

Romeronews

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El Salvador – Land of Prophets and Martyrs



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**Sunday 3rd February - 6.00pm
at**

**St Alban's Cathedral
Romero Evensong
Speaker**

Archbishop John Wilson

Romero Week 2024

**Saturday 16th March - 11.00am
National Ecumenical Service
at**

**St Martin in the Fields, London
Address delivered by
Dr Raymond Perrier**

**Director Archbishop Hurley Centre
Durban**

**Wednesday 20th March - 12.30pm
Mass and Romero Awards
at**

**St George's Cathedral Southwark
Celebrant
Archbishop John Wilson**

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**Saturday 13th July
CAFOD & Romero Trust
Pilgrimage to the Holy Island of
Lindisfarne**

**Further details on website
www.romerotrusted.org.uk**

Feast of Saint Óscar 2023

This year we were privileged to have Maria Exall, President of the TUC, as our guest speaker at the ecumenical service at St Martin in the Fields for the 43rd anniversary of Saint Oscar's martyrdom. Here we present an abridged version of her reflection.



Romero is our Martyr. His life and death tell us about responding to the injustice of poverty. He is a saint for our times because he allowed himself to be open to the cry of the poor. Today that cry is often dismissed, covered up, suppressed. We live in a sophisticated society with ever more means of communication but where facts and truth compete for our attention with conspiracy theories and post-truth narratives.

We live in a time of increasing authoritarian populism which would deny the interconnected world in which we live and set groups of people against each other. Deliberate misinformation about

some of the most vulnerable in society is promoted by those in power, to keep their power. How can we go beyond this commotion in society, and in ourselves, to see what is real and true? What spiritual resources do we as individuals, and us as 21st Churches need, to clearly hear the poor, to be Churches for the poor? We can learn from Romero how to do this - from the example of his life and from his spirituality.

Romero's time and place were very different to ours. He was born in an agricultural society, a society with a history of recent violence and repression of its own people. Once ordained he practised his ministry amongst the people he had grown up with before he moved up the Church hierarchy. He was a diligent if cautious priest.

But he experienced a transfiguration of his ministry, and his commitment to serving the people of El Salvador became something more. He went through a conversion in response to the deteriorating political situation around him, and he was particularly affected by the killing of his friend Rutilio Grande. He allowed himself to change. And we see

the results of that change in the ministry of the last three years of his life.

He had a change of mind and heart to a deeper understanding of the Church as Church for the poor. To see that the poor are blessedness because they are the ones who need God. His conversion can be explained in political theology terms as a move to the model of the preferential option for the poor.

It was a conversion to an understanding of “Christ who is not distant from history” to a commitment to “Christ in the midst of the movement of people”, recognising God’s action in salvation history.



Archbishop Romero and his people

Spiritual Poverty

Romero’s early spiritual formation took place in a different Church than we have now. It was pre-Vatican II with the dominance of a pre-modern sensibility. Relevant to Romero’s life is the concept of spiritual poverty rooted in the New

Testament idea of kenosis (self-emptying) and also in an understanding of the importance of the Cross - to take up our crosses because we follow Christ. Not as a morbid sacrifice but a true self-denial that bears fruit.

“Poverty is a spirituality,” said Romero. “It is the willingness of a soul open to God.” And to reach out beyond the self to others “becoming poor to seek with others the truth.” In his sermons and writings Romero speaks of transcendence. He had the humility to be in solidarity with the humiliated.

He said “The transcendence the Church preaches is not alienation, it is not going to heaven to think about eternal life and forget about problems on earth. It is a transcendence from the human heart. It is entering into the reality of a child, of the poor, of those wearing rags, of the sick, of a hovel, of a shack. It is going to share with them. And from the very heart of misery, to transcend it, to elevate it, to promote it, to say to them “You aren’t trash. You aren’t marginalised. It is to say exactly the opposite, You are valuable.” Romero believed that an intimate and sincere search for God will produce fruits of love, justice and truth, that there is a

link between transcendence and action for social justice.

