebrate their beatification together with the canonization of Oscar Romero.

When Romero stood in front of the still bleeding corpses that evening, something profound and converting was happening in him. Oscar Romero was a friend of Rutilio but he had been critical of Rutilio's pastoral commitment. Now he felt that he had to follow the way of Rutilio, which was the way of Jesus. Many spoke about the "miracle Romero". Archbishop Arturo Rivera y Damas, Romero's successor as archbishop, put it in these words: "One martyr gave birth to another."³ A first point I want to make is this: change, reform *is* possible. It is possible on a personal level, but it is also possible in the church, in society and in the world.

For more than four years we have been witnessing a major change in the church with Pope Francis. I must confess that at first I was shocked by his election, just as many were shocked and disappointed in El Salvador 40 years ago when Oscar Romero was appointed archbishop. But later I became hopeful that with Pope Francis major changes were under way and that he wants to bring the church back to the gospel – rather as did Martin Luther.

Pope Francis sees Oscar Romero as a model of a bishop who smells like his sheep and who was fully committed to a poor church for the poor. *They are brothers in the spirit and allies in the option for the poor.*

A church attentive to the signs of the times

There is an intrinsic relationship between church reform and the signs of the times. The Second Vatican Council established a new

² Cf. R. Cardenal, *Vida, pasión y muerte del jesuita Rutilio Grande*, San Salvador 2016.

³ Mons. A. Rivera y Damas, *Presentación*, in: J. Delgado, Óscar A. Romero. *Biografía*, San Salvador 1990, p.3.

relationship between the church and the world. Of key importance are the signs of the times as signs of the presence and the plans of God in history. Underlying this is the unity of the history of humankind and the history of salvation. Pope John XXIII took the signs of the times very seriously as manifestations of God at work in the world. Archbishop Romero follows this theology of the signs of the times. In his homily of 21 May 1978 for the Feast of the Holy Trinity, he quotes paragraph 11 of *Gaudium et Spes*:

The people of God, moved by faith, believe that they are guided by the Holy Spirit who fills the Universe, and in the events going on around them. They seek to discern true signs of the presence and plans of God in the demands and the desires of the people around them, and their own. Faith illuminates everything with its new light, and the divine plan is manifested in the vocation of every individual. Faith guides our minds to finding fully humane solutions.”

And he comments: “What a beautiful theology of the signs of the times!”⁴ (II, 512)

An essential dimension of Oscar Romero’s conversion was his constant search for the will of God in the changing circumstances of history. Added to this was his belief and conviction that God shows himself in events today, God is at work in them. He believed the divine will could be read in the signs of the times. This is why in his second pastoral letter he says: “The changes in the world today are a sign of the times for the Church to grow in her own understanding. She knows that it is God who is interceding in current events in the world and that she must be conscious of these events in order to respond to the Word of God and act for and in the world.”⁵

Romero gave a lot of attention to the “events of the week” in his homilies. In a context of a controlled press and pedalled lies, he simply spoke the truth about what was happening in the country. He named the victims, dignifying them by using their names. Whenever possible, he named the abusers. Romero didn’t consider the events of the week as news items, but as signs of the times in which God’s presence and design were revealed through the concrete circumstances of El Salvador.

Romero was firmly convinced that God chose to communicate through historical events, and that the Bible is the Word of God in its fullest sense only when considered alongside history. He frequently

⁴ We quote the homilies of Mons. Romero from the six volumes of the critical edition of UCA Editores, San Salvador 2005. The roman numerals indicate the volume followed by the page numbers.

⁵ *Cartas Pastorales y Discursos de Monseñor Oscar A. Romero*, San Salvador 2007, p.43.

said: “The Word of God has to become incarnate in reality.”⁶ For example, Romero applied the texts of the Old Testament prophets who denounced injustice and exploitation in Israel in the name of God, to the situation of injustice in El Salvador: “There are those amongst us who sell a just person for money and a poor person for a pair of sandals; there are those who accumulate violence and waste in their palaces; who tread down the poor; who work to bring about a kingdom of violence as they lie on their marble beds; and those who join up one house with another and annex field after field, until they own the whole area and are left as the only ones in the country.”⁷ Through the prophets, God demands the situation be transformed.

