

---

# DYING FOR THE EUCHARIST OR BEING KILLED BY IT?

## Romero's Challenge to First-World Christians

WILLIAM T. CAVANAUGH

**T**wenty years ago Archbishop Oscar Romero was celebrating mass when he was killed. Just as he had finished his homily and was about to turn to the liturgy of the eucharist, a single shot pierced his chest, and he bled to death within a matter of minutes. His blood-soaked vestments are now on display in San Salvador for pilgrims and tourists to see. His killer has remained free.

Oscar Romero stands now as a link in the long chain of martyrs whose blood has contributed to the fertility of the Christian church through the two thousand years of its earthly pilgrimage. It was no accident that he was killed while celebrating mass. This essay explores how the eucharist is inextricably linked with martyrdom in the life of the church, as exemplified by the life of Oscar Romero. It is not simply that the eucharist is a commemoration of a past dying, the dying of Christ at the hands of the principalities and powers; it is more radical: The eucharist makes present that dying, incorporating the communicants into a body marked with the signs of death, such that Christians, as Paul says, are "always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies" (2 Cor 4:10). The eucharist, in other words, creates a body of people who by definition stand in the line of fire.

All of this makes for wonderful drama. We first-world Christians want to be in solidarity with Oscar Romero and the persecuted church in Latin America. The problem for most of us here is that when we go to church no one shoots at us. We do not fear for our lives when we go to church, unless we count the fear of being bored to death. It is, of course, a good thing not to be shot at, and we should never romanticize violence and martyrdom. When we are unable to see the violence that is in fact going

---

William T. Cavanaugh is Assistant Professor of Theology at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, MN and author of *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (1998).

on around us, however, it could be killing us in more subtle ways. In his First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul makes clear that those who are eating the bread and drinking the cup without discerning the body of Christ in the poor of the community are eating and drinking their own condemnation. In fact, many of them are weak and ill because of it, and some have died (1 Cor 11:29–30). Paul is not speaking metaphorically; he believes quite simply that the eucharist is killing them!

## THE LOGIC OF MARTYRDOM

General George S. Patton once said, “No poor dumb bastard ever won a war by dying for his country. He won it by making the other poor dumb bastard die for his country.” This makes perfect sense—but the logic of Christian martyrdom has something quite different to say.

Surely one might think that, when it comes to war, we would rather have Patton at the helm than someone like Romero. Nevertheless, in Christian eschatology, wars among nations are only a symptom of a much larger cosmic war played out between, on one hand, Christ and, on the other hand, the “powers and principalities”—all those spiritual and material forces that resist the reign of God inaugurated by Christ. In this war, Christ has triumphed not by amassing a greater arsenal and using it more efficiently to produce “collateral damage,” as the Pentagon calls dead people. Rather, Christ triumphs by dying ignominiously, tortured to death on a cross, then peaceably rising again to new life. The kingdom of God is thus already “at hand” (Mark 1:15) but is not yet fully consummated until Christ comes again. In the meantime, the powers of darkness still stalk the earth and still deal in death. Because of the resurrection of Christ, however, death is robbed of its sting (1 Cor 15:55). People still die at the hands of the powers of darkness, and someone of Patton’s mind might take this as an indication that Christ has not triumphed. For St. Athanasius, on the other hand, the martyrs are in fact *proof* of the victory of Christ:

[M]en who, before they believe in Christ, think death horrible and are afraid of it, once they are converted despise it so completely that they go eagerly to meet it, and themselves become witnesses [in Greek, *martyres*] of the Savior’s resurrection from it. Even children hasten thus to die, and not men only, but women train themselves by bodily discipline to meet it.<sup>1</sup>

Since early in Christian history, a strong eschatological element has been associated with martyrdom. About to be stoned to death, Stephen, the first martyr, raises his eyes and declares, “Look, I see the heavens opened!” (Acts 7:56). This is not simply a personal vision by Stephen of his own eternal reward. Stephen is pointing to the gap that has opened in the barrier between heaven and earth, just as the curtain of the Temple is rent asunder at the death of Jesus. Here, in imitating Jesus, in likewise cheating death of its sting, the martyr witnesses to the outpouring of the

<sup>1</sup> St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s, 1953), 57 [§27].

kingdom of heaven on earth. Heaven does not simply await the martyr in another space and time upon his or her death. Instead, the martyr brings a foretaste of the not yet fully consummated kingdom to earth. In the book of Revelation, the martyrs are vindicated by the descent of the holy city, a new Jerusalem, coming down from heaven to earth. The eschatological imagination sees that, although they presume to kill us, Christ has vanquished the powers of death once and for all. A martyr is one who lives as if death does not finally exist.