As he said, “We don’t serve the poor with paternalism, helping them as if we are reaching down from above to someone below. This is not what God wants, but rather he wants us to do this as one brother or sister to another. This is my brother or sister, this is Christ, and with Christ, I am not reaching down from above to someone below rather I am reaching up from below to serve him above.”

The Legacy of Romero today

So, what is the legacy of Romero for us 43 years after his martyrdom?

Put simply: you in the Romero Trust keep the memory alive, maintaining relations with the Church in El Salvador and recent visit of John Wilson Archbishop of Southwark is a sign of that. And keeping an awareness of necessity of a global perspective and understanding the situation for El Salvador today.

But his legacy is something that is inside all of us who have been touched by Romero’s life and death.

I was a student of 19 when Romero was martyred. It coincided with me starting to work through the ethical and hence

political aspects of my faith. The faith community I was part of at the time, the Catholic Chaplaincy at the University of Sheffield, was deeply affected by what happened to Romero and those in the Church in El Salvador standing for justice was our inspiration. The lesson of Romero’s death for us was to look outwards and take responsibility for the society and world around us rather than just be submerged in the preoccupations of student life and subsequently post student life.

To pray more, to think more, to do more. Awareness of structural economic and political sins in the world are not only in books on liberation theology but also in our immediate time and place. I started to learn practical lessons. That things are better understood from the peripheries and margins. That there is an obligation to social solidarity with the poor and marginalised in the here and now.

Christian vocation to serve and Catholic Social Teaching

The context today in the UK is far from that of El Salvador in 1980 but the principles are the same: the poor and the marginalised are with us and we cannot ignore them. Pope Francis has reminded

us in Fratelli Tutti of the two poles of universality and social friendship. We have an obligation to global justice (being part of the larger human family) and to work for justice in our own country.

There is something in the experience of growing up Christian, and indeed in other religious traditions, that does pre-dispose you to see we are here to serve others. An instinctive understanding of the importance of the collective values of solidarity worldwide, in our own society and our own immediate situation. And this includes defending people's dignity in the workplace and workers' rights cross the globe.



Maria Exall at St Martin in the Fields

Certainly, the British Trade Union movement has a disproportionate number of leaders and activists from a Catholic background - the TUC General Council is full of them! And the values of social solidarity exist in movements within secular society including the labour movement, as well as in our faith tradition. Catholic Social Teaching represents the weaving together of these. The aspiration to workplace justice and dignity at work is right. The services we all rely on to have a decent life such as affordable housing provision, utilities such as water energy and comms are not provided to enhance our human dignity but for shareholders to make ever more profits.

Swathes of our society are subject to market mechanisms that exploit working people of all backgrounds for profit whether they be university lecturers or care assistants. There is an absolute exploitation of cheap and precarious labour but also a relative exploitation of those who may be paid more but are only valued for their productivity or profitability.

Schools and hospitals are increasingly subject to financial disciplines that fail to

take account of the whole person whether they be the pupil or the patient or the teacher or the health worker. In the unprecedented industrial action for a generation that has taken place this year many of the striking workers have been those who deliver key services to the public. They have made clear that a motivation of their action is pay, yes, but also to protect the quality, viability and integrity of the services they provide to us all, especially the most vulnerable.

Poverty in Britain today

In Britain today you can do a fair day's work but not get a fair day's pay. Nearly two thirds of all poverty in the UK is in-work poverty. Child poverty has quadrupled since 2010 to over 4 million, 29% of all UK children.

Call it class society or just call it inequality and unfairness, we know that there is a systematic problem. There is an economic inequality which traps people and denies them the ability to flourish.

Trade Unionists are concerned about the low pay that keeps millions in poverty but we are also concerned about the systematic exclusion of poorer people from British society. Wealth inequality in the UK is rising and it has been for the

majority of the last four decades. The escalation of prices and cost of living is driven by war, climate change and Brexit. But the poorest have been suffering well before this. There is an apparent crisis in Government funding of the national public services but there is mass private affluence.

