

Oscar Romero: the Unlikely Martyr

Francis McDonagh looks at the change in Romero that turned him from a young conservative into an outspoken archbishop and martyr.

A young conservative

Oscar Arnulfo Romero y Galdámez lived through events that dramatically changed the world in the 20th century. He was born in 1917, the year of the Russian revolution, an adolescent during the great depression of the 1930s, a student in Rome during the Second World War, and at the height of his powers during the decades when the United States supported dictatorships in Latin America in a misguided attempt to defeat communism. And from the 1960s the Roman Catholic Church to which he belonged was also to go through profound changes as the Second Vatican Council of 1962-65 was to redefine the church as ‘the people of God’, not a democracy by any means, but no longer an authoritarian pyramid with Pope, cardinals and bishops at the top and the laity at the bottom. Vatican II also proclaimed that ‘the joys and hopes, the anxieties and sufferings, of the people of our time are also those of the followers of Christ’, directing Catholics to engage with social issues here and now. This reassessment of the church’s role was given a radical development in Latin America in a series of bishops’ meetings starting in Medellín, Colombia, in 1967, which proclaimed the ‘option for the poor’. This context is part of what made Romero, a timid young cleric, who described himself as ‘surly and dry’, the target for a right-wing assassin’s bullet on 24th March 1980.

Oscar Romero was born in the little town of Ciudad Barrios, nestling in the Cacahuatique mountains in El Salvador’s eastern department of San Miguel, and received three years of basic education in the local school, followed by some private tuition. In 1930, at the age of 13, having expressed an interest in the priesthood, he entered the junior seminary in San Miguel, which his parents had to finance. Seven years later he was sent to the national seminary in San

Salvador to do theology. The young student clearly showed aptitude, because after six months he was sent to the Gregorian University in Rome, where he obtained a degree in theology *cum laude* in 1942. After the circuitous journey home and a few months as a parish priest, he spent twenty years as bishop’s secretary administrator of the cathedral in San Miguel. Here he had to raise funds to complete the construction of the cathedral, which meant attracting donations from the wealthy elite, but he also ran social projects, including a branch of Alcoholics Anonymous and a project to support street children. Former shoeshine boys in San Miguel, who were beaten by their guardians and forced to sleep in the park, have told how Romero formed them into an association, with official identification, which helped to end the beatings. He later built a hostel and a school for them.

One of his biographers, Jesus Delgado, describes his attitude at that time as follows:

It is not that he was unaware of the causes of the problem... But how could he just condemn the rich who were so generous in their support for the church’s charitable work? At that time Fr Romero could see only one solution, to encourage the rich in the practice of charity.

Archbishop Romero’s youngest brother, Gustavo, in an interview in 2011, made the same point more simply

He got on well with the landowners, he didn’t bother them. What he was concerned about was that the workers should sleep under cover, but he didn’t fight with the landowners. In fact, he had some friends among them who were filthy rich.

In 1963 Romero moved to San Salvador as rector of the national seminary, where he met and became a close friend of the Jesuit director

of studies, Fr Rutilio Grande. In 1966 he was made secretary of the Salvadorean bishops' conference and editor of the archdiocesan paper, *Orientación*, which under his editorship was described as 'clerical' and 'conservative'. In 1970 he was appointed auxiliary bishop of San Salvador, and consecrated in a ceremony at which his friend Rutilio Grande was master of ceremonies. This was not a happy time for Oscar Romero. The clergy of San Salvador were influenced by the 'new thinking' of the Latin American church, and Romero did not fit.

When the diocese of Santa María became vacant, he was quickly moved there. According to Gustavo Romero, his brother once said that the happiest time in his career was as bishop of Santa María 'because he'd been among rural people, poor people.'

But the period of happiness was very short; the war in El Salvador was closing in on Romero. In 1975, the army burst into the village of Tres Calles at one o'clock in the morning and killed six men with extreme brutality. The priests of the diocese urged Romero to make a public protest, but he refused, preferring to write privately to President Arturo Molina, who was a friend of his. This helps to explain why when, on 23rd February 1977 Oscar Romero was appointed archbishop of San Salvador, the reaction of the clergy was one of horror. Some boycotted the installation ceremony, and those who did attend did not join in the applause when he was formally presented.