Romero rebutted accusations that the “events of the week” had nothing to do with the church’s mission of evangelisation: “The task of someone who really reflects on the Word of God is to illuminate the signs of the times with the Word of God; so that history and the present day have a sense of unity with God and they may move towards God.” (II, 219).

When the Word of God is united with the present, that Word becomes explosive: “Preaching is fairly straightforward . . . but making this doctrine incarnate and alive in the Diocese or the community, and pointing out what goes against this doctrine brings about conflict.” (III, 105). Preaching the Word of God will cause conflict if the preacher denounces the sins and abuses as the prophets did. Nevertheless, it is the prophetic mission of the church to speak the truth in a climate of lies.

In his second pastoral letter he speaks of the many things that have changed in the church in recent years, for example in the liturgy, in the role of the laity and in the formation of priests. But the fundamental change that explains all the others is, for him, the new relationship between the church and the world: “The Church looks upon the world with new eyes. It will raise questions about what is sinful in the world, and it will also allow itself to be questioned by the world as to what is sinful in the Church.”⁸

In this same pastoral letter Romero also speaks of the need for a conversion of the church and he stresses: “This awareness of her own need for conversion is, historically, something very new, though it was said of the Church in the past that she always had to be

⁶ Cf. M. Cavada Diez, *Predicación y profecía. Análisis de las homilias de Monseñor Romero*, en *Revista Latinoamericana de Teología* 34 (1995) pp.3-36.

⁷ *Cartas Pastorales y Discursos*, p.184.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.42.

reformed (*semper reformanda*)“.⁹ He continues by quoting *Lumen Gentium*:

The same Council guides us in this examination of our consciences when it states frankly, and with all humility, that the Church, embracing sinners in her bosom, is at the same time holy and always in need of being purified, and incessantly pursues the path of penance and renewal (LG 8). The Church has regained the basic attitude for conversion, which is to turn toward those who are especially lowly, poor, and weak“.¹⁰

He rejects a “non-evolving traditionalism“: “To remain anchored in a non-evolving traditionalism, whether out of ignorance or selfishness, is to close one’s eyes to what is meant by authentic Christian tradition. For the tradition that Christ entrusted to his Church is not a museum of souvenirs to be protected“.¹¹ The changes “make the Church even more faithful and better able to identify her with Jesus Christ“. “Her mission will be authentic only so long as it is the mission of Jesus in the new situations, the new circumstances, of history.” “She is a community of faith whose primary obligation, whose *raison d’être*, is to continue the life and work of Jesus“.¹²

A church that is faithful to the gospel and to the way of Christ in this world will find itself in conflict. This was Romero’s experience:

The Church is persecuted because she wants to be the true Church of Christ. If the church preaches eternal salvation without getting involved in the real problems of the world, it may be respected and appreciated, and even rewarded with privileges; but if its mission is to denounce sins that force people into poverty, and if it proclaims the hope of a more just and humane world, then it will suffer persecution and calumny and be called subversive and communist.¹³

It is interesting to note that Pope Francis was accused of being Marxist by the ultra-conservatives in the United States for his tough criticism of the dominant neo-liberal economic system.

In El Salvador, mysteriously, the persecution led to a new unity in the church. In this context Romero also mentions ecumenical solidarity: “Support has also come from many of our separated brothers and sisters, both inside and outside the country. I wish publicly to thank them for their fraternal, Christian solidarity“.¹⁴

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.47.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, p.52.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.61.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.62.

