

Romeronews

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Saint Oscar Romero

Rutilio Grande

Cosme Spessotto



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The coronavirus pandemic has had an enormous and tragic impact on the lives of people across the whole world. The global lockdown in March meant that the celebration events planned for the 40th Anniversary of Archbishop Romero's martyrdom had to be cancelled. We hope it will be possible to hold the "anniversary events" in March 2021. We hope too that Edgardo Colón-Emeric, author of "Oscar Romero's Theological Vision", will accept a repeat invitation to speak at some of the following provisional events:

Saturday March 13th 11.00am

National Ecumenical Service, St Martin in the Fields Church, Trafalgar Square

Saturday March 20th

Romero Pilgrimage to Lindisfarne

Wednesday March 24th 6.00pm

Ecumenical Service
Metropolitan Cathedral, Liverpool

Saturday March 27th 12.30pm

Romero Anniversary Mass
St. George's Cathedral, Southwark

The Hour of Jesus – Our Hour

Edgardo Colón-Emeric, our invited speaker for the 2020 Romero Week events last March, was unable to travel due to COVID-19. Happily, the BBC was able to broadcast Edgardo's recorded homily on its Sunday Service from the Methodist Wesley's Chapel in London:

Grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. For a Methodist minister like myself, this feels like a homecoming, a return to the rock from which I was hewn, to quote the prophet Isaiah (cf. Is 51:1). Unfortunately, the challenging conditions under which we are currently living do not allow me to be with you in person. But I am grateful that through the wonders of modern technology I can be with you remotely, and we can be brought together as a community.

On this fifth Sunday of Lent, our journey towards Holy Week meets with an historical event, the 40th anniversary of Óscar Romero's martyrdom. On March 24, 1980, Romero was assassinated at the altar of a hospital chapel. He had just finished preaching from John 12: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and

dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." That afternoon he became the grain of wheat; he fell; he died; he bore much fruit. One of these fruits was his practice of reading the signs of the times through the Lord of history, Jesus Christ. In today's gospel lesson, we hear Jesus say that his hour has come. This morning with Romero's help, I invite us to consider the hour of Jesus as our hour, an hour of lament, hope, and witness.



Edgardo Colón-Emeric

The hour of Jesus is our hour of lament. In Psalm 130, we hear what the Bible calls a song of ascent. It is the song of a pilgrim for whom the prospect of holy days in the holy city brings no joy or security but pain and sorrow. It is a song written for our hour. "Out of depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice!" We are familiar with this voice. This is the voice of the infected patient told to wait

for treatment, the voice of the furloughed worker drowning in debt, the voice of the one whose future looked bright a few weeks ago but is now sinking in the mire where there is no foothold (cf. Ps 69:2). It is our hour of lament.

Jesus understands the hour of lament. “My soul is troubled,” he says. However, he does not ask to be saved from this hour; he came into the world for this hour, for our hour of lament. Romero learned from Jesus that this hour is a strange gift. Lament helps us see and name the truth about this world and about God.

During his time as archbishop Romero lived at a hospice for people dying from cancer. He frequently invited people to visit the centre, to lament alongside the sick and the dying, to experience that truth for themselves. It was both home and Gethsemane, a lonely place where he encountered God in the bodies of his suffering neighbours. All his homilies were prepared at this little hospital. It was there that his final homily was preached. It was there that he learned to wait for the Lord. This leads me to my second point. We are not left in the hour of lament, we

are not left waiting, but through our waiting we come to the hour of hope.

The hour of Jesus is our hour of hope. In the Gospel reading, we hear that the hour of the cross is also the hour of glory. Like the grain of wheat, Jesus will die, but he will bear fruit. He is exalted by falling. He hopes to lose because what history calls failure he calls doing his Father’s will. Jesus redefines hope. Hope in difficult times does not grow by downplaying the seriousness of the situation. Hope is not optimism; it is not found by looking on the bright side. Hope is found in God, for with him is great power to redeem.

In his final homily, moments before the fatal bullet was fired, Romero spoke of hope. He preached of the final hopes Christians hold in their hearts: the resurrection of the dead, the kingdom of God, the harvest of justice and peace awaiting God’s people, the transfiguration of all things in Christ. He also preached of more immediate hopes: an equitable society for all starting with the poor, an end to the state of emergency, a peaceful resolution to the political polarisation. He believed that heavenly hopes strengthen and purify

historical hopes. The good seeds that we plant on earth can sprout here and blossom in heaven. What matters is not the size of the seed but God.

Sara Meardi de Pinto, the woman Romero was eulogising on March 24, 1980, was an ordinary person. She was not on the frontline of the struggle for justice, her health did not allow it, but she too made a positive contribution during the time of national crisis: her understanding presence, an encouraging word, and above all her prayers, the great interpreter of hope. Our hour of hope is our hour of prayer. Prayer can turn a kitchen into an altar, a quarantine into a Lenten pilgrimage, a hospital room into an Upper Room, and an ordinary person into a witness. This leads me to my final thought on our present hour, we are called to bear witness.

The hour of Jesus is our hour of witness. In the Gospel reading, when Jesus learns that some Greeks were looking for him, he knows that his hour has come, the hour when he will draw all peoples to himself. The hour of his crucifixion under

Pontius Pilate is the hour of his manifestation to humanity. The inscription on the cross, written in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, is only the beginning. All nations will look for him and they will find him through his servants, through witnesses like Philip, Andrew, and Romero.



Mural by Salvadoran artist Madjer Linares

During his time as archbishop, Romero's homilies were broadcast on the radio. It is said that on a Sunday morning you could walk the streets of any town in El Salvador without missing a word of his sermons because every home radio was tuned in to the live broadcast. One word sums up the content of his preaching, the

truth. On one occasion, an airport employee unloading the archbishop's bag from the plane was overheard saying: "There goes the truth." It is because he preached the truth of the national crisis that people flocked to the cathedral in unheard of numbers and enthusiastically listened to sermons pushing the two-hour mark.

It is because he preached the truth of God's love for the outcast that those in power considered his preaching a threat. They jammed the radio signal, blew up transmission towers, and murdered him. Romero knew this was coming. He said, "All who preach Christ are voice, but the voice passes away, preachers die...only the Word remains."

The hour of Jesus is our hour of witness. The Word who is Christ remains in the voice of his witnesses. It sounds like the voice of the nurse who risks infection and burnout for the sake of caring for the sick. It sounds like the voice of a young person risking loneliness and depression for the sake of protecting others from becoming sick. It sounds like the voice of Romero saying, "God's best microphone is

Christ, and Christ's best microphone is the church, and all of you are the church."

