

Catholic

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Óscar Romero

A LIFE OF LOVE AND LIBERATION

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Whenever the life of St. Óscar Romero is recalled, the discussion invariably begins with his violent death in strife-torn El Salvador. In the midst of his homily while celebrating the Eucharist on March 24, 1980, a single bullet fatally wounded Romero, thus ending one of the most inspiring and controversial episcopal ministries of the twentieth century. Inspiring because Romero constantly preached the good news to the poor and a liberation that was tied up in the human dignity of those who were most oppressed in the world. Controversial because his type of preaching was considered scandalous to the powers-that-be, both in secular and ecclesial orbits. Supporters of liberation theology and many more hailed Romero as a holy hero. His tragic death began his path to sainthood that culminated on October 14, 2018, as Romero and his contemporary, Pope Paul VI, were canonized.

Saint Óscar Romero of San Salvador, El Salvador, in 1979
(CNS PHOTO/OCTAVIO DURAN)



Note: The archbishop is scheduled to be canonized on October 14, 2018, soon after October's *Catholic Update* is released, hence we refer to him as St. Óscar Romero.

Romero's Ministry: Deep Love for the Poor and Oppressed

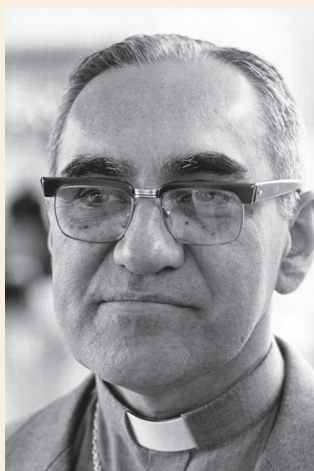
Christian martyrs are not killed by accident. Much like their great example and model, the Lord Jesus himself, martyrs of the Church are killed because they have dared to give witness to the gospel. This witness is seen in words and actions that often make the martyr seem something of a prophet, one who speaks truth to power. Óscar Romero's case is no different. His episcopal ministry in San Salvador began in 1977 when St. Paul VI surprisingly selected him to succeed the long reign of Archbishop Luis Chávez y González. After only two years as bishop of the diocese of Santiago de María in El Salvador, Romero had already gained a reputation in some quarters for his love of the poor and oppressed. This was a quality that, while not known to all, would become his defining characteristic during his three years as archbishop of San Salvador.

Romero's tenure was marked by tremendous violence in the country, including the killings of pastoral ministers in the Church. Romero wrote about the horror of this period in reflections in the third (1978) and fourth (1979) pastoral letters he sent to his flock in San Salvador, both dated August 6, the feast of the Transfiguration. In all four pastoral letters, as well as in his preaching—which was transmitted weekly via radio throughout the country—Romero placed himself firmly on the side of the vast majority of Salvadorans who were suffering at the hands of the government's unjust, authoritarian rule.

Perhaps no event in Romero's life affected him as profoundly as the assassination of Fr. Rutilio Grande, SJ. Mere weeks after Romero's installation as archbishop of San Salvador, on March 12, 1977, Grande—Romero's very good friend and colleague—was killed by gunfire while traveling by car to celebrate the Eucharist with the poor to whom he ministered. An elderly man and a teenage boy were also victims. Upon seeing the corpses later that evening, Romero's next decision—in consultation with other clergy—was historic: He mandated that only one Mass would be held in the entire country on the following Sunday. In his homily on that occasion, Romero made it clear that Grande's death had not only changed him but would also have an impact on how he would minister to the people entrusted to his care.

Romero's ministry to the faithful in El Salvador was marked

by care and concern for those most in need. It was embodied by his closeness to the people. Salvadorans cherished him just as we all cherish our own bishops who remain close to us, but Romero's love was extraordinary because of the grave risks that such love entailed, dangers vastly uncharacteristic of many other dioceses throughout the world. Grande's assassination happened in a country where Catholic clergy, sisters, and lay pastoral ministers were always under suspicion. In addition



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"Beautiful is the moment in which we understand that we are no more than an instrument of God, not only as long as God wants us to live; we can only do as much as God makes us able to do; we are only as intelligent as God would have us be."

ST. ÓSCAR ROMERO

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