The option for the poor

The option for the poor was the heart of Oscar Romero's spirituality and his pastoral action. The option for the poor is also at the heart of Pope Francis' wish to renew the church. Francis refers to his predecessor, Benedict XVI, who, in his opening speech to the Latin American bishops' conference in Aparecida in 2007, gave a wonderful theological and christological foundation for the option for the poor. This option "is implicit in our Christian faith in a God who became poor for us, so as to enrich us with his poverty". And Pope Francis goes on: "This is why I want a poor Church for the poor. We have to state, without mincing our words, that there is an inseparable bond between our faith and the poor."¹⁵

The fundamental principle of the option for the poor is equality of dignity for all human beings.¹⁶ This is rooted in the belief that every human being has been made in the image and likeness of God. When talking about the terrible human rights violations in El Salvador, Romero referred again and again to the human person's likeness to God: "There is no dichotomy between the image of God and the human person. If you torture a fellow human, if you offend another human, if you destroy another human, you are offending the image of God and the Church feels that this martyrdom is her cross". (II, 165) Precisely because every human being is important to God, he shows that God is one who stands with those whose dignity and life are under threat. In the Old Testament, God appears as the defender of widows and orphans. Isaiah demands in the name of God: "Learn to do right; see that justice is done, help those who are oppressed, give orphans their rights and defend widows". (Is 1:17) Jeremiah establishes an intimate link between the wisdom of God and the praxis of justice: "He gave the poor a fair trial, and all went well with him. That is what it means to know the Lord." (Jer. 22:16). Finding God meant practising justice for the Old Testament prophets.

God also shows his preference for the poor in his incarnation in Jesus Christ. The movement of the incarnation is from above downwards, from the glory of God to the limitations and poverty of humans – the Pauline *kenosis*. In one homily, Romero compares the kenosis of God to a king who abandons his throne, shrugs off his royal vestments, dresses in the rags of the rural poor and lives among them undetected. So it was that Christ dressed himself as a human being, and appeared as an ordinary person. If he was here in the cathedral, he would be indistinguishable in the crowd. Christ was not content with being an ordinary person, he became a slave

¹⁵ *Evangelii Gaudium* 198.

¹⁶ Cf. M. Zechmeister, Mons. Romero: mártir por la dignidad humana, in: *Revista Latinoamericana de Teología* 97 (2016) pp.55-64.

and suffered the death of a slave on the cross. Romero applies this divine movement, *kenosis*, to the church: the church must be poor and humble, it has to be a church from below (cf. III, 296).

The option for the poor characterised Jesus' earthly life. He did not live in palaces; he was at home amongst simple people. The poor held first place in his beatitudes. In the parable of the final judgement, he identifies with the most needy. Paul sees the quintessence of Christian faith in God's preference for revealing himself in the least and the weakest in the world. "God purposely chose what the world considers nonsense in order to shame the wise; and he chose what the world considers weak in order to shame the powerful." (1 Cor 1:27) In other words, the option for the poor runs through the Bible like a thread.

Romero found God in the poor. This was the most joyous experience of his life. In his homilies, he repeats again and again the jubilant cry of Jesus: "Father, Lord of heaven and earth, I thank you because you have shown to the unlearned what you have hidden from the wise and learned. Yes, Father, this was how you wanted it to happen." (Matt. 11:25-26) It seems by this that Jesus underwent a process of development, of learning. The 12 year old child sought God in the temple, in conversation with the scribes, the "wise and learned". But the itinerant preacher of Galilee found God amongst the poor, children and the socially marginalised. Oscar Romero experienced the same development. He exclaimed, "I have known God because I have known my people." And "A bishop always has to learn a lot from his people." And "The people are my prophet." "I have to listen to the Spirit who speaks to me through his people." And again, "With this people it is not difficult to be a good shepherd." The poor form the central axis of his spirituality, key criterion of which is, "how do I treat the poor? For God is there." (II, 257).