The hour of Jesus is our hour of lament, hope, and witness. The world has COVID-19, but the church is not closed for business. God's best microphone, Christ, is still speaking. And Christ's best microphone, you, the church is still transmitting.

Prayers for Romero Week

Throughout Romero week the Prayer for the Day on BBC Radio 4 was delivered by Fr. Jim O'Keefe. In the following extracts he reflects on two of Saint Oscar's closest collaborators.

In the summer of 1987, I visited El Salvador with some members of staff from CAFOD, the Catholic Church's Development Agency. We were there to support CAFOD partners working with returning displaced people and refugees. We met some amazing people. One was **María Julia Hernández.**

María Julia led the legal team of Archbishop Oscar Romero who was shot 40 years ago this week while celebrating an evening mass. María Julia took us on a two-hour trip into the mountains to the

town of Chalatenango. We were stopped on many occasions by soldiers who wanted to know who we were and where we were going. She was utterly fearless in dealing with the brash young soldiers, explaining that everyone with her was a priest or a nun – much to the amazement of the two married men and two unmarried women with us.



María Julia Hernández

One of the things she did as Oscar Romero's legal advisor was to provide him with the names of people who had been 'disappeared', taken without notice, tortured and killed and their bodies dumped somewhere to warn others. The Archbishop would read out the names of these people during his Sunday homilies,

broadcast on the Church radio station, so that everyone knew what was going on. In reciting these names, Romero was telling the truth to the whole nation.

At a later meeting I asked María Julia about her favourite line in the Gospel. She simply said: 'Joseph of Arimathea went to Pilate to recover the body of Jesus to bury it'. When I asked why, she said: 'Because I do that many times a week'.

God, help us see the face of your son in the poorest person we will meet today.

Amen



Monsignor Ricardo Urioste died just over 4 years ago. He had been the Vicar General – a chief advisor – to Saint Oscar Romero until the Archbishop was murdered 40 years ago this week. I met him in August 1987 when he was negotiating the return of refugees to El Salvador. The day I met him he had been

standing in the middle of a river helping people to cross it and he began to weep when he recalled the bodies of very young children floating past him and he muttered: 'Since when have babies been the problem in our country?'



Monsignor Ricardo Urioste

I met him again in 2012. He had aged very well and this time I asked him what he was on, before asking him what had driven St Oscar Romero to live the way he did. He said three things: 'Romero was a man of deep prayer and reflection, he had a vision of the world in which all were respected and treated equally and he spent a great deal of time with the poor.'

I then asked him what his favourite line was in the Gospels and he said: 'The story of the rich man and the poor man, Lazarus. The rich man did not go to hell because he was rich, he went to hell

because he did not even see and was not personally touched by the state of the poor man.' He went on to say that compassion is that feeling in our guts that compels us to do something for someone. He feared that it was a virtue sadly lacking in our world today.

God, grant us the gift and virtue of compassion so that we too can make a difference in the world we live in. Amen.



Rutilio Grande

Joe Owens SJ reviews a new biography of his fellow Jesuit Rutilio Grande who was confirmed by Pope Francis as a martyr "in odium fidei".

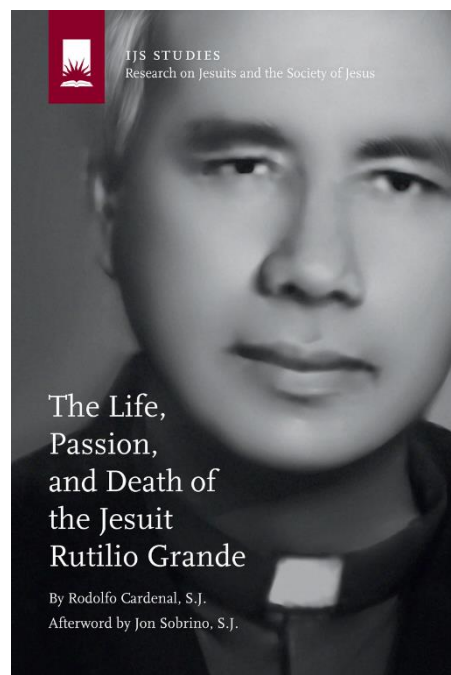
Clericalism has been described by Pope Francis as a "perversion of the Church," and he has not been sparing of priests and bishops who want to keep tight control over everything, allowing little or no active role to the laity. "Clericalism,"

says the pope, “gradually extinguishes the prophetic flame to which the entire Church is called to bear witness.” In his youth Rutilio Grande would have seemed the ideal candidate for the traditional clerical career.

He was born in 1928 in a rural town of El Salvador, a country where the Catholic clergy exercised enormous influence. With a naturally religious temperament, Rutilio was from an early age involved in the devotions and activities of his parish. When only twelve years old he entered the minor seminary in the capital, San Salvador, and five years later he entered the Jesuit novitiate.

Rutilio spent most of the first forty years of his life either as a seminary student or as a seminary teacher. That would seem to be a perfect recipe for producing a hopelessly “clericalised” priest, but Rutilio did not allow himself to be ensnared by that tendency. His fidelity to the radical message of the Gospel and his solidarity with the poor workers and farmers of the countryside stirred in him the “prophetic flame” of which Pope Francis speaks.

The Life, Passion, and Death of the Jesuit Rutilio Grande is the soon-to-be-published biography, written by Jesuit historian Rodolfo Cardenal, who himself narrowly escaped being murdered along with the Jesuit martyrs of the UCA in 1989. In this revised and expanded version of an earlier work, Cardenal gives the reader a privileged view of how a young Salvadoran developed over the years, from being a psychologically fragile seminarian to being a fearless defender of the rights of the oppressed. Ordained a priest in 1960, Rutilio welcomed the changes in the Church that came with the Second Vatican Council. After spending a year at the



famous Lumen Vitae International Centre in Brussels, he returned to El Salvador, where he helped to prepare scores of young priests to be servant leaders rather than clerical lords. A few years

later he attended a course at the Latin American Pastoral Institute in Ecuador, where he studied the emerging currents of liberation theology and learned of the importance of Christian base communities.

The decade of the 1970s was a turbulent period in El Salvador. As the poor majority became increasingly restive and began to organize resistance, the military governments reacted with murderous cruelty against any sign of opposition. In 1972 Rutilio helped to organize a team of Jesuits to work in the parish of Aguilares, where most of the people were either impoverished farmers working on steep hillsides or exploited workers labouring on vast plantations owned by others.

The clash was inevitable. The awakened parishioners, primed on the Gospel, had learned the meaning of liberation, but they were perceived as nothing but dangerous rebels by the government forces and the callous landowners. The parish did its best to lead the people along the paths of non-violence, but the situation was spinning quickly out of control.

