

**The Scandal of Redemption:  
Why God Liberates the Poor,  
Saves Sinners, and Heals Nations**

**by Saint Oscar Romero**

A Study Guide for Secular Franciscans  
(among others)

Prepared by David V. Cruz-Uribe, OFS  
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This document is a study and discussion guide for the book *The Scandal of Redemption*, drawn from the collected writings of Saint Oscar Romero (2018, Plough Publishing, Walden, NY). It was written for a year long, on-going formation program for St. Joseph Cupertino Fraternity in Bessemer, Alabama. It is specifically intended for use by Secular Franciscans as part of their on-going formation. It can also be used for a personal guided reading and reflection. We are happy to share it with our brothers and sisters in St. Francis, and indeed with all Catholics and all men and women of good will who would like to reflect on the life and message of Saint Romero.

Throughout, all page numbers refer to the *The Scandal of Redemption*. In the questions there are several references to the Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order. Readers not familiar with this document may find it at

*<https://secularfranciscansusa.org/the-rule-of-the-secular-franciscan-order/>*

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For ease of copying, each session has been placed on a separate page.

## **Introduction: Saint Oscar Romero**

Watch the film *Romero*, from 1989 (directed by John Duigan). In preparation for watching the film, read pp. 1-15.

For discussion:

- 1) What is one scene in the movie that struck you? Why?
- 2) What do you know about the violence and civil wars in Central America in the 1970s and 80s? If you are old enough, what do you remember from that time?
- 3) What connection, if any, do you see between the events of this film and the plight of Central Americans who are pressing to come to the United States as refugees today?

## Session 1: The Creator

Read Chapter 1, pp. 18-25.

In preparation, after reading the chapter select one passage that struck you as you were reading. Come prepared to share this passage and the reasons it affected you.

For discussion:

- 1) On p. 20, Romero says “*There is no anonymous person among those of us who are here. All of you have your own individual histories, even the humblest of persons....*” Why do you think Romero said this? How should this statement influence how we interact with other people?
- 2) We often hear people say that the Church should not be “political.” How do you feel about this assertion? On p. 21, Romero says, “*Agrarian reform is a theological necessity.*” He is referring to proposals to break up the large plantations and distribute the land to the peasants who work it (with or without paying the owners of the land). Is this a political statement? What did Romero mean by it?
- 3) In the diary entry on pp. 24-25, Romero describes the attempted intimidation of peasants by ORDEN. ORDEN was a paramilitary organization formed by the government to suppress “communism” among the rural poor. It was implicated in a number of atrocities: see

<https://www.refworld.org/docid/3dee04524.html>.

Can you think of examples in the United States where the government has used violence, either directly or indirectly, to frighten or control people? How should we as Franciscans respond to this?

## Session 2: The Word Made Flesh

Read Chapter 2, pp. 26-37.

In preparation, after reading the chapter select one passage that struck you as you were reading. Come prepared to share this passage and the reasons it affected you.

For discussion:

- 1) On p. 29, Romero said, *“How I wish that child, nestled in straw and humble cloth, would speak to us this Christmas of the sublime value of poverty!”* Compare this to what Thomas of Celano wrote about the first Christmas creche in Greccio: *“There Simplicity was honored, Poverty exalted, Humility commended; and of Greccio there was made as it were a new Bethlehem.”* (1 Cel 85) But on p. 27, Romero talks about the real images of poverty he sees around himself every day: *“...malnourished children who went to bed without anything to eat...poor newspaper boys who will sleep tonight on doorsteps, wrapped in their papers...”* How can we reconcile these to images of poverty?
- 2) On p. 35, Romero said, *“Christians must always nourish in their hearts the fullness of joy.”* How do we do this in the face of pain, and suffering, and evil? How does this equip us to live out our Rule, which tells us that *“A sense of community will make [Secular Franciscans] joyful and ready to place themselves on an equal basis with all people, especially with the lowly for whom they shall strive to create conditions of life worthy of people redeemed by Christ* (Chapter 13)”?
- 3) In his diary on p. 36, Romero writes about the tomb of Fr. Alfonso Navarro. Why do you think Fr. Navarro was murdered? And why do you think Romero says that *“His sealed tomb could be perceived as a failure of the redemption and resurrection of Christ, and yet it is a sign of hope”*?

