

THE CARE AND PRESERVATION OF ST OSCAR ROMERO'S RELICS

Address by Dr Jan Graffius

at Choral Evening Prayer on the third anniversary of the Canonisation of St Oscar Romero and reception of a first class relic of St Oscar Romero at the Metropolitan Cathedral of Christ the King, Liverpool, on Thursday, 14 October 2021

I have been involved for nearly fourteen years now with the preservation and presentation of Oscar Romero's relics, and those of Rutilio Grande, the six Jesuit martyrs of the UCA, their co-worker Julia Elba and her fifteen-year old daughter Celina.

When Julian Filochowski contacted me back in 2006 with a seemingly artless enquiry about conservation of textiles and relics, I had no idea where this was to lead. Certainly, no inkling that it would involve repeated visits to El Salvador to work with some of the most significant and harrowing artefacts I have encountered in my professional life.

That first meeting with Julian in Fortnum's tea rooms should have alerted me. There is no such thing as a free mille-feuille!

My working life, over the last twenty or so years, has brought me up close and personal with a wide variety of human remains- bones, teeth, hair, skin, blood, viscera- to name the more respectable items from the list of things I have encountered, dating from the 1st to the 20th centuries AD. It is a niche speciality, and one which I find endlessly absorbing and fascinating. I have come to realise that this is not a view widely shared amongst friends, relations, colleagues and the wider public. Although the ability to reduce a dinner table to silence by my response to the question 'And what have you been up to, lately?' has distinct advantages. As does the fact that my children very quickly stopped rooting through my handbag.

Community memory is preserved in material artefacts, and we have an entrenched need to keep things which belong to those we have loved; ask any parent about baby shoes, locks of hair, handmade birthday cards and the like. The early Church collected what shattered fragments it could from those first martyrs and built its first altars over the blood-soaked earth consecrated by the deaths of Lucy, Agnes, Cecilia and so many others.

Stonyhurst College, where I work, cares for a unique collection of relics which illuminate the history of Christian martyrdom over the last two millennia. It was working with this important collection, partly the property of Stonyhurst and partly that of the British Province of the Jesuits entrusted into the College's care, which led to my involvement in El Salvador.

Everything in a curator's care is treated equally, be it a Leonardo drawing or a 1930s tin of beans. But some objects seem to have a deeper and more profound importance. The relics of Oscar Romero are truthful witnesses to a courageous life lived in the light of the gospels, and to violent deaths in the service of Christ and some of the poorest people on Earth. They have a vital role in a country where official distortion and lies were commonplace, and in a world which often struggles to understand integrity, courage and holiness. Curators rarely get to deal with objects that speak as powerfully as these.

In many ways, museum professionals spend their lives trying to delay inevitable decay, to extend the life of objects which demonstrate a perverse and ungrateful determination to return to the dust from which they came. In Spanish, as Jon Sobrino once pointed out to me, the word *curador* means both 'healer' and 'curator', and it is easy to see the role in terms of a medic in an intensive care unit striving to keep ailing artefacts going just a little bit longer (although the job is just as much that of domestic cleaner, story-teller, Dickensian scribe, embalmer and amanuensis).

If I may, I would like to share with you two stories of my work in El Salvador, which have stuck with me for different reasons. The first explains the importance of careful forensic analysis and insight, the second acknowledges the need to keep a straight face in difficult circumstances and think creatively to make the best of distinctly unorthodox curatorial conditions.

The environmental conditions in El Salvador are far from ideal for the preservation of organic materials. The temperature is considerably in excess of the desired 18-20°C, and the humidity levels are heart-stoppingly high — for a curator, that is. I regularly recorded levels of over 90%; the optimum is 55% and at 70% spontaneous mould growth appears.

Mould spores attack fabric fibres, weakening the structure of the cloth until holes develop. A minute examination for mould on the black woollen trousers worn by Oscar Romero when he was murdered, provided probably the most moving discovery of my career. The woollen fabric was covered with a white, speckled deposit, formed into circular pools, which at first sight appeared to be some kind of mould, although it did not resemble anything I had come across before.

Under deeper magnification it became clear that these were salt crystals – the residue of a sudden and exceptionally profuse sweat. According to eyewitnesses at his last Mass, Romero suddenly flinched, having seen the gunman at the door of the church. He then stood his ground awaiting the inevitable bullet. For me, such a revelation was profoundly moving, reminding us that martyrs are also truly human. Romero expected to be murdered, and his mind accepted the fact that he was about to die, but his body reacted instinctively and sweated heavily.

