

AUGUST 17, FATHER PETER JAE CHOI

Archbishop Oscar Romero once said, “There are many things that can only be seen through eyes that have cried.” He was a good shepherd. Not only did he know his people, but he also understood their struggles and their suffering. During the late 70s and the early 80s, while the people of El Salvador were being oppressed and suffering violence, he stood by them and defended them by denouncing the government’s oppression and violence against their own people. He became a voice for the poor and marginalized, speaking out against the government and military’s human rights abuses. In what would be remembered as his final homily, he said the following directly addressing the military: “I want to make a special appeal to soldiers, national guards, and policemen: each of you is one of us. The peasants you kill are your own brothers and sisters. When you hear a man telling you to kill, remember God’s words, ‘thou shalt not kill.’ No soldier is obliged to obey a law contrary to the law of God. In the name of God, in the name of our tormented people, I beseech you, I implore you; in the name of God I command you to stop the repression.”

Archbishop Oscar Romero refused to remain silent. So he courageously spoke out. As a result, the day after he delivered this powerful homily, the government assassinated him while he was celebrating the Mass on National TV.

When we read today’s gospel, at a first glance, Jesus claiming to bring fire to the earth and causing a division within the household seems very strange, confusing, and so out of character to say the least! What did He mean by that? Did He come to incite violence and chaos? Was He giving us an excuse to disrespect our parents or hate our own family members? No! Far from it! Instead, what Jesus was telling His disciples was that they had to remain faithful to Him no matter what the cost! The early Christians understood this as many of them were persecuted and even martyrs!

I remember when I was in the seminary, in the fourth year of our seminary formation, which was our final year there, a new seminarian joined us. We were all in our 20s but Bruno was much older than us. He was in his 50s and he was from Poland. We got to know him and learned that he was thinking of becoming a priest but communist Poland made it difficult for him to enter seminary so he became a lawyer and worked in Germany for many years. I found out that while he was in his 20s he joined the solidarity movement and paid the heavy price for it. He was arrested, interrogated, tortured and barely made it out alive. After decades of state oppression and denial of workplace rights, 16,000 workers going on strike inspired the solidarity movement that united 10 million workers and led to the much needed political change. I asked Bruno why he joined the solidarity movement? He replied, "I could not stay silent! I knew I had to do something!" He told me what was even more painful than the torture was the betrayal he felt when one of his own family members turned him in to the authority for small sum of money the government offered. We will have people around us who agree with us and support us, but we will also have people who disagree with us and see us as a threat or even a villain. The chances are if we are being faithful to God, we are going to be a sign of contradiction and provoke opposition. And then we may be forced to choose a side, and what side of history we want to stand on.

Sometimes there's a price we have to pay for our discipleship. It may cost us our material possessions, freedom, friendship, and even life. Allow me to give you some examples to help us understand what I mean. Do you remember the story about St. Thomas More when imprisoned in the Tower of London, about to be executed? King Henry VIII was trying to persuade him to give in and acknowledge him as supreme head of the Church of England and to the annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon. St. Thomas More replied, "I die the King's good servant, and God's first!" Something more recent. Just

about 10 years ago, when ISIS persecuted Assyrian Christians from Northern Iraq and Syria, threatening to kill them if they didn't convert, none of them converted. Every single of Christians chose Christ, leaving behind their homes, material possessions and belongings, and even their much needed medicine. They left everything in order to remain faithful to God!

Obviously, God isn't making us choose martyrdom, or even renounce our ties to our family and material possessions. But there will always be challenges, and the cost of discipleship. To be honest, I struggle with the choices my life brings. I am often tempted to choose what is easier, rather than what is right, what benefits me rather than what's expected of me, as a Priest. Cardinal Newman said, "Things grow by opposition." Unless we are challenged we may not grow. One of the greatest golfers, Tiger Woods, to make him a great golfer, his father put him in the tournament with older boys who were taller, stronger, and more skillful. He constantly had to push himself harder than anyone else to compete. But the end result was he outgrew all the other golfers. God sends challenges our way, not because He forgot about us, but because He cares about us! And I assure you. Whatever we sacrifice, God will reward us beyond our imagination!