In the midst of this explosive situation, Rutilio Grande called on the powerful to stop plundering the poor, and he encouraged the people to defend their God-given rights—until one day when, driving out to celebrate Mass in a nearby town, he was gunned down by assassins. Killed with Rutilio were his faithful assistant, 70-year-old Manuel, and a young lad, 15-year-old Nelson. The murder occurred less than a month after Óscar Arnulfo Romero was made archbishop of San Salvador, and it gave Romero deep insight into the prophetic stance he himself would have to take in speaking to the Salvadoran nation. In February Pope Francis approved the beatification of Rutilio and his two companions, with the date still to be set. Reading this carefully researched volume would be a fine way to prepare for the event.



Cosme Spessotto OFM

Julian Filochowski introduces us to a less well-known martyr of El Salvador.

In May this year, just three weeks before the 40th anniversary of his 1980 assassination in El Salvador, the Italian Franciscan missionary priest, Cosme Spessotto, was declared a martyr by Pope Francis - killed 'out of hatred of the faith'. A month earlier Pope Francis had given the same verdict on the 1977 killing of the Jesuit, Rutilio Grande. Covid19 permitting, it is anticipated they will both be beatified in El Salvador in 2021, either in a single ceremony (if Pope Francis can be persuaded to travel to Central America) or otherwise on consecutive days in their respective dioceses. Cosme Spessotto was born in 1923. He joined the Order of Friars Minor of the Venice region and was ordained in 1948. He had hoped to serve in China but, after the expulsion of Catholic missionaries, that dream became impossible. In 1950 he was sent to El Salvador. For 27 years he served as parish priest of San Juan Nonualco in the diocese of San Vicente.

By all accounts he was an orthodox, rather traditional, prayerful Friar – the very best of his vintage. Cosme was a zealous pastor. With social welfare and community development programmes he supported his parishioners living in poverty and he humbly and courageously sought to protect their dignity. He travelled in a rickety jeep back and forth across his parish of 17,000 inhabitants. It comprised 6 urban districts, 12 rural villages and 8 hilltop hamlets. Like so many Italian missionaries before him (contemporary Michelangelos!), he completely rebuilt the parish church and added a parish primary school alongside. I think Cosme Spessotto might be described as a pastoral workaholic!



A procession in honour of Fr. Cosme

Alongside his lengthy routines of prayer and meditation, everyone speaks of his personal interest in the cultivation of

vines around the porch and garden of the parish house. Brought from home in Italy, he tended them with scrupulous care, eventually producing grapes which were something unknown in San Juan Nonualco - and he delighted in handing them out to his young parishioners and occasionally making red wine. The vines planted by Cosme survive to this day.

Liberation theology and the popular movements which came in its wake demanding social justice and fundamental political reforms did not form part of Cosme's ministry. In the years of extraordinary repressive violence in El Salvador, in the late 1970s, he stood by his people, amidst the avalanche of ideological tensions, the divisions and polarisation in the communities. Yet he never took sides.

He was determined that neither the supporters of the right-wing military regime nor those of the radical organisations of the left should take advantage of the Parish Church to propagandise. He regularly denounced the abuses of the security forces against his parishioners, drew up witness reports

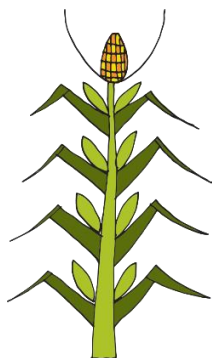
of killings and massacres, recovered the corpses they dumped in the ditches, and defended young people summarily labelled as subversive and liable to be captured and killed. At the same time, early in 1980, he sought to dissuade a group of young parishioners who planned to join the guerrilla movements. Cosme was certainly no leftist subversive hiding under a Friar's habit. He nevertheless received several death threats in the months leading up to his martyrdom. But they did not embitter him.

Dialogue, discernment and reconciliation were his watchwords and were the road to peace that he continually advocated and prayed for. He hated division and confrontation. When the notorious bishop of San Vicente, Arnaldo Aparicio, instructed his clergy to set up Parish Patrols, armed with sticks and clubs, to defend church premises from illegal incursions and occupations, Cosme saw it as a thoroughly ill-judged demand that would only heighten the tension and accelerate the polarisation in the parish. It was the antithesis of the dialogue and discernment process he promoted - and he refused to comply!

On 14th June 1980 as Cosme Spessotto knelt in prayer in front of the altar two men entered the church and shot him at point blank range. The bullet holes are still visible in the church which has become a beautiful shrine to Nonualco's Franciscan martyr. He was a faithful soldier of Jesus Christ who suffered and died fulfilling his pastoral mission – upholding the dignity of his people and protecting them.

After his death this note was found among his possessions:

"I have a feeling that at one time or another fanatical persons can take away my life. I ask the Lord that at the opportune moment he give me the strength to defend the rights of Christ and his Church. To die a martyr would be a grace I don't deserve. To wash away with the blood, poured out by Christ, all my sins, defects, and weaknesses of my past life would be a gracious and gratuitous gift of God."



Remembering a Bishop



Thomas Quigley spent several decades working as the Latin American advisor the International Justice and Peace Office of the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops. This article was first published by "The Witness" in September 1980. It merits a new audience for Romero's 40th anniversary.

A more unassuming international figure one could hardly imagine. He was not just humble, though he was certainly that, but genuinely shy. The first time I met him, in the spring of 1977, he had been archbishop of one of the world's most turbulent cities for less than half a year. Two of his priests, including one of his dearest friends, Rutilio Grande, a former student of his, had recently been assassinated by government thugs. The entire Jesuit community in the country was under threat of extermination by the White Warriors Union. World attention was focused on El Salvador and on the new, surprisingly outspoken archbishop, Óscar Arnulfo Romero.

We entered a room in the section of the seminary that houses the offices of the archdiocese, Jorge Lara-Braud of the U.S. National Council of Churches and I, two foreigners come to see what we could do. Some 20 others sat around the big oval table with us, the recently formed Emergency Committee that was then meeting regularly to discuss the crisis in El Salvador. There were diocesan and Jesuit priests, sisters, lay men and women, the auxiliary bishop, Rivera Damas, and, somewhere among them, Monseñor.

Everybody called him just that — Monseñor. Not a title really, more an affectionate, deeply loving nickname. Dad. Poppa. Monseñor. Even though every bishop in Spanish America is called that, in El Salvador when they say “Monseñor always did this” and “Monseñor said that,” now even after his death, they mean only Óscar Romero.