The fact that the English word “martyr” comes from the Greek word for “witness” indicates the revelatory effect of martyrdom. A martyr is a public witness who makes the truth visible in her or his own body. The powers of darkness obscure the light of Christ’s truth; the martyrs make it shine through the darkness of violence and death. In El Salvador, the people commonly say that Romero, and many others, died *por decir la verdad*, for telling the truth—the truth about the system of exploitation of the poor upon which El Salvador’s economy is based. Death, then, becomes a *criterion* of truth: If they killed you, you must have been telling the truth and, conversely, if your life is not in danger, you must not be telling the truth.<sup>2</sup> The life and death of the martyr stands out against the darkness and reveals the truth of Christ’s triumph and the transitory nature of the powers and principalities. As Oscar Romero said, “This hour of trial will pass and the ideal so many Christians died for will survive resplendent.”<sup>3</sup>

Romero’s own path to martyrdom was illuminated by the martyrdom of his close friend Fr. Rutilio Grande. Grande was gunned down, along with a boy and an elderly man, on his way to celebrate mass in El Paisnal, less than three weeks after Romero’s installation as archbishop. As Jon Sobrino, one of Grande’s fellow Jesuits in El Salvador, tells it, Rutilio Grande’s death played the central role in converting Romero from cautious bureaucrat to prophetic voice of the voiceless. Though personally fond of Grande, Romero had regarded with suspicion the work Grande was doing with the peasants of Aguilares, teaching them to apply the lessons of the Bible to their own lives and denouncing the unjust distribution of land. Sobrino writes:

I think that, as Archbishop Romero stood gazing at the mortal remains of Rutilio Grande, the scales fell from his eyes. Rutilio had been right! The kind of pastoral activity, the kind of church, the kind of faith he had advocated had been the right kind after all. And then, on an even deeper level: if Rutilio had died as Jesus died, if he had shown that greatest of all love, the love required to lay down one’s very life for others—was this not because his life and mission had been like the life and mission of Jesus?<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Anna Peterson, *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion: Progressive Catholicism in El Salvador’s Civil War* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 123–4.

<sup>3</sup> Oscar Romero, *The Violence of Love: The Pastoral Wisdom of Archbishop Oscar Romero*, ed. James R. Brockman, S.J. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 199.

<sup>4</sup> Jon Sobrino, *Archbishop Romero: Memories and Reflections* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990), 9–10.

Romero's subsequent transformation into a tireless advocate for the poor and oppressed of El Salvador became known as "Rutilio's miracle," a miracle performed only in his death.

This revelatory aspect of martyrdom is not lost on the powers that be. In fact, much of the repressive energy of regimes such as that in Romero's El Salvador is spent, not in trying to produce martyrs, but in trying to *prevent* them. Indeed, one of the things that separates the early Christian martyrs from those of the most recent century is that modern regimes have by and large learned the lesson articulated by Tertullian some eighteen centuries ago: "The more you mow us down, the more in numbers we grow; the blood of Christians is seed."<sup>5</sup> The historical lesson of the Colosseum is widely known: the more the Roman Empire treated its citizens to the public spectacle of Christians going peacefully and prayerfully to their deaths at the hands of gladiators and beasts, the more the church grew, eventually overtaking the Empire itself. At her martyrdom, Perpetua is said to have calmly guided the gladiator's sword to her throat; the hand of the gladiator trembled. Under such circumstances it was not difficult to see on whose side was the truth. This kind of spectacle had the opposite of the effect desired by the Empire. Modern regimes have since learned that their task in hiding the truth is facilitated by the creation not of martyrs, but of victims.

