



## Archbishop Oscar Romero (1917-1980)

Oscar Arnulfo Romero y Goldámez was born on August 15, 1917 in Ciudad Barrios, a Salvadoran mountain town near the Honduran border. He was the second of seven children of Guadalupe de Jesús Goldámez and Santos Romero, who worked as a telegrapher. Although better off financially than many of their neighbors, the Romeros had neither electricity nor running water in their small home, and the children slept on the floor.

Since his parents could not afford to continue Oscar's education beyond the age of twelve, they apprenticed him to a local carpenter. Oscar immediately showed promise as a craftsman, but he was already determined to become an apprentice of the Carpenter of Nazareth. He entered the minor seminary in San Miguel at the age of thirteen, was promoted to the national seminary in San Salvador; and completed his studies at the Gregorian University in Rome, where he received a Licentiate in Theology. He was ordained in Rome in 1942. Unfortunately, his family could not attend his ordination because of WWII travel restrictions.

Although Fr. Romero hoped to pursue a doctorate in ascetical theology, he was called home to El Salvador in 1944 due to a severe shortage of priests. He initially served as pastor of a rural parish, but his exceptional skills and commitment marked him for greater responsibilities. He was soon appointed rector of the interdiocesan seminary and secretary of the Diocese of San Miguel, a position he held for 23 years. Recognizing the evangelical power of radio long

before most of his contemporaries, he convinced five radio stations to broadcast his Sunday sermons to *campesinos* who believed they were unwelcome in the churches of their “betters.” Romero continued to rely on the electronic pulpit throughout the remainder of his life, making it a pillar of his ministries.

He also served as pastor of the cathedral parish of Santo Domingo, as chaplain of the Church of San Francisco, as Executive Secretary of the Episcopal Council for Central America and Panama, and as editor of the archdiocesan newspaper, *Orientacion*. The majority of his duties were administrative, a good match for the shy and introspective Romero who had serious doubts about his own “people skills.”

In 1970, he became Auxiliary Bishop for the Archdiocese of San Salvador, assisting the elderly Archbishop Luis Chávez y Gonzalez. Monsignor Chávez had been deeply influenced by the Second Vatican Council and was implementing progressive reforms in pastoral work throughout the Archdiocese. Many of these reforms—particularly lay leadership of catechists and delegates of the Word—troubled Romero who was then a doctrinal and social conservative and a staunch supporter of hierarchical authority. Indeed, Jesuit biographer describes the Romero of 1970 as: “Strong-willed and seemingly born to lead; yet he submitted unquestioningly to a structure that encourages conformity.” Romero diligently carried out the duties assigned to him by Archbishop Chávez but he was not comfortable with several of the programs. It was with some relief that he left the archdiocese in 1974 to become Bishop of Santiago de Maria, which includes his hometown, Ciudad Barrios.

Bishop Romero’s hopes of escaping socio-political controversy were short lived. Popular resistance to economic and political oppression was growing as rapidly in Romero’s diocese as in any other part of El Salvador. Although a few farm workers and laborers saw armed revolution as the only viable recourse, the vast majority turned to the social teachings of the Church. Thousands joined Basic Ecclesial Communities (also known as Small Christian Communities) that sought to reform their society in the light of the Gospels.

The so-called “fourteen families” of the aristocracy termed all such activities “Marxist” and ordered the military to shoot strikers, union organizers, and human rights activists, especially teachers, nuns, and priests. The army’s efforts were supplemented by mercenary death-squads who roamed the

countryside killing, raping, and torturing with impunity, and then collecting cash bounties on each man, woman, or child they victimized.

Romero strenuously denounced violence against people who had “...taken to the streets in orderly fashion to petition for justice and liberty,” just as he had denounced “...the mysticism of violence” being preached by the true revolutionaries.

His words were not heeded. On June 21, 1975, Salvadoran National Guardsmen hacked five *campesinos* to death in the tiny village of Tres Calles. Romero rushed to the site to console the families and to offer mass. Despite his lifelong determination to keep Church and politics completely separate, he denounced the attack as, “a grim violation of human rights.” That same day he wrote a letter of protest to Col. Arturo Armando Molina, head of the military dictatorship ruling the nation, and denounced the attack to the local National Guard commander personally. The commander pointed his finger at the bishop and replied: “cassocks are not bulletproof.” This was the first death threat directed at Romero, but it would be far from the last.