Everybody spoke at the meeting; people had reports, analyses, conclusions. Jorge and I had our pieces to say. But the little man, indistinguishable from the rest except

for his cassock and simple pectoral cross, listened, smiled gently, and only at the end said a few words. Mostly words of gratitude for our coming, of hope we would have a fruitful visit and, finally, of regret that he could not then — though he would like eventually to do so — accept our invitation to visit the United States. He said he had to stay with his people.

Two years later he did accept, and plans were set for him to address the Governing Board of the NCC and meet with U.S. Catholic bishops; but the October coup intervened, and he had to cancel. He never left El Salvador. He is still with his people.

Much is made of the “conversion” of Óscar Romero, and I believe he did go through extraordinary changes in his last three years. But it was not Saul on the Damascus road. He was a good and holy priest, conservative and traditional, as was typical both of the clerical training of the time and, more importantly, of his humble roots. When the truly ancient Archbishop Chávez y González finally retired in 1976 (he’s still serving as a parish priest in

Suchitoto) all the progressives wanted the bright young auxiliary of San Salvador, Arturo Rivera Damas, to succeed, and were crushed when Rome named Óscar Romero to the post. "It's all over," a Central American Jesuit told me then; "the Vatican doesn't know what's happening here."

But he was not Saul, nor was he a reactionary; he was a humble man of the people and nobody's fool. The U.S. Ambassador, I suppose meaning no harm, told a group in Washington last April that the Jesuits "gave the archbishop one of their crash courses." A simple *curé de campagne* in the hands of the wily Jesuits, filling him with political theories coated with the sugar of liberation theology.

An even less sensitive and intelligent former ambassador, who represented Richard Nixon's government during the massively fraudulent elections in 1972 when Napoleon Duarte won the presidency but was prevented by the military from wearing the sash, recently wrote that the archbishop's "character was as good as his judgment was bad."

The typical State Department line: Put down what you don't understand; deny what doesn't conform to your pet theory. They never did understand him, or his people. They still don't.

Monseñor was bright by anybody's standards; he was sent to Rome for advanced studies, taught in seminary, read widely, made bishop in a system that prized intelligence if not always creativity and courage. But far more, he was a leader that merited the term brilliant, a brilliant leader of the kind that calls to mind John XXIII, representative of the people who knew that leadership has to do with evoking, calling forth the wisdom that is in the people. Although we corresponded in the intervening years (he was an extraordinary communicator, writing to scores, maybe hundreds of people all over the Americas and Europe) we didn't meet again until Sunday, March 23, 1980. Five of us from the U.S. churches had gone on a hastily formed ecumenical visit to El Salvador, seeking to express the solidarity of the U.S. religious community with him and the people of his country and to learn what we could

of the current, rapidly changing situation. We were seated, Quaker, Episcopalian, Methodist and Catholic, in the sanctuary of the old ramshackle, tin-roofed wooden Basilica of the Sacred Heart. The huge, cavernous poured-concrete cathedral 10 blocks down the street, left unfinished by the previous archbishop who said “we must stop building cathedrals and start building the Church,” was unavailable; one of the popular movements had taken it over some weeks before. The basilica was packed, mostly with simple working people, families, kids on their fathers’ shoulders. The entrance hymn began and with it, applause starting at the rear and undulating up to the front as the archbishop and the priests and seminarians, vested in brilliantly coloured stoles over their albs, moved joyfully up the aisle. How to describe a triumphal procession when there wasn’t a trace of triumphalism anywhere? The applause was thunderous, shaking the corrugated roof, teasing tears out of the most non-liturgical of our company; it was simply a pastor receiving the loving embrace of a people who saw themselves, their suffering and their

hopes, embodied in this humble figure.

It didn’t occur to me then, but it has often since, that that day, the eve of his martyrdom, was as vivid a re-creation as I could imagine of the palm-strewn path into Jerusalem.



His homily on that occasion is now famous, translated and published around the world. He told soldiers, simple peasants themselves for the most part, that they are not bound by unjust orders to kill; standard textbook theology but if applied in the concrete, usually considered treasonous. It was so described in the Monday morning paper by an Army spokesman.

The most quoted line of all was heard in its entirety only by the score of us nearest to him in the sanctuary. When he said, addressing the government, the military,

the security forces, “I ask you, I beg you” the applause was already deafening; “I order you . . .” and it was an explosion, blocking out the words everyone knew would follow: “in the name of God, stop the repression!”

But the military heard. Indeed, all Central America did, since on that day the archdiocesan radio station, YSAX, went back on the air for the first time in weeks after having been bombed out of commission.

Monseñor’s sermons were the most widely listened to programme in the entire country, and his broadcast that day, the first in weeks and the last forever, was no exception. As we recessed out of the basilica, receiving applause and smiles and handshakes we knew we had done nothing to merit, we North Americans wondered among ourselves how long it would be before some response would be made to this holy man. The radio station had been bombed immediately after the Feb. 17 homily in which he read the letter he wished to send — if the congregation would approve it — to President Carter.

The tin roof shook with approval on that Sunday and the YSAX radio station was bombed on the Monday.



If I am killed, I will rise again in my people

But we know now that his assassination was not directly tied to content of that March homily. Documents which almost certainly link former high officials of the military and international right-wing terrorist groups to the killing, show that it had been in the works for some time. The date was probably chosen because it was known in advance that the archbishop would be celebrating a sparsely-attended memorial Mass in the hospital chapel at Divine Providence on March 24 (1980), the first anniversary of the death of Sara Meardi de Pinto, mother of the editor of opposition newspaper *El Independiente*.

In a more profound sense, though, I believe that sermon was the symbolic occasion for his death. He is stirring up people; he has blasphemed against the idols of the state; it is better that one man die; what need have we of further witnesses? And Caesar, too, strutted upon this stage, unwitting and unwilling, perhaps, but present, nonetheless. If you let this man go, thou art no friend of the United States. He is spoiling the Grand Design, playing into the hands of the Marxists, the “bloodthirsty terrorists” and the “Pol Pot Left,” as the State Department, with its penchant for one-liner analysis, likes to characterise the massive peasants’ and workers’ movements. **He must be stopped.** The U.S. didn’t pull the trigger, but it helped provide the ammunition. It sought, in unprecedented ways, to pressure Monseñor, to lecture him as one might an errant schoolboy, to seek Vatican intervention to have him quieted, to put out the word — in an act of almost criminally stupid arrogance — that the information flowing daily into the *Arzobispado* from eyewitnesses all across the country was somehow less to be trusted than the intelligence

gathered by the U.S Embassy, locked behind its fortress walls and in effective communication only with the Salvadoran government.

It beggars belief, especially when successive ambassadors and State Department officials have privately acknowledged that “our intelligence on El Salvador is not very good.”