For Pope Francis also the joy of the gospel is linked with the poor and the little ones: "Jesus felt it when he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and praised the Father for revealing himself to the poor and the little ones (cf. Lk 10:21)". He continues very personally: "I can say that the most beautiful and natural expressions of joy which I have seen in my life were in poor people who had little to hold on to".¹⁷

Despite his respect for the poor, Romero had a clear understanding of poverty formed by experience. For him, "sinful poverty" is the product of injustice that denies human beings the right to a life of dignity. Such poverty is an indictment of society. In his great homily of 17 February 1980 on the poverty of the beatitudes, he calls it evil-poverty (cf. VI, 276 onwards). It has to be fought, it has to be eradicated. Romero did not romanticise poverty. He knew very well

¹⁷ Evangelii Gaudium 7.

the frightening reality of poverty. He knew about the exploitation of women by men, the Latin American “machismo”; he knew the destructive effect of alcoholism and violence. The poor also are sinners and need conversion.

The poverty that Jesus refers to in the beatitudes is distinct from “sinful poverty”. Whilst it may have something to do with material poverty, Jesus refers more to an internal disposition, a tendency of the heart: blessed are the poor because they put all their trust in God. Romero unpacked this understanding of poverty in a meeting with some priests: “For my part, I said that it seemed to me that it all had to do with conversion; he who is converted to God and puts all his trust in God is poor, and the rich person who has not been converted to the Lord puts his trust in idols of wealth, power and earthly things. All our efforts should be directed towards our own conversion and converting everyone to this authentic poverty. Christ gives us a clue when he says that you cannot serve two masters, God and money.”¹⁸

For Romero the option for the poor has to be the guiding principle for the necessary changes in the church: “Incarnation and conversion is to get closer to the world of the poor. The most important changes in the Church in pastoral care and teaching, in religious and priestly life and in the lay movements will not come through introspection, but by turning to the world of the poor.”¹⁹ Pope Francis confirms this in his address to the Astalli Centre, a Jesuit-run Refugee Service in Rome: “It is important for the whole Church that welcoming the poor and promoting justice not be entrusted solely to ‘experts’ but be a focus of all pastoral care, of the formation of future priests and religious, and of the ordinary work of all parishes, movements and ecclesial groups.”²⁰

The church has a mission and this mission is to proclaim in words and deeds the coming of the Kingdom of God which is in first place for the poor. The world that the church should serve is the world of the poor. Coming closer to the world of the poor means for Romero incarnation and conversion. The church has to proclaim the good news to the poor and to defend them. Defending the poor brings conflict and persecution.

In his address to the Astalli Centre, Francis speaks very much in the spirit of Romero: “The poor are also the privileged teachers of our knowledge of God; their frailty and simplicity unmask our selfishness, our false security, our claim to be self-sufficient. The poor guide us to experience God’s closeness and tenderness, to receive his

¹⁸ Mons. Romero A. Romero, *Su diario*, San Salvador 2000, p.86s.

¹⁹ *Cartas Pastorales y Discursos*, p.183.

²⁰ Address of Pope Francis to the Astalli Centre: https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-francesco_20130910_centro-astalli.html.

love in our life, his mercy as the Father who cares for us, for all of us, with discretion and with patient trust.”²¹

Because of his insistence on the option for the poor, Romero was soon accused of being against the rich. All the same he did not want to exclude the rich but to call them to conversion. So does Pope Francis: “The Pope loves everyone, rich and poor alike, but he is obliged in the name of Christ to remind all that the rich must help, respect and promote the poor.”²² Romero also became aware that charity was not sufficient but that you also have to tackle the structures and the system. This is what Archbishop Helder Câmara from Brazil expressed in the words: “When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.” Pope Francis takes exactly this line in his speech at the Astalli Centre: “Charity that leaves the poor person as he or she is, is not sufficient. True mercy, the mercy God gives to us and teaches us, demands justice; it demands that the poor find the way to be poor no longer.”²³