The politics of the mean society

We can critique politicians for failing to lead on matters of moral value in our society including fair taxation and redistribution of wealth. But sadly, all the polling shows that we as UK citizens are overall much less sympathetic to the plight of the poorest in our society than we were in 1980. What we are prepared to give to help others is much less. This constrains our political democracy and makes us a meaner society.

The treatment of those who are poor and on benefits in Britain today is callous and brutal. The way we treat those in our society who rely on welfare is only matched by the inhumanity of how we as a country treat immigrants and asylum seekers. We all lose when poorer people are excluded from human flourishing. We are meant to live as sisters, brothers and friends and care for each other. We all

lose when the collective aspect of humanity is denied.

The challenge to us as Church

How can Romero's example guide us as Christians today to respond to the cry of the poor in our own country?

As Christians we know the words of the Sermon on the Mount are true. Blessed are the poor. And we know we must take on the cause of the poor as if they were Christ himself.

But are we the prophetic church of Romero? A Church that "cannot remain silent when it sees injustices of an economic nature, of a political nature, of a social nature"? A Church that "if it remains silent is complicit"?

Finally, I want to speak today about an aspect of Romero's death. Responsibility for his death was down to Christians – reactionary Catholics and reactionary Evangelical Christians who supported an oppressive and violent political regime. Sometimes we as Christians are asked to reject the values of secular society in the name of our faith - and sometimes this is correct. Equally, however, and perhaps more significantly today, we should reject 'Christian values' when we see them as oblivious to the injustice of

poverty and promoting hate that leads to violence. And following the Jesus of the gospels we must call out hypocrisy – admit that non-Christians can follow Christ more closely than many who call ourselves Christians. We need to be honest like Romero when he said: "The Church does not have a monopoly on the Kingdom of God", that "Outside the Church, anyone who struggles for justice, anyone who makes demands in an unjust atmosphere, is working for the Kingdom of God. This person may not be a Christian."

If this makes us Church goers feel uncomfortable, if our complacency is challenged by this, that too is in the spirit of Romero. "This is what the Church wants – to bother your conscience and provoke a crisis. A Church that doesn't stir up a crisis, a Gospel that doesn't make us uncomfortable... a word of God that doesn't touch on the specific sins of the society in which it is spoken, what kind of Gospel is that? "

With Romero we need to recognise that it is through the poor that God is making history, it is through the poor that we are saved.

St Oscar Romero pray for us.

Romero Week Celebration

This year the Romero Week events featured a speaker tour by Peggy Healy on the theme



“Responding to the Cry of the Poor Today”: The Inspiration of Saint Oscar Romero and the Martyrs of El Salvador.

I was fortunate to have spent 21 years as a Maryknoll Sister. I was missioned to Nicaragua in 1975, five years before my four friends, Maura Clarke, Ita Ford, Dorothy Kazel, and Jean Donovan were martyred in El Salvador. I visited them several times during 1979 and 1980. And I met Monseñor Romero more than once during that time. It was he who had asked the sisters to undertake their life-saving mission among the victims of the civil war that was raging there.

I was with Maura, Ita, Dorothy and Jean in El Salvador in late November 1980, just two weeks before they were killed. The four of them had picked me up at the

same airport where the military captured them on the night of their martyrdom on December 2nd, 1980. It was a terrible, terrible time and a terrible, terrible loss. I never got to serve with them in El Salvador, but I did get to witness the extraordinary impact that their martyrdom has had over these 40 plus years on countless people across the globe.

And what moved me from the beginning, and still moves me today is not their saintliness nor their holiness, but the profound humanity of Monseñor Romero and the four women. Ordinary people living extraordinary lives. I remember clearly when Romero was named in 1977 as Archbishop and we, priests and religious throughout Central America, were so deeply disappointed. We were desperately hoping for a different cleric to be named. But by the time I met Archbishop Romero in 1979, only two years later, he was already deeply revered by the clergy and the people of El Salvador. He had become a larger-than-life prophet and hero and I will never forget how, in the countryside, you could hear his Sunday sermons from out in the street because every battery-operated

radio in the vicinity was tuned into his weekly Sunday sermon from the Cathedral. A larger-than-life hero, but in fact he was not only small in physical stature but one of those people who would never ever stand out in a crowd. Never. He was simple. Humble. Present. Listening. But he had the impact of a giant. The impact of a saint.