### Session 3: Redemption

Read Chapter 3, pp 38-49.

In preparation, after reading the chapter select one passage that struck you as you were reading. Come prepared to share this passage and the reasons it affected you.

For discussion:

- 1) On p. 42, Romero said, *“That’s what our God is like. Blessed be God who lets us know that he calls us at every hour and at every hour is ready to receive us, no matter what crimes we have committed.”* Romero is commenting on the parable of the workers in the vineyard, Matthew 20:1-8. How do we respond when it is God who calls us? How do we respond when God calls others, particularly those we do not think worthy of that call? Can you give specific examples where God’s mercy has upset you?
- 2) On p. 47, Romero criticizes *“the small-mindedness of those who want to fix the world’s problems by using violence.”* Earlier, on p. 45, in a different homily, he said, *“The victories achieved by bloodshed are detestable. The victories won by brute force are brutish.”* Who was he speaking to in El Salvador? What message does he have for us, now?
- 3) In the diary writings on pp. 48-49, Romero recounts visits by a bishop and priest where they discuss accusations that the other bishops of El Salvador are pressing against him in Rome. Can you give examples of other Catholics who have been unjustly accused and vilified for embracing the radical message of the Gospel? How did they respond? How should we respond when others take it upon themselves to question or denounce our efforts to be faithful?

## Session 4: The Call

Read Chapter 4, 50-63.

In preparation, after reading the chapter select one passage that struck you as you were reading. Come prepared to share this passage and the reasons it affected you.

For discussion:

- 1) On p. 51, Romero says, *"We all have a vocation. No woman or man is born without a vocation from God. We all have a place in history...Let us seek our happiness by always asking what God desires of us."* Later, on p. 52, he says, *"Conversion means asking at every moment: what does God want of my life?"* Each of us has a vocation to the Secular Franciscan Order. We are called by our Rule to ongoing conversion (Chapter 7). But what, concretely does that vocation mean? What are we called to repent of and turn towards? What does God desire of each of us, individually and collectively as a fraternity?
- 2) On p. 54, Romeo says, *"Modern-day society is an anonymous society in which nobody accepts blame by everybody is responsible. All of us are responsible for what happens, but the sin remains anonymous. We are all sinners, and have all contributed our grain of sand to this mountain of crimes and violence in our country."* What are the crimes in our own country? (Can you name at least three?) How have we contributed "our grain of sand" to them?
- 3) On p. 59, Romero says, commenting on the story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10), *"This aspect of the gospel is very interesting because it helps us to see that true conversion expresses itself in deeds. It is not enough just to say that one repents of a sin; it is also necessary to repair the harm that was done."* In what ways do we express our repentance and take up the burden of making things right? Return to the previous question: how can we begin to make amends for something we are not to blame for, but for which we are responsible?

## Session 5: The Way

Read Chapter 5, 64-77.

In preparation, after reading the chapter select one passage that struck you as you were reading. Come prepared to share this passage and the reasons it affected you.

For discussion:

- 1) On p. 69, Romero says, speaking to a group of priests, *“Dear brothers, do not betray your service to this ministry of God’s word. It is very easy to be servants of the word without disturbing the world in any way.... We can speak words that sound good in any part of the world because they say nothing about the world.”* In what ways today does the Church in the United States betray its ministry of the word? As Secular Franciscans we also have a share in the ministry of the word, as our rule calls us to *“proclaim Christ by our life and words* (Chapter 6).” In what ways do we, as individuals and as a fraternity, fail to “disturb the world”?
- 2) At the beginning and end of this chapter, Romero talks about the “violence” we are called to do to ourselves. On p. 64 he says, *“We do violence first to ourselves by the inspiration of faith according to what Saint Paul said so beautifully: ‘I insist that you keep the commandments without stain or reproach’ (1 Tim 6:14).”* And then on p. 75 he says, *“True freedom is that which does violence to itself just as Christ, almost disregarding his sovereign power, becomes a slave in order to serve others.”* What does this call to violence mean for us as Christians and as Secular Franciscans?
- 3) Speaking to a nation that is daily torn by violence and oppression, on p. 71, Romero says to those with a calling to act politically: *“Don’t replace that social and political sensitivity with hatred, vengeance, and earthly violence. Lift your hearts on high, and consider the things that are above!”* What should we take from this injunction as we face the political turmoil and division in our own nation today?