Monseñor had a simple proposition. The military and their masters, the oligarchy, had failed for half a century to bring justice and prosperity to the people; the government that took power last October only increased the repression while constructing a facade of long-overdue but, under the circumstances, impossible reforms, refusing all the while to deal with the undeniable reality of popular awakening and organization. It was time, he said, to give the people a chance, to let the now developed people’s movements, democratic and revolutionary, join with all others of good will to create a new and just society. He had no fear of the church being snuffed out in the process, any more than the peasant farmers or the urban workers or the teachers would be; they are all the

co-makers of the nation they are struggling to build. A profoundly Christian sense informs the whole process, not because some of the popular movements were in fact organised by priests, but because the people's social consciousness has grown up hand in glove with their biblical awareness that they are a holy people called to freedom.

It may take a special grace for them eventually to forgive their persecutors, especially the bungling policy-makers of the United States, but they will never forget their martyrs. El Salvador will never forget Óscar Romero. Nor should we.

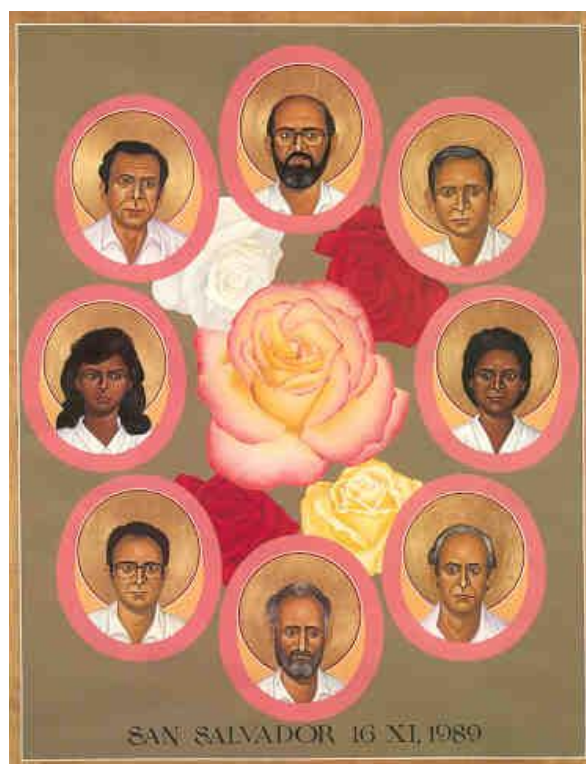
Justice for the UCA Martyrs?

In June and July the Spanish High Court in Madrid put on trial one of the suspects behind the killings of the UCA martyrs, six Jesuits and their two female co-workers, in November 1989.

Francis McDonagh reports:

The civil war in El Salvador which raged from 1980 to 1992 is estimated to have cost over 70,000 lives, mostly non-combatants. The report of the United Nations Truth Commission lists some

thirty atrocities during conflict. One of these was the massacre of six Jesuits and two women at the Jesuit University (UCA) in November 1989. In 1991 two junior members of El Salvador's military were convicted of the killings but were released 15 months later under an amnesty. No senior officer who ordered the killings has been brought to justice.



In November 2008, a new case was filed, this time in Spain, by the Spanish Association for Human Rights (APDHE) and the San Francisco-based Center for Justice and Accountability (CJA), taking advantage of the fact that five of the Jesuits held Spanish nationality. El Salvador refuses to extradite any suspects, but one of those allegedly

involved, Inocente Orlando Montano, former colonel and former deputy public security minister of El Salvador, was extradited from the United States, where he was serving a sentence for immigration fraud. Nine sessions of hearings took place in Madrid before a division of the Spanish High Court, in June and July 2020.

In a commentary as the trial opened, the Central American Jesuits and the UCA issued a statement saying: "The pain caused by a crime is not healed by allowing it to be forgotten, but by the recognition of the truth, repentance and the restoration of the victims' dignity. This is the path of Christian forgiveness. The Society of Jesus and the authorities of the UCA have expressed their readiness to forgive those who planned and carried out this horrendous crime. Nevertheless, it is necessary that the whole truth should be known, and the various responsibilities elucidated, *which is the task of the courts*, so that forgiveness can afterwards be offered." They conclude: "Knowing the truth of what happened in this and other cases will be a benefit for El Salvador, will contribute to justice for the victims, will be

a huge step in the process of reconciliation and will bring peace to the killers themselves."

"I had nothing to do with the military, my responsibilities were limited to the police security forces," was the implausible assertion of Montano, as he began his evidence on Tuesday 10 June. Montano nevertheless agreed that he had been a member of the army year group known as *la tandona*, the "class of 1966", whose members ended up in the senior posts of El Salvador's General Staff.



Montano (pictured) insisted he had nothing against Fr Ellacuría, the slain Vice-Chancellor of the

UCA, claiming he had good relations with Salvadoran President Alfredo Cristiani and also good contacts with the FMLN guerrillas. The court heard Montano recycle lurid fantasies about the Jesuits that circulated in the 1980s among the Salvadoran military. He claimed that the Jesuits had orchestrated the 1979 coup that overthrew the then military regime of General Francisco Romero and claimed that there were photos and videos showing the theologian Jon Sobrino

“training 10 or 12-year old boys to use AK47 machine guns” a claim denounced as totally false by the Jesuits. According to the UN Truth Commission, on the night before the murders Montano attended a meeting with the Chief of the General Staff, Emilio Ponce, which gave orders to kill Fr Ellacuría and leave no witnesses.

Some of the most moving evidence came from Lucía Barrera and her husband Jorge Cerna. Lucía did cleaning for the Jesuits at the UCA and the provincial house. Because of the guerrilla offensive, they felt unable to stay in their house in Soyapango on the other side of the city, and Lucía asked Fr Martín-Baró if he could put them and their four-year old daughter up at the UCA, and he agreed. In the middle of the night of the 15/16 November they were awakened by the sound of shooting. Lucía went to a window and saw soldiers. When the soldiers left she ventured out and saw the bodies of the Jesuits. She ran to the provincial house and told the provincial, Fr José-María Tojeira. The Jesuits then took the family to the Spanish embassy, where they gave a statement. They were later moved to the French embassy,

where there was greater security. The Jesuits advised them to leave El Salvador for their own safety, and a French minister arranged for them to be taken on a French military aircraft to Miami. On the flight they were intercepted by Richard Chichester, a legal officer of the US Embassy in El Salvador. When they reached Miami Chichester diverted them from the Jesuits who had come to meet them and handed them over to the FBI, who subjected them to bullying and hectoring, and succeeded in getting them to withdraw their original statement.