The four women martyrs were also deeply human. Maura had a heart bigger than any one I ever knew, but God help you if you

criticised the Irish! And Ita was a brilliant writer and editor, who was deeply spiritual, along with being splendidly ironic and irreverent when the situation called for it. Dorothy was unfailingly cheerful and brave amidst the constant violence, but she was very worried about the fact that she would be returning to the US, as her mission tour was soon to be over. And Jean was engaged to be married to a doctor. She had documented way too many bodies

tortured and dumped in the street, and she had agonised many times over leaving El Salvador herself, but she never could leave the refugee children behind.

They were all deeply touched by the courage and resilience and faith of the Salvadorean people but each one of them carried their own fears and insecurities—their deep internal wounds—as we all do—and they each struggled with their own demons. They knew very well that they were in danger—they had received direct threats from the death squads much the same as Romero, who had died only months before in March, and they were scared. But they persisted, their commitment endured, and they managed to even have a sense of humour about it.

That last time I was with Maura and Ita in their tiny home in Chalatenango, Ita joked that they would certainly never attain the glory of being martyrs like Monseñor Romero because they would surely be killed any day, because the sacks of rice and beans for the war refugees that were stored in a makeshift attic above their beds, would crash through the floor and crush them. In

short, St. Romero and the women were real and accessible, brave and beautiful human beings who stood by the displaced *campesino* families and regularly took calculated risks to help and rescue them. And that is why they continue to inspire so many others to greatness—and to hear the cry of the poor as they did. But what is the cry of the poor?

The cry of the poor is the clamour to the heavens of those who are systematically dispossessed, marginalised and oppressed by systems and governments. The poor who cry out to be seen and to be heard and to be accompanied in their legitimate and valiant quest not only for survival and safety but also for justice and equality.

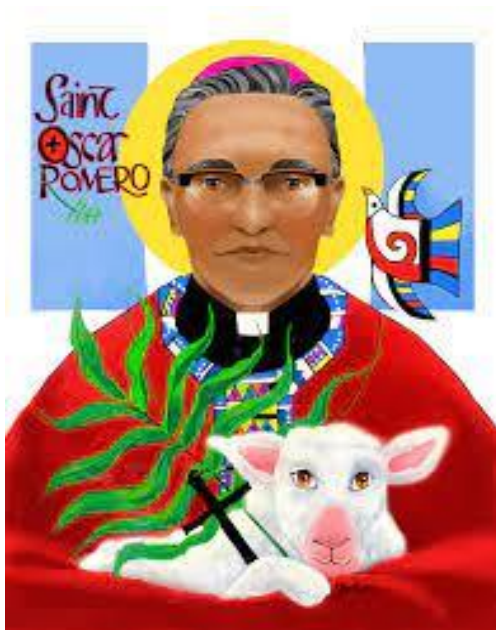
In 1968 the Latin American Bishops pronounced that the Church must make a “preferential option for the poor”. The Maryknoll Sisters as a congregation, made their commitment to that preferential option, fully aware of the possible consequence of martyrdom. And St. Romero, early after he was made Archbishop of San Salvador, made crystal clear his option for the poor when he said: “I am a shepherd who with his

people has begun to learn a difficult and beautiful truth. Our Christian faith requires that we submerge ourselves in this world. The world that the church must serve is the world of the poor. The persecution of the church is the result of defending the poor.”

But today, WHO are the poor among us? Here in Britain, you all know all too well the havoc that the pandemic and the war in Ukraine have wrought on your communities—to say nothing of the growing divide between the super-rich and ordinary citizens, and the devastation of the environment. And we have similar economic problems in the USA along with the terrible issue of migration.