The second story relates to the relic of St Oscar Romero's rib which you see here before you.

The story of the preservation and display of this relic is truly the most surreal of my professional life. A number of years ago, Oscar Romero's little brother, Don Gaspar, confided to Julian that he possessed a rare and highly significant first-class relic of the martyr, which he had received at the time of Romero's murder, from the A&E surgeon who tried to save Romero after the fatal shooting.

Don Gaspar had kept this piece of bone safely for some twenty-five years, throughout a time in which the possession of anything associated with Oscar Romero must have been highly incriminating. Given the repression of the 1980s and 90s in El Salvador, it is understandable that he was reluctant to confide to anyone the fact of its existence.

But five years ago he realised that the relic was deteriorating and that he needed help to preserve it.

Enter Julian.

It took a while for Julian to persuade Don Gaspar that the relic needed expert treatment, and that he should consider sharing its existence with me. Eventually, he conceded, and I was called to inspect the relic.

This might get a bit explicit from here on.

One of the most important things to ascertain when dealing with human remains is to find out how the individual died and the circumstances in which the remains were collected and preserved. This information allows the curator to discern the best way to treat the relic, bearing in mind its past history.

Don Gaspar told the most extraordinary story. On the evening of his brother's murder on 24th March 1980, he was called to the hospital, to be met by a surgeon,

gloved hands soaked in blood, who informed him that his brother had been killed by the kind of bullet that explodes on entering the body. In his hand he had a six inch piece of rib, taken from Romero's devastated body, which he pressed on Don Gaspar.

As you can imagine, Don Gaspar was in a state of shock, and stared at the bloodied bone in confusion. At which point a journalist, part of a pack swarming all over the hospital on the news of Romero's murder, grabbed the bone and ran off with it. Don Gaspar gave chase and demanded its restitution, whereon the journalist snapped the bone in half, gave a piece back and ran off with the other piece.

Don Gaspar wrapped the bone in a handkerchief and went home. Three days later it became apparent that he needed to do something to preserve it. You have to imagine now the confused and dangerous situation in El Salvador in the immediate aftermath of Romero's murder. It wasn't the best of times to seek advice on the curatorial preservation of a bone belonging to a high-profile archbishop who had just been murdered by an elite marksman from the government's death squad.

And so he wandered into a local chemist and asked for some hospital alcohol. Lacking a more suitable receptacle he decanted the alcohol into an empty coffee jar, decorated with images of Jemima Puddleduck. On the top of which he placed a miniature replica of the Great Pyramid of Cheops and a small pile of US dimes. All I can say, is that is what he did.

More than thirty years later, things inside the Jemima Puddleduck jar were not looking good. Hospital alcohol, apart from its sterling qualities as an antiseptic, will also, over time, destroy organic material. When I arrived at Don Gaspar's house it was evident that the bone was far along the process of being reduced to a sort of calcium soup.

Sorry. Said it would get explicit.

Trying to remove what was left of the bone was impossible. The only option was to allow the alcohol to evaporate and return to deal with the dried residue. The obvious way forward was to remove the lid of the jar, place it in a safe location, and return the following year. But El Salvador is a tropical and humid country, blessed with many interesting, tenacious and curious insects. The contents of the jar had to be protected while the necessary evaporation took place.

Normally, a curator would reach for unbleached muslin, at this point. Not readily available in that part of the world. A brief conversation, ably, and nobly translated by Julian as my Spanish is next to non-existent, led to Don Gaspar triumphantly

producing a pair of his late wife's 30 denier American Tan tights, which were duly secured over the neck of the jar, topped off by a plastic sieve for extra security and placed in a well-ventilated spot.

Twelve months later I returned, removed the dried residue and translated it into two cut glass containers which were sealed and labelled. Don Gaspar, Julian and I each signed three copies of the narrative outlined here, and the task of rescuing St Oscar Romero's rib was completed.

Don Gaspar very generously donated one of the cut glass containers to the Sisters of the Hospitalito where Romero lived in his last years, and in whose chapel he was murdered. It now sits in a very fine illuminated reliquary attached to the wall of the altar sanctuary adjacent to the spot where he was murdered in 1980. The second container was sent to the Vatican.

Other pieces of the rib were given to Julian on behalf of the Archbishop Romero Trust to be donated where it was thought best.

Thanks to the work of the Trust, there are first class relics of St Oscar Romero in Rome, Colombia, Edinburgh, Southwark, Stonyhurst and now here in Liverpool, where his memory and example will surely spark the generous people of this city to emulate his care for the poor and the voiceless.