During his two years as Bishop of Santiago de Maria Romero crisscrossed his diocese on horseback, talking with laboring families to learn how he could best serve them. The reality of their lives horrified the bishop. Every day he discovered children dying because their parents could not pay for simple penicillin; people who were paid less than half of the legal minimum wage; people who had been savagely beaten for “insolence” after they asked for long overdue pay. Romero began using the resources of the diocese—and his own personal resources—to help the poor, but he knew that simple charity was not enough. He wrote in his diary:

“The world of the poor teaches us that liberation will arrive only when the poor are not simply on the receiving end of handouts from government or from churches, but when they themselves are the masters and protagonists of their own struggle for liberation.”

Similarly, in a pastoral letter released in November 1976, he reflected on the plight of the thousands of coffee plantation workers in his diocese:

“The Church must cry out by command of God: ‘God has meant the earth and all it contains for the use of the whole human race. Created wealth should reach all in just form, under the aegis of justice and accompanied by charity...’ It saddens and concerns us to see the selfishness with which means and dispositions are found to nullify the just wage of the harvesters. How we would wish that the joy of this rain of rubies and all the harvests of the earth would not be darkened by the tragic sentence of the Bible: ‘Behold, the day wage of laborers that cut your fields defrauded by you is crying out, and the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord’ [James 5:4]”

Nevertheless, many regarded Romero as a conservative, both in his viewpoint and his practices, especially in comparison to the Archbishop Luis Chávez, who had reached mandatory retirement age. The government, the military, and the aristocracy were delighted to see the staunch defender of God-given human rights replaced by the “safely orthodox” Oscar Romero. Conversely, progressive pastoral leaders were hoping the Vatican would choose Bishop Arturo Rivera Damas instead of Romero, whom they remembered as a harsh critic of their liberation theology initiative. Clearly, both sides of the ideological spectrum had underestimated the scope of Romero’s now-famous “conversion.”

As Oscar Romero was being installed as Archbishop of San Salvador, El Salvador was on the brink of civil war. The murder of *campesinos* was so common that it scarcely attracted attention from anyone except their families. General Carlos Humberto Romero (no relation) proclaimed himself President of El Salvador following a blatantly fraudulent election. Eight days later, scores of people were killed when the police opened fire on thousands of demonstrators protesting election corruption. That same month, three foreign priests were beaten and expelled from the country, and a Salvadoran priest was abducted, beaten nearly to death, and thrown through the doors of the chancery.

On March 12, 1977 a death squad ambushed Fr. Rutilio Grande, SJ along a road from Aguilares to El Paisnal, killing also the old man and young boy who were giving Fr. Grande a ride to the rural church where he planned to celebrate mass. Soon after, death squads killed another archdiocesan priest, Fr. Alfonso Navarro. Romero rushed to El Paisnal and offered mass in the house where Rutilio

and the two *campesinos* had been carried. Romero was deeply saddened by the brutal murder of his friend and trusted aide, but he was also profoundly moved by the sugar-cane workers' testimony to Fr. Grande's works on their behalf and by their faith that Jesus would send them a new champion. Romero's diaries clearly show that he believed he had been called once again.

Two days later in a mass at San Salvador Cathedral, celebrated by 100 priests before an immense crowd in the plaza, Romero called Grande and his two companions "...co-workers in Christian liberation" and he declared,

"the government should not consider a priest who takes a stand for social justice as a politician, or a subversive element, when he is fulfilling his mission in the politics of the common good."

Romero twice demanded that the President of El Salvador thoroughly investigate the murders. The government's failure to offer more than lip-service condolences reinforced the archbishop's growing conviction that the right-wing government was in collusion with the aristocrats who killed for personal gain. Realizing that his traditional reluctance to speak out on political matters had been a passive endorsement of repression and corruption. He notified the president that representatives of the archdiocese would no longer appear with government leaders at public ceremonies.

He also made the controversial decision to cancel masses throughout the entire country the following Sunday, except for the one on the steps of the cathedral, to which the faithful of all parishes were invited. More than 100,000 people attended. The event drew sharp criticism from the government, the military, and some factions within the Church, but it united the population and it clearly announced Romero's belated acceptance of Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez' dictum, "to know God is to do justice."