Both Republican and Democratic administrations have effectively closed our southern border to those who are fleeing violence and persecution and extreme poverty in Latin America and beyond. Yet while the situation for the poor in the UK and in the USA is very serious, the global situation is catastrophic. Our challenge is HOW shall we respond to the cry of the poor? First of all, we need to stay close to the communities of those who suffer, so that

we share the joys and the sorrows and challenges and beauty of the poor. The sisters in Salvador lived where the refugees lived. They lived poorly and simply and made themselves available to serve where needed. Monseñor Romero frequently visited communities scarred by the war and had lines of campesinos at his door daily. Pope Francis said it beautifully when he told a group of clergy: I wish you to be shepherds with 'the smell of the sheep' on you.



Secondly, we need an attitude of respect and listening—seeing the poor as capable of solving their problems, and not as powerless victims. We often confuse compassion with our need to save the poor and solve all of their problems for them. I learned this in spades in Nicaragua when the barrio

residents I lived with organised to get running water and a bus line and a cemetery. I wanted to fix everything for them rather than let them find solutions. I quickly learned that it was much more important for them to take the lead than to do it my way even if I thought my way would be more efficient.

Thirdly, we must recognise that the cry of the poor can provoke anger and rage and fear in those whose interests are threatened, including governments and special interest groups. Just one tiny example: once when I travelled to El Salvador, I was sitting next to a woman from the upper class who told me she owned several coffee farms. She told me how terrible the situation was and worst of all was that each Sunday, Archbishop Romero stood up in the pulpit of the Cathedral and ordered the *campesinos* to cut off the fingers of the rich in order to take back their jewels! And like this woman, it is clear that governments around the world, including my own and your own, have spread false propaganda and have also responded cruelly to those who preach and work for justice and peace. So, we must be ready to counter falsehoods and also be prepared to pay

the price for aligning ourselves to the powerless—whatever that might be.

Fourthly, the preferential option for the poor is messy. We need to stay faithful to our strongly held gospel values, but we must also keep our hearts open those who have different beliefs. For example, Monseñor Romero did not believe ever in the use of violence and never preached it but he also understood how the use of violence differs between those who use it to repress and those who are using it to make needed change. He criticised both sides when they used violence excessively and in pursuit of power. Another example, even though our sisters saw clearly that it was the government that was responsible for most of the violence, they cared for war refugees no matter which side they were on.

Fifthly, as US civil rights activist Bryan Stevenson so beautifully put it: “we have to stay on the side of love”. If we are motivated by hatred or fear or anger, this is not the response of a true Christian. We CAN commit to act in ways not shaped by fear and anger. Maura Clarke taught me this lesson in Nicaragua, where we had an amazing youth group.

One day, as the government repression got ever more violent and very close, I said to Maura— “If they kill one of our youths, I swear that I will pick up an AK47 and start shooting.” Instead of chiding me about how unchristian that would be, she looked at me with unending kindness and simply said to me: “Look how much you love them”. And that was such a gift to me--only to receive an even greater gift from her years later.

When Maura and the others disappeared in El Salvador and we did not know what had happened to them for two whole days, we were in agony. And on the day their bodies were finally found in a shallow grave, and we confirmed they had been murdered, I remember as clear as day—at that moment—that any anger or revenge that I might have had simply drained out of me completely. And all that was left was the absolutely clear sense that I never wanted anyone to be killed for any reason no matter what. And that was Maura’s gift to me too.

And finally, there are some basic things that can help us to sustain our response over the long haul.

The most important is that the power of love is forged by adversity and struggle,

but it is also relentlessly committed to nurturing and caring.

Nurture your spirituality with your activism: Our faith can give us a strength that others do not have.

Find other saints and prophets to work with. Recognise how you too are called to be an inspiration to others.

Keep a sense of humour. Pope Francis prays Merton's prayer every day for a sense of humour.