Just under three weeks later, members of an army intelligence unit in plain clothes opened fire on a car in which Fr Rutilio Grande was travelling to El Paisnal to celebrate a novena to St Joseph with two members of his parish team

from Aguilares, 72-year old Manuel Solórzano and 15-year old Nelson Lemus. Romero went immediately to El Paisnal with the Jesuit provincial and celebrated the funeral mass. This time he listened to his clergy and ordered that on the following Sunday no masses should be celebrated in any church in the archdiocese except for one in the cathedral.

Romero, who had previously been taken

aback by Rutilio Grande's radicalism on issues such as agrarian reform, defended his friend in his funeral sermon as a champion of Christian liberation, which he insisted on



Romero with seminarians in 1978

distinguishing from violent revolution:

The liberation that Father Grande preached is inspired by faith, the liberation which culminates with happiness with God; liberation which brings about a repentance for sin, liberation based on Christ, the only saving power. This is the liberation that Father Rutilio Grande preached... How I wish that all those movements that are sensitive to the social question would be aware of this doctrine. For in this way they will avoid failure and a short-sightedness that is unable to see beyond worldly realities and structures. As long as our hearts are not converted ... everything will be feeble, revolutionary, passing and violent. None of these things is Christian.

Archbishop and martyr

But Rutilio Grande's death marked a turning point for Romero. He broke off communications with his friend President Molina, and from that point on refused to attend official government functions. He had long had a

reputation as a gripping preacher, and now his Sunday homilies in the cathedral gained world-wide attention for their combination of accurate reporting of events in the country and theological interpretation. In El Salvador they were broadcast by the diocesan radio station YSAX, and listened to eagerly in rural communities across the country, and of course by the military and politicians. Fr Thomas Greenan, who worked in El Salvador and has studied Romero's homilies in detail, has described how Romero prepared them in a 'homily advisory breakfast':

Archbishop Romero met with several people before writing his Sunday homily. Among them was his Vicar General, Ricardo Urioste, Roberto Cuellar of the Legal Aid Office and the Mexican Jesuit Rafael Moreno, who presented an analysis of the country's political situation... Nevertheless the final preparation of the homilies each Sunday and the final exposition was Romero's alone.

In view of the objections raised against Romero's beatification on the grounds that he was more politician than priest, it is interesting to find that the theology of the homilies is mainline Catholic theology – not surprising in someone who did his theology in Rome at the end of the 1930s – but with an ecclesiology taken from Vatican II and a 'social teaching' influenced by the teaching of the Latin American bishops at their meetings in Medellín and Puebla. He frequently refers to the popes, confirming his adherence to his episcopal motto *Sentire cum Ecclesia*, 'Have the mind of the church'.

Romero stresses the incarnation, Christ's identifying of himself with humanity, but neatly gives it a Salvadorean colouring:

If Christ had become incarnate in our time, 1978, he would be a thirty-year old man, a farm-worker from Nazareth, here in this cathedral, like any other farm-worker from our rural communities. He would be the Son of God enfleshed and we would not recognise him: in everything he is just like us.

Christ is a man of flesh and blood, of nerves and muscles, like us. A man who feels what anyone feels when the Civil Guard arrests him and takes him to the place of torture. Christ also was tortured; Christ also

was executed unjustly.

He insists on his orthodoxy:

Let's not give the impression of being two Churches, because we are only one Church, in line with the magisterium of that Church, especially for our time with the Second Vatican Council and the Medellín documents.

Another constant theme is that the church must be concerned with secular issues:

Keep a careful eye on all those who say that the Church ought to keep to the sacristy and not start proclaiming the duties of justice and insisting on humanity's human rights, Christians who, under the pretext that here we have no permanent abode, say we should look to the future, those who consider that they can ignore temporal tasks, without realising that faith itself is a force that obliges them to carry out those tasks as well as possible in accordance with each person's calling.

As tension grew in El Salvador, Romero's criticisms of the oligarchy sharpened:

Those who call themselves Catholic and idolise wealth and have no desire to detach themselves from their wealth – such people are not Christian. They have not understood the Lord's call and this is not the Church.