A cornerstone of his efforts to "do justice" was his establishment of a permanent archdiocesan commission to find truth in a country governed by lies and to incontrovertibly document human rights abuses. When he visited the Vatican in 1979, Archbishop Romero presented the Pope with seven detailed reports of institutionalized murder, torture, and kidnapping throughout El Salvador.

He also wrote to President Jimmy Carter, appealing to him as a fellow Christian, to stop sending military aid to the Salvadoran government. His letter went unheeded. President Carter suspended aid in 1980, after the murders of four churchwomen, but President Reagan resumed and greatly increased aid to the Salvadoran government. In all, US aid averaged \$1.5 million per day for twelve years.

Romero's pleas for international intervention were ignored. To his dismay, so were his calls for solidarity with his fellow bishops, all but one of whom turned their backs on him. He continued to plead for an end to oppression, for reform of the nation's deeply institutionalized structures of social and economic injustice, and for simple Christian decency. The rightists' only response was an increase in the death threats against Romero and fire-bombings of the archdiocese's newspaper and radio stations.

Four more priests were assassinated in 1979, along with many hundreds of catechists and delegates of the Word. The peasant death toll exceeded 3,000 per month.

In all, at least 75,000 - 80,000 Salvadorans would be slaughtered; 300,000 would disappear and never be seen again; a million would flee their homeland; and an additional million would become homeless fugitives, constantly fleeing the military and police. All of this occurred in a nation of only 5.5 million people.

Romero had nothing left to offer his people except faith and hope. He continued to use his nationally broadcast Sunday sermons to report on conditions throughout the nation, to reassert the Church's prophetic and pastoral roles in the face of horrendous persecution, to promise his listeners that good would eventually come from evil and that they would not suffer and die in vain.

On March 23, 1980, after reporting the previous week's deaths and disappearances, Romero began to speak directly to rank-and-file soldiers and policemen:

“Brothers, you are from the same people; you kill your fellow peasants...No soldier is obliged to obey an order that is contrary to the will of God...In the name of God, in the name of this suffering people, I

ask you—I implore you—I command you in the name of God: stop the repression!”

The following evening, while performing a funeral mass in the Chapel of Divine Providence Hospital, Archbishop Oscar Romero was shot to death by a paid assassin.

Only moments before his death, he had reminded the mourners of the parable of wheat. His prophetic words:

“Those who surrender to the service of the poor through love of Christ will live like the grain of wheat that dies...The harvest comes because of the grain that dies...We know that every effort to improve society, above all when society is so full of injustice and sin, is an effort that God blesses, that God wants, that God demands of us.”

More than 50,000 people gathered in the square outside San Salvador Cathedral to pay their last respects to Archbishop Romero on March 30, 1980. As they waved palm fronds and sang, “You are the God of the Poor,” a series of small bombs were hurled into the crowd of mourners, apparently from the windows or balcony of the National Palace, which overlooks the Cathedral plaza, and cars on all four corners of the square exploded into flames. The blasts were followed by rapid volleys of gunfire that seemed to come from all four sides. Many witnesses saw army sharpshooters, dressed in civilian clothing, firing from the roof and balcony of the National Palace.

An estimated 7,000 people took sanctuary inside the cathedral, which normally holds no more than 3,000. Many others were crushed against the security fence and closed gates that were intended to provide security for the funeral mass.

Cardinal Ernesto Corripio Ahumado, representative of Pope John Paul II at the funeral, was delivering his tribute to Archbishop Romero when the first bomb exploded. The service was immediately postponed as clerics tried in vain to calm the panicked crowd. As gunfire continued outside the cathedral, Romero’s body was buried in a crypt below the sanctuary.

The attack left 40 mourners dead and hundreds seriously wounded.

In an eyewitness account published in the March 31, 1980 *Washington Post*, Christopher Dickey wrote, prophetically:

“A highly popular and controversial figure and outspoken critic of the military that has long dominated this Central American nation, Romero was looked upon as one of the few people who could keep the violence-ridden society from plunging into all-out civil war.”

Soon after Romero’s death, El Salvador was plunged into a full-blown civil war which lasted for twelve years. The United Nations Truth Commission called the war “genocidal”—a war that claimed more than 75,000 lives, if one accepts the Salvadoran government’s numbers, or more than three times that number if we accept the findings of most international investigating agencies.