---

***The martyrs are foot soldiers in the battle of the powers and principalities against the body of Christ.***

---

In El Salvador, this process took many forms, none more terrible than the strategy of "disappearance." Many of those arrested were simply never heard from again; their bodies would "disappear," most buried around El Salvador in shallow graves. Torture was also commonly used to instill fear, most often with the use of electricity and other techniques that leave no distinguishing marks on the victim's body.<sup>6</sup> Finally, the state-controlled media referred to people killed, not as martyrs, but as subversives, communists, terrorists, criminals, and delinquents. The intent of these strategies was to inflict suffering and death on those who would challenge the status quo while simultaneously preventing the revelatory nature of that suffering from coming to light.

We misunderstand what is at stake, however, if we just leave the analysis at the level of individual bodies. For the point of martyrdom is not

---

<sup>5</sup> Tertullian, *Apology* 50, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926), 3:55 (translation altered).

<sup>6</sup> See my book *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998) for a detailed account of torture and disappearance as a social strategy, and eucharist as a counterstrategy.

simply the cult of a few heroic individuals who reveal the truth by rising above the crowd. In the United States, there is a tendency to look for heroism in individuals, a tendency that does not capture what is truly radical about martyrdom. For the point of Christian martyrdom is not merely the immolation and glorification of individual bodies but the sustenance of a social body, the body of Christ. It is precisely this type of body that the Salvadoran oligarchy most feared. What brought repression to a fever pitch in El Salvador in the 1970s and 80s was not merely the actions of heroic individuals but the efforts of the people to organize into bodies of a social nature: peasant cooperatives, base ecclesial communities, unions, student movements, and women's groups—many of them sponsored by the church and all of them a threat to the atomization of the poor that had traditionally worked so well for El Salvador's landed elites. The repression was meant to disappear not merely individual bodies but especially social bodies, largely through the spread of fear. To participate in any kind of social body meant confronting the very real possibility of one's own death.

From the point of view of Christian theology, the martyrs are foot soldiers in the battle of the powers and principalities against the body of Christ. Martyrs help build a communal body by overcoming the fear that would atomize the people and keep them from participation in such bodies. If, as Athanasius says, the martyrs witness to the way that Christ has made a mockery of death, then the fear that individualizes the people is capable of being overcome, even if death remains the result.

Martyrdom also builds a communal body because the very process of naming a martyr is part of the act of memory that gives the community its identity. Not everyone who is killed is a martyr; some are merely victims. To be a martyr one must be recognized as such by the discernment of the community; a martyr must be *named* as such by those who remain alive. In El Salvador, martyrdom became a full reality not until the dead were publicly celebrated as martyrs by Romero. As Sobrino recalls, "It was an extraordinary thing for the poor to go to mass at the Cathedral and hear the archbishop say, 'We have martyrs in this country.' . . . Until Archbishop Romero spoke out, the Salvadoran people did not believe that hearing the truth was possible."<sup>7</sup> For Christians, what makes a martyr is whether or not the church as a whole is able to discern the body of Christ, crucified and glorified, in the body broken by the violence of the powers. The point is not the heroism of the individual; martyrdom is not a heroic *self-giving*, for our lives are not ours to give. What makes martyrdom possible is the eschatological belief that nothing depends on the martyr's continued life; if he or she dies, that death is not ultimate, for Christ lives on in the multitude of foolish and sinful people like us, who make Christ present by remembering the martyrs. As such, martyrdom recalls into being a people,

---

<sup>7</sup> Jon Sobrino, quoted in Peterson, *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion*, 124.

the people of God, and makes their life visible to themselves, to the powers, and to the whole world.

## MARTYRDOM AND THE EUCHARIST

The eucharist is the central act in this communal remembrance of martyrdom, because the eucharist is first the remembrance of Jesus' death at the hands of the powers. "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19). In El Salvador, popular Catholicism is very clear that Jesus was killed because he defended the dignity of the poor and marginalized against their exploiters.<sup>8</sup> Those who are killed for similar reasons today are therefore linked backward in time to the passion of Jesus, and the eucharist becomes a ritual maintenance of the "dangerous memory" of Jesus' confrontation with the powers.