And:

I am simply the shepherd, the brother, the friend of this people, who knows its sufferings, its hunger, its anguish; in the name of these I raise my own voice to say: Don't worship your riches like an idol. Don't protect them in a way that leaves others to die of hunger...

Nonetheless Romero maintained his insistence that the church stood for principle, not party:

We repeat once again that with regard to political systems and organisation the Church does not identify herself with any specific political option but supports that which is just in all political options but also denounces those situations that are unjust.

In October 1979 he neatly turned the charge of bias back on the government:

The political crisis is based on a confrontation between the people and the government. We have said the same thing on many occasions. When we have been asked about the conflicts with the Church we have said: 'The Church is not against the government, but rather the government is against the people. The Church desires to be with the people and because of this, the Church is persecuted.'

While not supporting violence, he increasingly saw it as inevitable:

There is injustice, an institutionalised violence, a frenzy to retain power, to maintain control of the economy, and they are capable, in this desire to maintain their position, of crushing human lives and society as a whole. This is violence, institutionalised violence. It is no surprise that there should be a violent reaction.

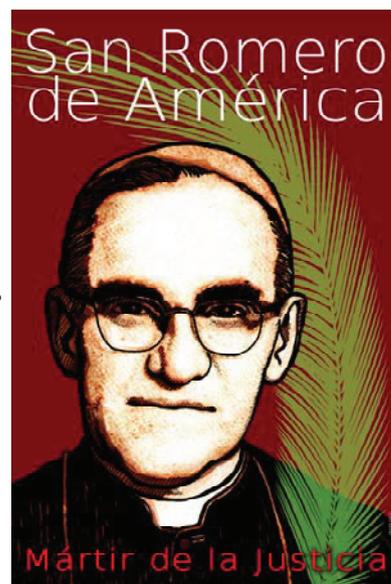
And the day before he was murdered, he delivered the homily that probably sealed his fate, with a call to the ordinary soldiers to disobey unjust orders:

Brothers, you are part of our own people, and you are killing your own brothers and sisters from the rural areas. Against any order to kill given by a human being, God's law must prevail: Thou shalt not kill! No soldier is obliged to obey an order that is against the law of God... In the name of God, and in the name of this suffering people, whose tears rise to heaven with more force each day, I beg you, I ask you, I order you in the name of God: stop the repression!

His cause in Rome

Archbishop Romero had been supported by none of the other Salvadorean bishops except his auxiliary and later successor, Arturo Rivera y Damas. His episcopal enemies had sent hostile briefings on him to the Vatican. This was also the height of the battle within the Roman Catholic Church over liberation theology: Cardinal Ratzinger's negative assessment, *Libertatis nuntius*, was issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1984. Archbishop Rivera y Damas announced the start of the process of beatification with a diocesan investigation in 1990, and the case was submitted to Rome in 1996. As the official in charge of presenting Romero's case, Archbishop

Vincenzo Paglia, admitted in February 2015, once Pope Francis had agreed that Romero could be declared a martyr, his progress to beatification had been held up by 'negative information' sent to Rome. Pope Benedict, apparently, unblocked the process, but, said Paglia, it took a Latin American pope to see it through to completion.



Another important factor, according to Jon Sobrino, liberation theologian and friend and adviser to Romero, had been John Paul II's change of heart, and his insistence on visiting Romero's tomb when he visited El Salvador in 1983, against the wishes of the government. Previously the Polish pope has been critical of what he saw as Romero's involvement in politics. Writing in 1998, Sobrino argued that official recognition is important, but what really matters is that the people have already canonised him, and not as a distant figure, but as one of their own:

The canonisation of Archbishop Romero ... is necessary. A saint is an intercessor, in our favour, interceding with God, in the language of tradition, or in historical language, someone who gives us encouragement, strength, life and hope. And a saint is a model, someone who shows us the way to go, with what the language of tradition calls exemplary virtues or, in historical language, with his life as a complete Salvadorean and Christian.

A fully referenced version of this article is available from the Editor: editor@sofn.org.uk
The sources for the information contained in the article, including the quotations, are most easily accessed through the website of the Romero Trust: www.romerotrust.org.uk.

Francis McDonagh writes about Latin America for the *Tablet*. He has edited the *Selected Writings* of Dom Helder Camara in the Modern Spiritual Masters series (Orbis Books, New York 2009).