On Thursday 9 July the court heard from Fr José María Tojeira, at the time of the murders Jesuit provincial in Central America, and also a former Vice-Chancellor of the UCA. Fr Tojeira said: “We forgave the murderers right from the start. We are Jesuits. We have faith in the person of Jesus Christ, and it’s that attitude: “Father forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.”

On Wednesday 15 July, the last day of his trial in Madrid, Inocente Orlando Montano devoted most of his closing remarks to defending his fellow officers in senior positions in the Salvadoran army.

Having previously exercised his right not to be questioned by the prosecution, he asserted his right to have the last word. He attacked the report of the United Nations Truth Commission, part of the terms of the peace accords that ended the civil war. The report, Montano said, has been written “by our enemies, the political advisers in the UCA”.

The former minister claimed the evidence of the experts on behalf of the Jesuits’ families had been “a stream of lies”. He insisted that there was no “preconceived plan or intention or desire to murder the fathers. It was a very big mistake made by the soldiers. I deny any responsibility on the part of the high command. I deny all responsibility on the part of those of us who were mentioned by the Truth Commission report. The report was written in the UCA, nowhere else. There is nothing against me in the records of the courts in El Salvador.”

As he ended his address, Montano turned to counsel for the family of Ignacio Martín-Baró to offer – he struggled for the word – his condolences. A verdict is expected in late summer.

This article is a revised and abridged version of reports that first appeared in The Tablet.

Bukele’s First Year

On 1st July President Nayib Bukele completed his first year of office. Bukele, a maverick millennial populist with a penchant for communicating via social media was elected President by promising to end the political polarisation between left and right and putting an end to gang violence. His previous political experience was as FMLN Mayor of San Salvador, but he split with the party and launched his presidential campaign with the support of minority parties.

Whilst he remains popular with much of the electorate because of the hard-line repression of gangs and a reduction in the number of killings, the rest of his mandate has not been quite so successful.

In a critical review of Bukele’s performance, the Jesuit University (UCA) points to the growing authoritarian tendencies of the President, his chaotic response to the Coronavirus pandemic, including draconian repressive measures to enforce quarantine, lack of delivery on any of the promised reforms of the health

sector and economic reactivation. The impact of COVID-19 has caused the virtual collapse of the deeply flawed health system.

Bukele has scrapped the protection plans of previous governments, leaving the poor more vulnerable. He constantly criticises and attacks opposition parties and challenges the oversight powers of the legislative assembly, refuses to submit to audits of expenditure, amidst accusations of excessive spending and corruption.

The UCA concludes “The harsh reality of the country, which beats down and excludes so many of our people, has worsened in some key dimensions. What is new is an extremely populist and aggressive president, who tries to get people fired up and polarise the country even more for his own benefit.”

St. Oscar Romero High School

Chatsmore Catholic High School at Goring-by-Sea in Sussex will become St Oscar Romero Catholic School from September 1st 2020. It is an 11-16 mixed

school of approximately 750 students. To inaugurate this new identity ceremonies have been organised in the school on Thursday September 10th, including a special Mass celebrated by Arundel and Brighton’s bishop, Richard Moth. Although there are multi-school academy trusts in Coventry and Salford which have taken Romero’s name, this is the first school in Britain embracing Oscar Romero as its Patron Saint.



*Headteacher
Peter Byrne with
the bust of Saint
Oscar Romero,
who will be
inaugurated as the
school's new
patron in
September.*

On the School’s behalf the Romero Trust persuaded sculptor Lado Goudjabidze to cast a further resin copy of his bust of Archbishop Romero which was shipped from California and will be placed in the School Chapel. The original bust stands on the front of Romero’s little bungalow in San Salvador and a further copy forms part of the Romero shrine in St George’s Cathedral in Southwark.

Papal Honours

On February 11th in a lovely, low-key ceremony led by Archbishop Wilson of Southwark, two members of the Romero Trust were installed into the Pontifical Order of St Sylvester. Madge Rondo – the Trust’s membership secretary and Stephen Lloyd, our treasurer, were honoured with the insignia of Dame and Knight respectively, in recognition of a lifetime of dedicated service working for human development and social justice, with CAFOD and the Romero Trust.



Stephen Lloyd and Madge Rondo raise a glass after their investiture at Archbishop's House

Father Thomas Greenan RIP

The COVID-19 crisis has caused great sadness and loss. In May we received the sad news that Thomas Greenan, a priest of the St. Andrew's and Edinburgh

Diocese who spent many years working with the poor in El Salvador, had died aged just 64.

Tommy was inspired by the example of Oscar Romero and in 1986 he

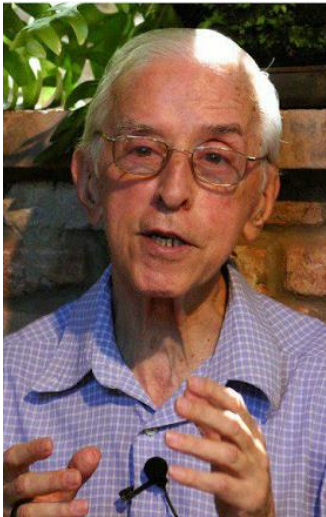


asked to be sent as a missionary to El Salvador during the civil war where he served in the conflict zone of Chalatenango and later among former refugee communities.

Tommy's book, "Archbishop Romero's Homilies – a Theological and Pastoral Analysis" was published by the Archdiocese of San Salvador before the English translation in 2018 (see Romero News Issue 22 for review). In 2010 Tommy was the guest speaker of the Romero Trust for the 30th Anniversary Lecture which he delivered in a number of locations around the UK, including London and his hometown of Edinburgh. After serving in Central America Tommy returned to Edinburgh where he died peacefully on 17th May after living with Alzheimer's for a number of years. RIP

Bishop Pere (Pedro) Casaldáliga RIP

Known in Brazil as the "bishop of the poor," retired Bishop Pedro Casaldáliga Pla, 92, died on August 8th after suffering respiratory problems arising from pneumonia.



Because of his untiring defence of the indigenous communities and of the struggle of peasants for land ownership, the retired bishop of São Félix was

revered by the poor but, like Oscar Romero, became regarded as an enemy by the rich and powerful.

"Dom Pedro" as he was known throughout Brazil was a great admirer of Oscar Romero, and just days after Romero's murder he was the first to call him "Saint Romero of America" in a poem written in his honour.

Born in Catalonia in Spain, Pere Casaldáliga arrived in Brazil as a

Claretian missionary in 1968, during the most violent period of the country's military dictatorship. Because of his actions against the dictatorship and the violence of land-grabbers, loggers, miners and large rural producers, he spent much of his life marked to die. Poet and writer, he became one of the main victims of government censorship.

