

Following Oscar Romero's Example: The Way of Life, Way of Love

Leader: One of the great gifts of freedom is choice. One of the great burdens of freedom is choice. We gather today/tonight to reflect on our choices, to repent for choices driven by fear and greed, and to pray for the courage, like Oscar Romero, to choose life over death, nonviolence over violence, love over fear. We pray for all those around the world who are constantly affected by our choices as Americans, those whose choices are limited or eliminated by the choices we make daily. We pray for the grace to choose life over death and love over fear.

We are called to examine our choices, to reflect on their effect on others, and to take responsibility for them.

Reader 1: Forty years ago Pope John XXIII, in his letter *Pacem in Terris* said: "The unity of the human family has always existed, because its members were human beings all equal by virtue of their natural dignity. Hence there will always exist the objective need to promote, in sufficient measure, the universal common good, that is, the common good of the entire human family." (#132)

Reader 2: Archbishop Oscar Romero proclaimed in a sermon in 1978:

"Moses killed an Egyptian;
Elijah put to the sword
 the prophets who did not adore the true God;
Peter drew his sword against Malchus
 to defend Christ;
James and John begged Christ to rain fire
 on a town that would not give him lodging.
But I say what [the Latin American bishops' document at] Medellin says:
Christians are peacemakers
not because they cannot fight,
but because they prefer the force of peace.
And so I invite you,
let us place all that energy
 that God has given our Salvadoran people,
like a torrent,
not at the service of bloodshed, of violence . . .
[but] at the service of building true justice,
 of building the order of things
 that truly ought to be defended."

Leader: For the ways in which our choices have not promoted the common good of the entire human family, we pray for mercy and forgiveness....

All: Forgive us, O God.
(*brief silence*)

Reader 1: Twenty years ago the United States Catholic Bishops, in their letter *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response* said: "No society can live in peace with itself, or with the world, without a full awareness of the worth and dignity of every human person, and of the sacredness of all human life" (#284).

Reader 2: In December of 1977, Oscar Romero said:

“For the church, the many abuses of human life, liberty, and dignity are a heartfelt suffering. The church, entrusted with the earth’s glory, believes that each person is the Creator’s image and that everyone who tramples it offends God.

As holy defender of God’s rights and of his images,
the church must cry out.

It takes as spittle in its face, and lashes on its back,
as the cross in the passion, all that human beings suffer, even though they may be unbelievers.

They suffer as God’s images. There is no dichotomy between man and God’s image.

Whoever tortures a human being, whoever abuses a human being, whoever outrages a human being abuses God’s image, and the church takes as its own that cross, that martyrdom.”

Leader: For the ways in which our choices have not been made with full awareness of the worth and dignity of every human person and the sacredness of all human life, we pray for mercy and forgiveness...

All: Forgive us, O God.

(brief silence)

Reader 1: Today we face, in the United States alone, the reality that 37 million people live below the poverty level. This level in 2005 was \$16,090 for a household of three persons, and \$9,570 for a single household of a person 65 years of age or older (U.S. Census Bureau). In 2004, 17.8% of all America’s children were poor.

Reader 2: Oscar Romero said in February 1980, one month before he was assassinated while proclaiming God’s justice during his homily at Mass:

“[W]e become incarnate among the poor.

We want a church that is really side by side with the poor, with the people of El Salvador.

As we draw near to the poor, we find we are gradually uncovering the genuine face of the Suffering Servant of Yahweh.

We are getting to know closer at hand the mystery of the Christ who becomes human and becomes poor for us.

What else does the church do here? It proclaims the good news to the poor . . .

[T]he Church has good news to proclaim to the rich as well;

they are to turn to the poor and thus share with them in the riches of God’s reign that belong to the poor.

Leader: For the ways in which our choices have meant prosperity for us and increasing despair for the poor, we pray for mercy and forgiveness...

All: Forgive us, O God.

(brief silence)

Reader 1: Forty years ago *Pacem in Terris* said: “...If civil authorities pass laws or command anything opposed to the moral order and consequently contrary to the will of God, neither the laws made nor the authorizations granted can be binding on the consciences of the citizens, since God has more right to be obeyed than humans. Otherwise, authority breaks down completely and results in shameful abuse” (#51).

Reader 2: Throughout his time as archbishop, Oscar Romero said over and over that, as Church, we are called to cry out for justice when our leaders and authorities go astray. He proclaimed in 1978:

“A church that doesn’t provoke any crises,

a gospel that doesn’t unsettle,

a word of God that doesn’t get under anyone’s skin,

a word of God that doesn’t touch the real sin

of the society in which it is being proclaimed - what gospel is that?”

(April 16 1978)

“Dear Brothers and Sisters,
the church knows it is God’s lamp,
light taken away from the glowing face of Christ
to enlighten human lives, the lives of peoples,
the complications and problems that humans create in history.
The church feels obliged to speak, to enlighten like the lamp in the night.
The church feels compelled to light up the darkness.”
(August 6, 1978)

Leader: For the ways in which our choices do not reflect that God has more right to be obeyed than humans, and for the times we have not fulfilled our role to cry out against unjust decisions by leaders and authorities, we pray for mercy and forgiveness...

All: Forgive us, O God.

(brief silence)

Leader: God of all mercy and compassion, we ask for your mercy and forgiveness. Give us the courage to sin no more, to turn from choices of death and fear to choices of life and love. Help us to be light to the world, to speak truth to lies, to speak love to fear. We pray this in your name.

All: Amen.

Psalm Response: Psalm 148

Reader 1: Praise God, O my soul; I will praise you all my life; I will sing praise to my God while I live.

All: Help us choose life!

Reader 2: Put not your trust in princes, in humans, in whom there is no salvation. When their spirits depart they return to the earth; on that day their plans perish.

All: Help us choose life!

Reader 1:

Happy those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in God, who made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them; Who keeps faith forever, secures justice for the oppressed, gives food to the hungry.

All: Help us choose life!

Reader 2: God sets captives free; God gives sight to the blind. God raises up those that were bowed down; God loves the just.

All: Help us choose life!

Reader 1: God protects strangers; the fatherless and the widow God sustains, but the way of the wicked God thwarts.

All: Help us choose life!

Reader 2: God shall reign forever through all generations. Alleluia!

All: Help us choose life!

Reader 1: Oscar Romero proclaimed in his homily, minutes before being killed for love of life, peace, and justice:

“God’s reign is already present on our earth in mystery.

When the Lord comes, it will be brought to perfection.

That is the hope that inspires Christians.

We know that every effort to better society,
especially when injustice and sin are so ingrained,
is an effort that God blesses,

that God wants, that God demands of us.” *(March 24, 1980)*

(brief silence and/or shared reflection)

Closing Prayer:

All: O God, you are the source of life and peace. Praised be your name forever. We know it is you who turn our minds to thoughts of peace and justice.

We pray that you would help us to continue the mission of Oscar Romero, whose work was so rudely interrupted by the fear, hate, and despair that rang out in a single hollow gunshot on March 24, 1980.

Awaken us to proclaim the power of peace and justice. Help us to stand up for the dignity of all of humanity. Be with us as we follow the way of life. Amen.

Closing Song: Be Not Afraid

Source: This prayer service is adapted from “Choose Life, not Death; Choose Love, not Fear,” by Mary Carter Waren, Professor of Religious Studies at St. Thomas University, Miami, Florida, <http://www.paxchristiusa.org>.