Remembrance, however, is misunderstood if it remains the mere calling to mind of an event from the ever more distant past. The Greek word *anamnēsis* from the liturgy is not a mental exercise but the making present of a past event. In eucharistic liturgies and songs sung at mass, the modern-day martyrs such as Romero become contemporaries with Christ. Furthermore, the re-remembering of Christ involves the re-incorporation of the communicant in the body of Christ. In the mass, not only are the modern-day martyrs interpreted as imitators of Jesus' death, but communion is a participation in the body of Christ, which is a body marked by death and resurrection. As a pamphlet from the Archdiocese of San Salvador has it, "To participate in the mass is to unite all our work, suffering, struggle, and death to the suffering and death of Jesus."<sup>9</sup>

This is by no means a novel interpretation of the eucharist. In the ancient church, the word *anamnēsis* had the effect not so much of a memorial, as one would call to mind the dead, but rather of a performance. The focus of the eucharist is not simply the hidden transformation of the elements, but the visible action of the church caught up in the divine action, the divine alchemy of turning earth into heaven. Dom Gregory Dix points out that modern Christians have tended to make the sacrifice dependent on the sacrament: Since the consecration turns the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, what the church does in the eucharist must be what Christ did with his body and blood—offer them in sacrifice. In the early church, on the other hand, priority was given to the sacrifice: Since we are Christ's body performing his will, what we offer must be what he offered in the events on Calvary, his own body and blood.<sup>10</sup> Paul's designation of the church as Christ's body is no mere metaphor. The church does not offer the body and blood of Christ—what Christ himself offered—without being itself offered in sacrifice.

<sup>8</sup> Peterson, *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion*, 83.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>10</sup> Dom Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London: Dacre Press, 1945), 12.

The dependence of the sacrament on the sacrifice explains why ancient writers did not regard the eucharist as mere symbolism. Both the consecrated elements and the church simply are the body of Christ. If the church truly is Christ's body doing Christ's will, then what it offers at the altar in sacrifice must really be what Christ offered in his sacrifice, his body and blood. This is truly incarnational theology, for the fact that Christ suffered in human flesh on a hill in Jerusalem impelled the martyrs likewise to make a sacrifice of their own flesh. As the sacrifices of the church of the martyrs are not merely symbolic, neither is its offering at the altar. Ten years before his own death in Rome, Justin Martyr wrote of the eucharist:

Not as common bread or as common drink do we receive these, but just as through the word of God, Jesus Christ, our Saviour, became incarnate and took on flesh and blood for our salvation, so, we have been taught, the food over which thanks has been given by the prayer of His word, and which nourishes our flesh and blood by assimilation, is both the flesh and blood of that incarnate Jesus.<sup>11</sup>

The incarnational aspect of the eucharist is most apparent in the act of eating the eucharistic flesh. Flesh into flesh, the body becomes food for another body. Unlike ordinary food, however, the body of Christ does not become assimilated into our bodies, but vice versa. Thus Augustine reports in his *Confessions* that he heard a voice from on high say to him, "I am the food of the fully grown; grow and you will feed on me. And you will not change me into you like the food your flesh eats, but you will be changed into me." The fact that the church is literally changed by the Holy Spirit into Christ is not a cause for triumphalism, however, precisely because our assimilation to the body of Christ means that we then become food for the world, to be broken, given away, and consumed. The church is called, as Romero said, to be the very body of Christ in history.<sup>12</sup> The church does so, not by conquering bodies, but by making a sacrifice of its own body. In this sense, the church is called, as Paul says, to make up "what is lacking in Christ's afflictions" (Col 1:24). The church is the incarnation of the presence of Christ in the world, but the church is only properly the church when it exists as sustenance for others. The church only receives its life as a gift of the Holy Spirit, and it is in turn given away.

The eucharist does not simply look backward in time to remember Christ's death and resurrection, but it also looks forward to the full coming of the kingdom. The eucharist is both a remembrance of the past and a foretaste of the future. In Oscar Romero's own words:

The eucharist makes us look back to Calvary twenty centuries ago . . . [b]ut it also looks ahead to the future, to the eternal, eschatological and definitive horizon that presents itself as a demanding ideal to all political systems, to all social struggles, to all those concerned for the earth. The church does not

---

<sup>11</sup> Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 66, in *The Eucharist*, ed. Daniel J. Sheerin (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1986), 34.