Pope Francis, in his 2020 apostolic exhortation *Querida Amazonia*, quoted one of Casaldáliga's poems. "Carta de Navegante — Por el Tocantins amazónico." For his funeral Dom Pedro Casaldáliga was placed barefoot in a simple coffin covered with a patchwork shawl and a cross on his chest made by the Xavante Indians for the vigil.



In accordance with his wish, after wakes in Batatais and Ribeirão Cascalheira, he was buried on the banks of the

Araguaia River in São Félix. RIP

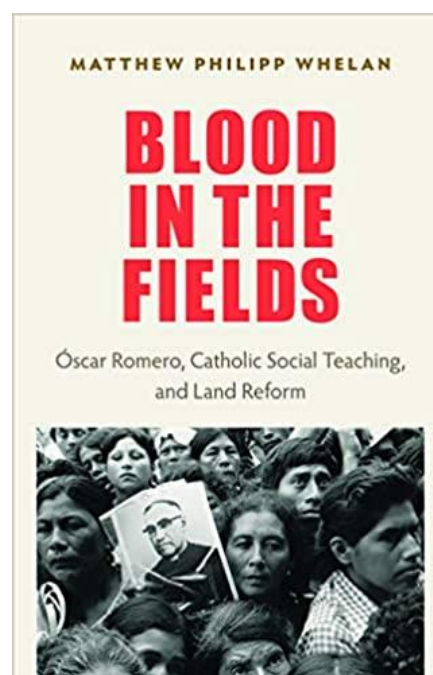
Book Review

Blood in the Fields

Romero scholar Carlos Colorado reviews a new book which explores the influence of social injustice suffered by rural workers upon the thinking of Saint Romero

In the afterglow of Archbishop Oscar Romero's October 2018 canonisation in Rome, there is a hunger for Romero scholarship to plumb the theological underpinnings of St. Romero's preaching. Matthew Philipp Whelan sets out to do that in a new book, *Blood in the Fields: Óscar Romero, Catholic Social Teaching, and Land Reform*, The Catholic University of America Press (February 14, 2020), hardcover, 336 pages.

In this new offering, which has the potential to make a significant contribution to the study of Romero and Catholic social thought, the author homes in on Romero's support for agrarian reform in El Salvador, its grounding in Catholic social thought, and its opening up a broader landscape of social justice issues for the supposedly rather conservative cleric.



Although a newcomer to book publishing, the author is no stranger to Romero scholarship. Matthew Philipp Whelan is

sort of a “next generation” Romero scholar, taking his cues on Romero's legacy as much from Pope Francis and *Laudato Sí'* as from Medellín and more traditional sources. Whelan is a fellow at Baylor University, a Christian college in Waco, Texas. It was in Honduras that Whelan was first exposed to regional agrarian issues, which resonate in Pope Francis' teaching, including the 2020 post-synodal exhortation *Querida Amazonia*, which contains language evocative of Whelan's book: “the land has blood, and it is bleeding...”.)

In a word, Whelan zeroes in on the conviction in Catholic teaching that creation is a common gift.

“Romero locates the gift of creation within the wider divine economy of salvation, which is ordered by and to common gifts, and whose telos [aim or end—‘telos’ is the root of the word teleology] is eternally sharing in God’s life. Sin is the refusal of this reality.”

In other words, for Whelan, the idea that creation is a gift is central and functions like an umbrella, whose spokes touch and move many other aspects of Romero’s magisterium. Most directly, the fact that God intends the land as common gift to all makes agrarian reform a “theological necessity” for Romero in a society in which the land is unfairly distributed.

The notion that creation is a gift negates the idea of private property as an absolute to be taken as sacred unto itself. Lord Rowan Williams spoke about this in some length in his Sermon at Evensong in Westminster Abbey for the Romero Centenary in September 2017. In Jewish and Christian Scripture, he said, “Those who are wealthy – in this world’s terms –

are those who have been given the privilege of using the things of the world for the flourishing of their neighbour.” In that sense, “liberation” is the deliverance “from the imprisoning falsehood of supposing that the world is something we can own,” said Lord Williams.

This premise—that creation is a gift—permeates and fuels Romero’s conversion or transformation from a timid cleric to an outspoken champion of human rights. Whelan notes that the idea was given emphatic voice during the Council, and in *Gaudium et Spes*. It filters into Romero’s thought and is evident in his teaching at Santiago de Maria, his first diocese in El Salvador in 1975, before he is elevated to archbishop. And Romero recognises that it is not true only for El Salvador, but that it is an ethical and theological fact which must inform also the international order.

Once he has embarked on this path, it serves as a bridge onto other issues. Romero must recognize that the activities of squatters occupying the landed estates of the wealthy are a manifestation “from below” of this theological precept—the land is a gift.

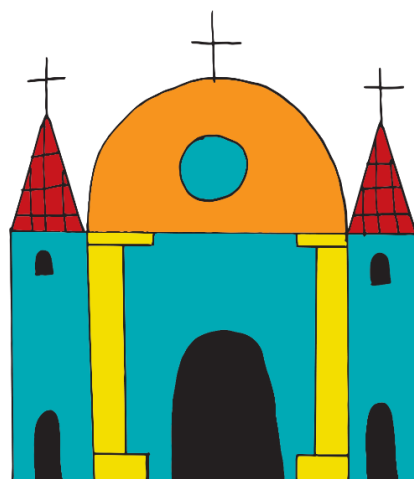
And it helps Romero to recognise social unrest no longer as the mischief of social rabble rousers, but as a symptom of the rejection of God's gift by selfish interests in society. It is akin to the dynamic of a reserved observer who comes to see the material damage occasioned by a protest march in support of 'Black Lives Matter' not as the handiwork of blameworthy looters and rioters, but as the fruit of a whole society's injustice.

Perhaps most interestingly, the theology of creation as gift shapes Romero's views about sin and violence. In the most immediate sense, Romero sees vehement opposition to calls for structural reform by himself and others as a negation of the gift. He comes to associate these obstinate views with the vice of covetousness. And he eventually considers the usurpation of lands that rightly belong to the poor as an aggravated form of "thievery". This is because the theft of land by the rich from the poor itself constitutes "violence"—it *violates* a sacred precept; but also, it warps the law into a legalism by purporting to make the poor man the "thief" when he seeks to take back the

land by becoming a squatter, and—most perniciously—it compounds the *structural violence* with *actual violence* when it resorts to repression and murder to assert the tenuous rights of the real "thieves".