Recognise that we cannot right all wrongs. We can get addicted to activism if we believe that our value comes from what we are doing to save the world. My neighbours in Nicaragua had an ability to rest, play and celebrate even while they were fenced in by misery, terror and darkness.

I have never seen the planet as dark as it is now in many ways. I am sure many of you feel the same way. But perhaps weirdly enough, I have never felt so hopeful. And this is not because I do not see what is going on. I do—very clearly. It is because I have met people and continue to meet people all over the world who are just like you. People who care and who serve and who love in the midst of all of the darkness. For whatever

reason, this is OUR time in history. My time has spanned over seven decades. But I was so fortunate to be given the opportunity, early on in my life, in Central America, to experience the joy of living with and learning from some of the most forgotten and dispossessed communities on the planet. It had its share of heartbreak, pain and fear. We lost a sainted archbishop and these four extraordinary women and so many, many more saints and martyrs. But I have carried their inspiration with me and I have found so many beautiful ways to continue to respond to the cry of the poor all over the world.

Together we need to bring about a pandemic of kindness, service, presence mercy and justice. This call requires courage, persistence, resilience, grit and grace. But our name is legion! We have heard the cry of the poor and we have not turned away. So, let us finish with the call of Pope Francis ringing in our ears and in our hearts: "Let us be renewed by God's mercy and let us become agents of this mercy, channels through which God can water the earth, protect all creation, and make justice and peace flourish."
(*Laudato Si'*).

Southwark Pilgrimage To El Salvador

In February this year Archbishop John Wilson and a small group of Southwark diocesan clergy travelled on pilgrimage to El Salvador. The Archbishop and his team – private secretary Fr Phil Andrews, the Dean of the Cathedral, Canon Michael Branch, and Guardian of the Romero Shrine, Canon Alan McLean - fulfilled a long-held commitment to visit the land of Saint Oscar Romero and the holy sites which commemorate him and so many other martyrs.

This is particularly significant for the Archdiocese as, since 2013, St George's Cathedral in Southwark has been home to the diocesan shrine to St Oscar, where a magnificent cross, painted by the Salvadorean artist Fernando Llort, forms the centrepiece of the shrine. The beautiful front cover of this Romero News is also the work of Fernando Llort.

In April this year the Bishops Conference unanimously agreed to elevate it to the status of a National Shrine for England and Wales.



The Chapel of Divine Providence, site of the martyrdom of Saint Oscar Romero



Commemorative Mural by artist Fernando Llort outside Saint Oscar's living quarters



Archbishop John visited the Hospital of Divine Providence where Romero lived



With the sisters of Saint Clare at the tomb of Saint Oscar in the crypt of the Cathedral



At the roadside martyrdom site of Rutilio Grande, Manuel Solorzano and Nelson Lemus



Welcome to Ciudad Barrios, birthplace of Saint Oscar



The two Amigos, Archbishop John and the parish priest of Ciudad Barrios



Founding members of the Ciudad Barrios Romero Memorial Museum

Southwark National Shrine

On Thursday 28th September, more than 250 people gathered in St George's Cathedral, Southwark for an ecumenical service of Sung Evening Prayer.



The event celebrated the tenth Anniversary of the installation of the Romero Cross in the Cathedral, which is now the national shrine to St Oscar.

It was a glorious and colourful event - psalms and hymns were sung by the resident choir - the last hymn being composed and written in honour of St Oscar Romero. The final words being "we'll devote ourselves to justice and the common good of all".

The Very Reverend Dr John Hall, Dean Emeritus of Westminster Abbey, gave the address, reminding the congregation that Saint Oscar Romero was one of the Twentieth Century martyrs whose

statues were erected in 1998 above the Western Door of the Abbey, an early recognition of his martyrdom by the Anglican Communion.

The final words of the evening were given by Archbishop John Wilson who reminded us that the poor are not just over there! But here in Southwark - the Cathedral's food bank is a reminder of this fact. Archbishop John ended with Romero's words -

"The Church is all of you".