<sup>12</sup> Oscar Romero, *The Voice of the Voiceless: The Four Pastoral Letters and Other Statements* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985), 69.

ignore the earth, but in the eucharist it says to all who work on earth: look beyond. Each time the Victim is lifted up at Mass, Christ's call is heard: "Until we drink it anew in my Father's kingdom." And the people reply: "Come, Lord Jesus." . . . Death is not the end. Death is the opening of eternity's portal. That is why I say: all the blood, all the dead, all the mysteries of iniquity and sin, all the tortures, all those dungeons of our security forces, where unfortunately many persons slowly die, do not mean they are lost forever.<sup>13</sup>

Since the earliest days of the church, the earthly eucharist has been seen as the eternal action in time of Jesus Christ himself, "high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens" (Heb 8:1). The Letter to the Hebrews makes clear to the humble group of assembled Christians that their liturgical action is no mere earthly mumbling: "You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly (*ekklesia*) of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel" (Heb 12:22–24). No mention here of coffee and donuts. At the eucharist, the feast of the last day irrupts into earthly time, and the future breaks into the present. Vatican II's *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* affirms the scriptural and patristic emphasis on the eschatological dimension of the eucharist: "In the earthly liturgy we take part in a foretaste of that heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the Holy City of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims."<sup>14</sup>

---

***It is wonderful to have saintly exemplars to look up to, but there is always a danger of falling into an exercise in mere theological tourism.***

---

That the Christian life is a pilgrimage is more easily forgotten by those who are comfortable in the world. Persecuted Christians—whose name today is legion—do not have the luxury of forgetting the eschatological dimension of the liturgy. The eucharist was essential for the early Christian martyrs, for it was seen as the foretaste of the heavenly banquet to which they were about to be called. Upon seeing the execution of Papyrus and Carpus, the martyr Agathonica exclaimed, "For me too this dinner has

<sup>13</sup> Romero, *Violence of Love*, 168.

<sup>14</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 8, in *Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Austin P. Flannery (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 5.



been prepared, I too must eat my share of this glorious dinner.”<sup>15</sup> For Romero, “Each priest killed is for me a new concelebrant in the eucharist of our archdiocese.”<sup>16</sup> The martyrs bridge the gap between earth and heaven by participating in the sacrifice of Christ on both the earthly and the heavenly altars. This gives us hope that the way things are is not the way things have to be or will be. Through Christ’s sacrifice, the beginnings of the future heavenly kingdom have irrupted into human history. As Romero puts it, “Christ arisen has put in history’s womb the beginning of a new world. To come to Mass on Sunday is to immerse oneself in that beginning, which again becomes present and is celebrated on the altar at Mass.”<sup>17</sup>

There is one incident in Romero’s life that especially highlights the importance of the eucharist in forming a body of people marked by the kingdom of God, a body of resistance to the powers of darkness. When Rutilio Grande was killed, Romero had only been archbishop for a few short weeks. The oligarchy that killed Grande still had high hopes for Romero; so far he had done nothing to gainsay the widespread judgment that his appointment had been intended to dampen some of the more incendiary challenges to the status quo from within the church. When Grande was killed, however, Romero made an extraordinary decision: The following Sunday there would be only one mass in the entire archdiocese. In order to receive the eucharist, every person would have to come to the cathedral in San Salvador.

The oligarchy reacted with alarm. The day after Romero announced the single mass, representatives of ANEP, the national businessmen’s association, met with Romero and demanded that the idea be dropped. The church, they said, was stirring up trouble and conflict. Besides, the wealthy Catholics of the plantations were complaining that they would be deprived of the opportunity to receive the eucharist and fulfill their Sunday obligation. They seem never to have considered the fact that the wealthy could most easily drive into San Salvador for the mass, even if it did mean standing in the sun for three hours with a bunch of unwashed poor people.<sup>18</sup>

But that, of course, was the whole point. Romero intended the one eucharist to be an anticipation of the kingdom, of the day when rich and poor would feast together, of the day when the body of Christ would not be wounded by divisions. Later that year Romero would say that one day we “will have achieved humanity’s incorporation into Christ, and Christ will be the one priest, formed in his historical and eternal fullness by all of us who in the course of history have made with him one sole priesthood, one sole offertory, one sole Mass that will last

---

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Geoffrey Wainwright, *Eucharist and Eschatology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 124.