Romero wanted a church similar to Christ, a church that serves humankind and especially the poor and needy. So too does Pope Francis. I am convinced that we can find much inspiration for building up a poor church for the poor from Archbishop Romero. According to him the church has to continue the life and work of Jesus. For this she continually has to convert herself to the reign of God and the poor. This corresponds to Pope Francis’ frequent call against ecclesial introversion and self-centredness: “making the Church constantly go out from herself, keeping her mission focused on Jesus Christ, and her commitment to the poor.”²⁴

For Romero the church’s outreach is first to the poor: “I have tried to state that the proper theological and historical criterion of the Church’s praxis must be the world of the poor. Depending on whether it benefits the poor, the Church should support this or that political project. We believe that the only way for the Church to retain its identity and transcendence is by participating in the socio-political processes in our country. In this it will be judged by the poor, insofar as it supports the process of liberation and brings justice and peace to the people . . .”²⁵ In a similar way Pope Francis states: “It is no longer possible to claim that religion should be restricted to the private sphere and that it exists only to prepare souls for heaven. We

²¹ Ibid.

²² *Evangelii Gaudium* 58.

²³ Address to the Astalli Centre.

²⁴ *Evangelii Gaudium* 97.

²⁵ *Cartas Pastorales y Discursos*, p.192.

know that God wants his children to be happy in this world too, even though they are called to fulfilment in eternity.”²⁶

Once Romero described his duty as a bishop as “going around picking up dead bodies” (I, 149). This fits with Pope Francis’ vision: “The thing the Church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the Church as a field hospital after the battle . . . to heal wounds I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.”²⁷

The crucified people

Romero’s deepest and most creative spiritual and theological insight is his association of the passion of the Salvadorian people with the suffering servant of God and the crucified Christ. He spoke of a crucified people. This inspired and nourished the theology of Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino.²⁸ The first time he expressed this association was in his homily of 19 June 1977 in Aguilares, following the siege of the villagers by soldiers when, in Romero’s words, they transformed it “into a jail and place of torture.” Romero alludes to Zechariah: “They will look at the one whom they stabbed to death, and they will mourn for him like those who mourn for an only child. They will mourn bitterly, like those who have lost their first-born son”. (Zech. 12:10). In the John’s Gospel this text is quoted before the image of Jesus dying on the cross. Romero applies it to the abused population of Aguilares, “You are the image of the Pierced God, who we read about in the first reading, in prophetic, mysterious language, but who represents Christ nailed to the cross and pierced by the spear. This is the image of all those villages which, like Aguilares, will be pierced, will be offended.” (I, 150).

In his homily for the first anniversary of the assassination of Rutilio Grande, he explores these thoughts more deeply. Grande showed the poor campesinos the true image of Christ. As a Jesuit, Rutilio Grande searched continuously in spiritual retreats for the possibility of a full encounter with Jesus. But the true image of Christ, “is not discovered through spiritual retreats alone, but through entering into life here where Christ is suffering flesh, here where Christ is present, where Christ is to be found in the persecution, where Christ is the men

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 182.

²⁷ Interview with Pope Francis by Antonio Spadaro: https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-francesco_20130921_intervista-spadaro.html.

²⁸ Cf. M. Maier, “Teología del pueblo crucificado. En el 70 aniversario de Jon Sobrino”, in *Revista Latinoamericana de Teología* 75 (2008) pp.279-294.

sleeping in the field because they cannot sleep in their homes, where Christ is in the illness caused by long exposure to the elements, and to so much suffering; here is Christ, carrying his cross on his shoulders, not in a chapel beside the stations of the cross, but alive in the people; this is Christ with his cross on the road to Calvary.” (III, 323).