## Session 6: The Church

Read Chapter 6, 78-91.

In preparation, after reading the chapter select one passage that struck you as you were reading. Come prepared to share this passage and the reasons it affected you.

For discussion:

- 1) On p. 82, Romero writes: *“The Church celebrates her liturgy and preaches her word for that reason alone: to save people from sin, to save them from enslavements, to overthrow idolatries, and to proclaim the one God who loves us.”* How well does our Church in the US do that today? Where do we fall short? He goes on to say: *“Since carrying out this mission cost Christ humiliation and the cross, the church also must be ready if necessary to suffer martyrdom, the cross, humiliation, and persecution, as Christ did.”* The Church in the US faces very few of these challenges—to what extent is this because we have turned aside from our mission?
- 2) On p. 83, Romero writes, *“The Church wants to rouse men and women to the true meaning of being a people. What does it mean to be a people? A people is a community of persons in which everyone works together for the common good.”* What does it mean for us, as Franciscans, to be a people? To work for the common good?
- 3) On p. 80, Romero writes, *“If I...try to set myself up as if I were the Holy Spirit trying to shape the Church to my liking, then I would be quenching the Spirit.”* In what ways do we try to make the Church over in our own image, rather than letting ourselves be remade in the image of Christ? How do we recognize, and fail to recognize, the Spirit moving within and beyond the Church? (See also p. 87.)



## Session 7: The Kingdom

Read Chapter 7, pp. 92-105.

In preparation, after reading the chapter select one passage that struck you as you were reading. Come prepared to share this passage and the reasons it affected you.

For discussion:

- 1) On p. 92, Romero writes, “*Christ is already building this kingdom; we human beings are not going to do this by ourselves.*” What roles do we as Franciscans play in helping Christ build his kingdom? By what signs can we discern if we are helping or hindering this great work?
- 2) On p. 98, Romero quotes the passage in the book of Numbers that we know as the Blessing of St. Francis. What does this blessing mean in the context of our call to build up the kingdom of God? How should we live if this is how we are blessed by God?
- 3) On p. 93, Romero writes, “*The Church is not on earth to gain privileges, to seek support in power and wealth, or to ingratiate herself with the mighty of the world. The church does not exist even to erect great material temples or monuments.*” More recently, Pope Francis has said the we must be “*a poor Church, for the poor.*” What do they mean by this? How can we, as Franciscans, help our parishes to be part of a “poor Church”?

## Session 8: Liberation

Read Chapter 8, pp. 106-123.

In preparation, after reading the chapter select one passage that struck you as you were reading. Come prepared to share this passage and the reasons it affected you.

For discussion:

- 1) The word “liberation”, especially in the phrase “liberation theology”, often provokes a strong negative reaction in many Catholics in the United States. What do you think these words mean? How does your definition agree or disagree with what Romero writes: e.g., , “*liberation is redemption that is already beginning* (p. 107)”; “*The Church cannot seek a only a liberation of a temporal order* (p. 110)”; “*This is why the Church values human beings and fights for their rights, for their freedom, for their dignity* (p. 114).”
- 1) Chapter 5 of our Rule begins, “*Secular Franciscans, therefore, should seek to encounter the living and active person of Christ in their brothers and sisters, in Sacred Scripture, in the Church, and in liturgical activity.*” What does it mean to encounter Christ? Romero writes, on p. 115, “*Let us not forget them [the poor], for they are the face of Christ.*” And on p. 118, “*The way we look at them [the poor] is the way we look at God.*” How can we interpret and live this passage of our Rule in light of what he wrote?
- 2) On p. 109, Romero writes, “*The paths of the beatitudes are today very dangerous paths, and that is why there are so few people willing to walk on them.*” Compare this to the Admonitions of St. Francis, where Francis said, “*Look at the Good Shepherd, my brothers. To save his sheep he endured the agony of the cross. They followed him in trials and persecutions, in ignominy, hunger, and thirst, in humiliation and temptations, and so on. And for this God rewarded them with eternal life. We ought to be ashamed of ourselves; the saints endured all that, but we who are servants of God try to win honor and glory by recounting and making known what they have done.*” How, as Franciscans, should we respond to the charge of Saints Francis and Romero?

## Session 9: All Things New

Read Chapter 9, pp. 124-132.

In preparation, after reading the chapter select one passage that struck you as you were reading. Come prepared to share this passage and the reasons it affected you.

For discussion:

- 1) On p. 132, Romero writes: *“The redemption and liberation that the church preaches and longs of is not a liberation that disappoints when things turn out badly, even when people must die on the cross, even when people are tortured and killed...These are episodes in Christ’s war to save the world. Let us not forget, sisters and brothers, that redemption is still taking place.”* How do we participate in this redemption and liberation? How do we respond to the call of our Rule, which says: *“Mindful that they are bearers of peace which must be built up unceasingly, they should seek out ways of unity and fraternal harmony through dialogue, trusting in the presence of the divine seed in everyone and in the transforming power of love and pardon (Chapter 19a).”*
- 2) On p. 130, at the funeral of Sra. Sara Meardi de Pinto, Romero said, *“I ask all of you, dear brothers and sisters, to view these things that are happening in our historical moment with a spirit of hope, generosity, and sacrifice. And let us do what we can. What can all do something and be more understanding.”* In our own historical moment, far from El Salvador, what can we do to respond to the call of our Rule, which calls on us: *“Messengers of perfect joy in every circumstance, they should strive to bring joy and hope to others (Chapter 19b).”*
- 3) On p. 128, Romero writes, *“As long as we have faith and hope in this Christ who will return and in the realities that exist beyond our own failures and our death and our difficulties, as long as we keep present that horizon, then we are the Passover church, the church of hope.”* In the face of trials and the difficulties of our own lives, how do we hold onto this hope? How do we respond to our Rule, which says, *“Since they are immersed in the resurrection of Christ, which gives true meaning to Sister Death, let them serenely tend toward the ultimate encounter with the Father (Chapter 19c)”*?

## Session 10: Begin Anew

In this session we will go back and assess the writings of Saint Romero as a whole and reflect on what it means for us today.

For discussion:

- 1) Go back through the book, starting in the earlier chapters, and look at the passages you marked. Do any of them strike you differently now? Are there other passages that you passed over before that now speak to you? Come prepared with a passage (old or new) to share.
- 2) Go back to the discussion questions for the earlier chapters. As you read them, do they take you to passages you did not see before? What do they spark in your heart? Do they help you see the life and work of Romero differently?
- 3) Our seraphic father, St. Francis, said to his disciples, "*I have done what was mine to do, may Christ now teach you what you are to do.*" The writings of St. Oscar Romero show what he was called to do in El Salvador, in the late 1970s. What lessons can we draw from his life of service and sacrifice? In light of them, and in light of our Rule, which calls us to be fully engaged with God's created order and with the struggles of our brothers and sisters, what is Christ calling us to do?

### A Prayer of Saint Oscar Romero

God of the prophets, we pray for ourselves  
and our Church that we might become  
prophets of justice and life to our world.

If God accepts the sacrifice of my life,  
may my death be for the freedom of my people.

A bishop will die, but the Church of God,  
which is the people, will never perish.

I do not believe in death without resurrection.  
If they kill me, I will rise again in  
the People of El Salvador.