<sup>16</sup> Romero, *Violence of Love*, 195.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>18</sup> See the account of the single mass in Sobrino, *Archbishop Romero*, 14–20.

eternally to sing of God's glory."<sup>19</sup> The kingdom is already anticipated in the eucharist, but of course the kingdom is not yet fully here, as evidenced by the terrible conflict and violence that continued to rock El Salvador. Under these circumstances, the single mass also served to illumine and to judge the ongoing divisions between rich and poor. The single mass, just like the martyrs, did not create conflict, but rather shone a light on it and revealed the truth about it.

### DISCERNING THE BODY

The apostle Paul faced a similar situation in writing to the Corinthians in the first century. Paul accused them of creating divisions in the body of Christ by participating in the worship of idols (1 Cor 10:14–21) and by the rich eating and drinking while the poor have nothing (1 Cor 11:21–22). This is especially scandalous in the light of the eucharist, for as Paul says, "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor 10:17). This is not simply a matter of wishful thinking; our unity is true eschatologically, for we will all feast together in the kingdom. Where divisions exist now, in history, Christ in the eucharist appears in judgment, according to Paul, and the judgment is severe: "For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves, we would not be judged" (1 Cor 11:29–31). Archbishop Romero comments on these passages, "Today the idols of the Corinthians no longer exist: idols of gold, figures of animals, of goddesses, of stars and suns. Today other idols exist, which we have often spoken of. If Christians are nourished in the eucharistic communion, where their faith tells them they are united to Christ's life, how can they live as idolaters of money, idolaters of power, selfish idolaters of themselves? How can a Christian who receives holy communion be an idolater?"<sup>20</sup>

In the Christian tradition, both the martyrs and the eucharist participate, through the power of the Holy Spirit, in the sacrifice of Christ in such a way that a body of people is built up and made visible. In this body of people, the body of Christ, the powers of darkness are resisted because the truth about their violence is revealed in the violence they inflict on the body. Martyrdom and the eucharist reveal the irruption of Christ's kingdom into history, a revelation that both judges the divisions that exist and, at the same time, points hopefully forward to the day when such divisions will be overcome.

The problem with what I have written so far is that it is all about places and times that are remote from myself and most of my readers. When thinking about writing this essay, I became very uneasy with the idea of just talking about Romero and the early Christians without looking at my

<sup>19</sup> Romero, *Violence of Love*, 21.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

own largely unmartyrlike experience of the church. It is wonderful to have saintly exemplars to look up to, but there is always a danger of falling into an exercise in mere theological tourism. It is all very inspiring, and we would like to think that we would stand up for the truth even if it cost us, but the fact is it usually does not, or does not seem to. After the Misfit kills the Grandmother in Flannery O'Connor's story "A Good Man is Hard to Find," he says, "She would of been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life."<sup>21</sup> We would like to hope we would be good too, but in fact there are no Roman soldiers or Salvadoran death squads around to shoot us. We receive the eucharist with impunity.

Or do we? What reading Paul in the light of the martyrs suggests, to be blunt, is that if we are not dying for the eucharist, the eucharist could be killing us. For Paul, the crucial criterion for receiving the eucharist truthfully is to be able to "discern the body." I want to offer a few reflections on what discerning the body might mean in our context.

Discerning the body must mean being able to identify truthfully where the body is not whole, where divisions exist. One of the limitations we North Americans tend to labor under is the illusion that we are not limited, that we can sympathize and identify with anyone, anywhere. As the nightly news beams images of suffering people into our living rooms from around the globe, we assume that we can identify with and often fix their problems. When my classes read Rigoberta Menchu's autobiography, we all identify with her and the Indian people of Guatemala, and we become righteously indignant at their treatment at the hands of the *ladinos*, or upper-class people of European extraction. This is good insofar as it comes from a deep impulse of compassion, but it can also give us permission to ignore the fact that—for most of us in the class—we *are the ladinos!* The bullet that shattered in Oscar Romero's chest was made in the USA, as was the rifle that shot it. Both were paid for with our tax dollars. We also paid to train two of the three officers responsible for the assassination at the U.S. Army School of the Americas in Fort Benning, GA. When I watch the movie *Romero*, I want desperately for Romero and the Salvadoran poor to be "us." The truth is, however, that I am "them" as much as I am "us." The first step in discerning the body is recognizing the reality of these divisions.