In his Palm Sunday homily of 1978, Romero establishes a link between the growing political repression and Jesus’ walk to Calvary. He created the term “a crucified people”: “In Holy Week, in Christ with his cross on his shoulders, we see the people carrying their cross. In Christ with his arms outstretched, crucified, we see the crucified people, but a people who find hope in Christ in the midst of their crucifixion and humiliation. I have taught you to speak words of consolation, you have learnt through your suffering to give consolation to others.” (II, 333)

On Good Friday he returned once again to the image of a crucified people, Christ’s suffering shows us the suffering of all people, and like him, they take comfort in the secret of redemption. “Jesus Christ Our Lord represents our tortured people, our crucified people, spat upon, and humiliated, giving us a sense of redemption in the midst of such a difficult situation.” (II, 355) In the Palm Sunday homily of 1979, he explores Jesus’ cry, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” Once again, he draws a direct parallel with the reality of El Salvador. “How easily we can identify with Christ in the suffering of our people! So many people in the shanty towns, so many people in the prisons, so many suffering, so many who are hungry for justice and peace, send up their cries, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me:” He has not abandoned us. This is the moment when the Son of God, with all his burden of sin, obediently fulfils God’s expectation of him, in order to forgive the sins of humanity, the root of all injustice, of all selfishness.” (IV, 356)

If Romero considered the “crucified people” to be the sign of the presence of Christ in the world, it raises the question of the relevance of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist. The abuse of the people of Aguilares and the profanation of the consecrated hosts in the tabernacle by soldiers, affect Christ in the same way: “In the symbol of the host, stamped upon in Aguilares, we look upon the face of Christ on the cross” (I, 135). In the Corpus Christi homily of 1978, Romero establishes a link between the presence of Christ in the sacrament of the Eucharist and the abuse of so many people in El Salvador: “It is very appropriate to honour the body and blood of the son of man when there are so many offences against our own body and blood. I would like to include in this homage of our faith, in the presence of the body and blood of Christ spilt for us, the blood of the mountain of massacred bodies here in our country, in our sister republic Nicaragua, and the whole world.” (IV, 527)

Lastly, Romero speaks of a martyred people, the suffering servant of God and the crucified Son of God in his speech at Leuven on 2 February 1980: “The real persecution has been directed towards the poor, who are the body of Christ today. They are the crucified people, like Jesus, the people persecuted for being the servant of Yahweh. As a body they complete the passion of Christ.”²⁹ This last phrase alludes to Saint Paul’s letter to the Colossians: “now I am happy about my sufferings for you, for by means of my physical sufferings I am helping to complete what still remains of Christ’s sufferings on behalf of his body, the church.” (Col. 1:24) Enigmatically, Paul says here that there is something missing in Christ’s afflictions and that it has to be completed. So he establishes a link between his own suffering and the suffering of Christ. Romero also relates the sufferings of the crucified people to Christ. This comparison of the suffering of the poor with the suffering of Christ became an important theme of the Episcopal Conference in Puebla. On the presence of Christ in the world, Puebla says, “He wanted with a special care to identify with the weakest and the poorest.” This is expressed in what is possibly the most beautiful passage in Puebla, in which the faces of the most needy in Latin America are likened to the face of Christ in the passion. Romero quoted this passage in his fourth pastoral letter.³⁰

Conclusion

To return to the initial question: yes, the need for reformers continues in the church. *Ecclesia semper reformanda*. Church reform means bringing the church back to the gospel, and this is very much in the spirit of Martin Luther. Church reform means a conversion to the kingdom of God, which is in the first place for the poor. So church reform is intimately linked with the option for the poor. That is why Pope Francis’ call for a poor church for the poor is a call for church reform. I will close by adapting a well-known sentence of Karl Rahner about the Christian of the future: *The church of the future will be a poor church for the poor, or it will not exist at all.*

Dr. Martin Maier SJ
 51 rue du Cornet
 B-1040 Brussels
 Belgium

martin.maier@jesuiten.org

²⁹ Cartas Pastorales y Discursos, p.186.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 114s.