Whelan unpacks his argument meticulously and methodically through five rich chapters that wind their way through Romero's notion of ordinary violence, the relevant Catholic social teaching from *Rerum Novarum*, to land reform in social doctrine, the Salvadorean social context and, finally, the relationship of these concepts to Romero's martyrdom.

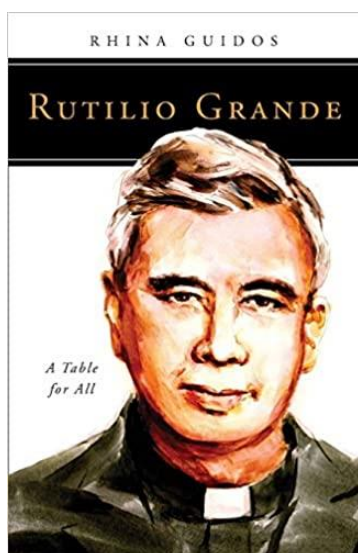
Blood in the Fields is bound to become an indispensable companion for reading—and understanding—Romero.



BOOK OFFERS

‘Rutilio Grande - A Table for All’

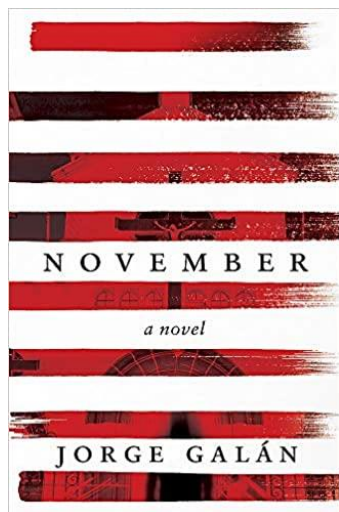
by Rhina Guidos. A short and well-



written biography which beautifully captures the life and ministry of the soon-to-be-Blessed Rutilio Grande”.

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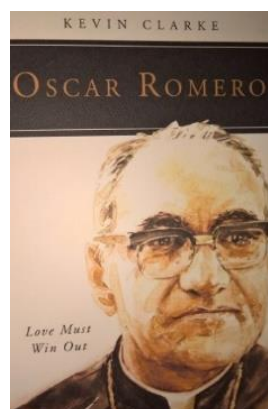


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Based on the true story, recreating the events around the assassination

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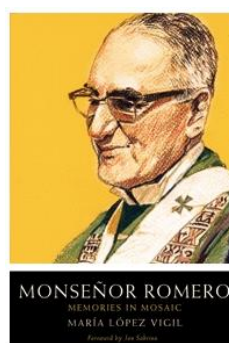
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Oscar Romero – Love Must Win Out by Kevin Clarke. An excellent and very readable short introduction to the life and times of

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Oscar Romero: Memories in Mosaic

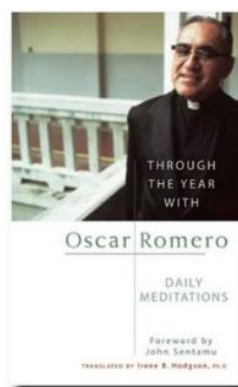
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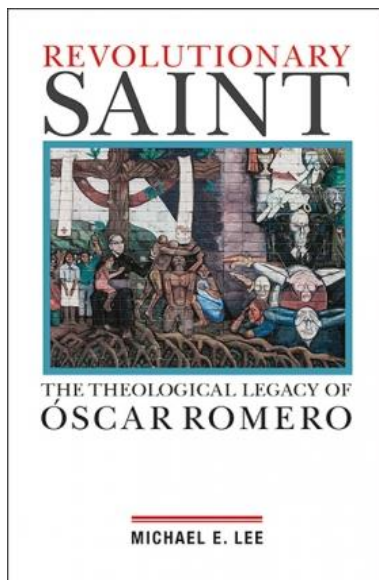
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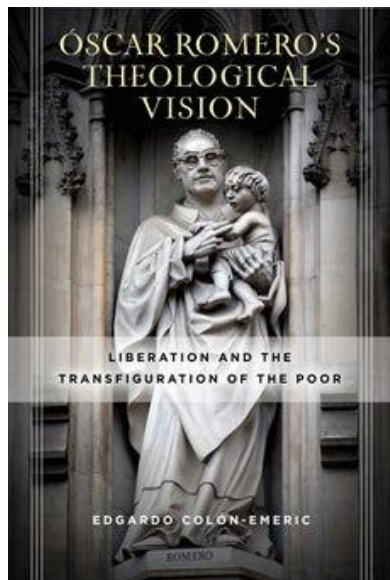
Revolutionary Saint – The theological Legacy of Oscar Romero
Michael E. Lee.
Orbis Books.

Reviewed previously here.

Highly recommended! Available in bookshops at £20: from the Romero Trust at the special price: **£13 (incl. p&p)**

Oscar Romero's Theological Vision

by Edgardo Colón-Emeric: the Romero Trust's guest speaker for 2021 Romero Week. Throughout this remarkable book the author takes us ever deeper into the



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This documentary provides an excellent overview of Romero's life and martyrdom, and the long drawn out process after his death leading to his canonisation by Pope Francis in 2018. The Romero Trust shares the view that this is the best Romero film currently available.

Find all the videos on:

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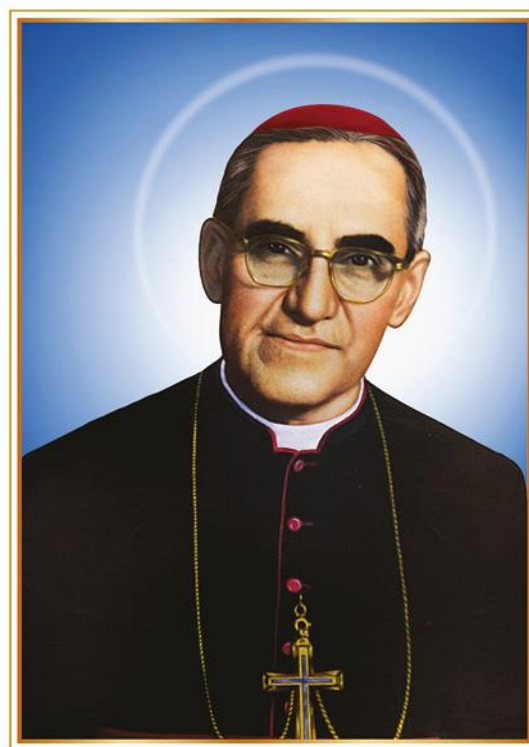
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15 August

Oscar Romero



103 años

FELIZ CUMPLEAÑOS

San Oscar Romero

"La celebración de mi cumpleaños, donde he comprendido una vez más que mi vida no me pertenece a mí, sino a ustedes"

- San Oscar Romero