The process of globalization that we hear so much about has a tendency to obscure these divisions. We are told that we are a "global village." Internet advertising treats us to images of French monks and Thai villagers and Minnesotan suburbanites happily communing on the Internet. In fact, the Thai villagers have sent their daughters to work twelve-hour days making forty cents an hour to make shoes for the Minnesotans. This is the true face of globalization. The global focus also helps us ignore local problems. It is easier to notice the difference between the rich and poor of El Salvador than to question the existence of inner-city Detroit in the

---

<sup>21</sup> Flannery O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* (New York: Noonday Press, 1971), 133.

world's wealthiest country. The university where I teach in St. Paul is farther from the city's Latino West Side than the ten minutes it takes to get there.

Fortunately, our eucharistic communion gives us hope that this is not the final word. Besides shining a light on the divisions that exist, discerning the body includes an exercise in dissolving those divisions, blurring the lines between "them" and "us." In the body of Christ, Paul continues to tell the Corinthians, people are distinguished from each other, not by class or race or nationality, but by charisms given them by the Holy Spirit. Each has a different role to play in the service of the whole, and the weakest members are the most indispensable, to be treated with the greatest honor. Therefore, "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it" (1 Cor 12:26). The eucharist gives us hope by helping us to discern the deep reality that all people are members or potential members of the body of Christ. The body of Christ transgresses artificial national borders that separate the United States from El Salvador or Iraq. By the estimate of the United Nations, 500,000 Iraqi children have died as a result of the U.S.-imposed economic sanctions against Iraq; Christ invites us to experience that suffering as our suffering, suffering that takes place in our very body. What a difference that would make in the tolerance we have for the outrages done in our name.

---

***To take on the suffering of others may be central to Christianity, as the martyrs attest, but is becoming increasingly marginal in this society.***

---

Of course, the voluntary assumption of suffering is not terribly popular in the culture in which we find ourselves. The growing pressure to normalize euthanasia and the widespread sympathy for Dr. Kevorkian indicate that increasingly the preferred way to deal with suffering is to eliminate the sufferer. This is perhaps one society-wide symptom of the sickness that Paul describes; our fear of suffering may be killing us from within. To take on the suffering of others may be central to Christianity, as the martyrs attest, but it is becoming increasingly marginal in this society. Sacrifice of the self is identified with a kind of morbid masochism that denies the goodness of creation.

In Christian thought, however, nothing could be farther from the truth. Suffering is not a good in itself; it is simply something that must be encountered if one is to speak the truth about the re-creation of the world through Jesus Christ. If one speaks truthfully of the in-breaking kingdom of light in a world of darkness, the powers of darkness are going to resist. But the suffering that will be thus encountered is not only not a good, it

is not anything at all. It does not ultimately have any reality, and it is passing away. In the meantime, suffering is simply a consequence of discerning the body and speaking the truth. If we do not meet with resistance, then we must not be speaking the truth. We must find ways, even small ways, to put ourselves in the line of fire. This is good news, because we are made able by Christ in the eucharist to overcome our fear, our fear of death, our fear of each other. The cross is an invitation to liberating joy. This is why Jesus can say, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:10).

Good Friday is followed by Easter Sunday, death by resurrection. These are the words of Archbishop Romero the day before he was killed:

Easter is itself now the cry of victory. No one can quench that life that Christ has resurrected. Neither death nor all the banners of death and hatred raised against him and against his church can prevail. He is the victorious one! Just as he will thrive in an unending Easter, so we must accompany him in a Lent and a Holy Week of cross, sacrifice, and martyrdom. As he said, blessed are they who are not scandalized by his cross.<sup>22</sup>

#### ABSTRACT

This essay uses the life, death, and writings of Oscar Romero to explore the connection between eucharist and martyrdom, and how to tell the difference between dying for the eucharist and being killed by it. The essay begins by examining the logic of martyrdom, then shows its connections with the eucharist, and concludes with some comments about the situation of first-world Christians in a relatively safe church. The essay suggests that the eucharist can bring judgment if Christians do not attend to those who suffer in their midst.

---

<sup>22</sup> Romero, *Violence of Love*, 241.