Celebrating ten years of the Southwark Shrine to Saint Oscar Romero

Holy Island Pilgrimage

The first joint pilgrimage to Lindisfarne - organised by the Romero Trust and CAFOD - was held on 8th July with some 200 participants.



At the closing Mass in the historic St Mary's Church on Lindisfarne, Fr Jim O'Keefe gave the following reflection:

In today's Gospel we have heard that the disciples of Jesus didn't fast when the disciples of John the Baptist and the Pharisees did. Something new is afoot here. The old way of being a good person – fasting when you're supposed to, not picking corn on the Sabbath and so on – is being taken over by a new way. The new way is to be in relationship with Jesus. We are to follow Jesus in our lives, our love is to be active! It doesn't work to put a patch of new cloth over the hole in an old garment, they'll tear apart.

The new cloth – following Jesus – can't really be grafted into an old way of living, unless the old way of living changes! The message is summed up in one word – Repent, change direction, a word first used by John the Baptist himself. With the help of the Holy Spirit – huge changes are possible in our lives; this is what our Pilgrimage today is about.

Centuries later, one Mgr. Oscar Romero was appointed Archbishop of El Salvador on 3rd February 1977. The date matters. He was only in the job for 3 years! But what a three years! The government and wealthy families were delighted. They believed they had a champion who would befriend them and support them. Many of his brother priests were deeply saddened. They saw him as a reactionary, someone not in touch with the poor, not in tune with the direction of many other bishops in Latin America and certainly not a friend of many of the Jesuits who ministered selflessly, intelligently and courageously in his Archdiocese.

On 12th March that year, 1977, a mere 30 days later after his installation as Archbishop, his friend, a relatively young Jesuit, Rutilio Grande, (he was 48 years

old), was assassinated along with a teenager (Nelson, an altar server) and an older man (Manuel, a sacristan) by a death squad. They were on their way to celebrate Mass in a local town, the village in fact where Rutilio was born. The death squad had done their homework, watching the journey on previous occasions. They fired numerous bullets into the front of the Volkswagen Safari, killing all three, Rutilio, Nelson and Manuel, instantaneously, thankfully missing the 3 small children sitting in the back of the car – Rutilio had picked them up to give them a lift. One of the children recognised one of the gunmen as his godfather.

The Archbishop, Oscar Romero, was called and he rushed to the church. Kneeling down next to the bodies, something fundamental shifted inside him. He told another friend, another Jesuit, some weeks later: *‘When I saw Rutilio dead, I thought, if they killed him for what he was doing, it’s my job to go down the same road...I changed, I also came back home again’*. He went back to his roots. With the help of the Holy Spirit – huge changes are possible in the way we live our lives.

From then on, Mgr Romero became an utterly dedicated spokesman for justice for the poor. He supported those who spoke out for the fullness of life for those being persecuted. In his Sunday homilies he named those who had been ‘disappeared’ and he championed those who worked to reunite those who had been killed with their families.

A mere three years later, on 24th March 1980, he himself was assassinated while celebrating an evening Mass. It was a Monday evening. He had just finished preaching on the text from John’s Gospel; ‘Unless a grain of wheat dies, it remains only a single grain, if it dies it bears much fruit’. He was about to pick up the bread for the offertory and at that moment a sniper entered the chapel in the hospital grounds where he lived in a small apartment across the road - and shot him. The evidence of a significant deposit of salt in his clothing suggests that he saw what was to happen, and his body reacted in fear, producing all that salt. One of his prayers had been answered. He always prayed that if he was to be killed, it would be quick and that no one would be killed with him. It was quick, and no one else died.

I mentioned his Sunday homilies – they were legendary. Everyone listened to them, including those who vehemently opposed him.



His enemies – many of whom were Catholics - tried on a number of occasions to destroy the Radio Station, in fact it was bombed twice in January and February 1977, just a month before he died. One of the institutions which helped to restore the Radio Station was CAFOD. CAFOD's Headquarters, as I'm sure you all know, is called Romero House. Just across the backyard from Romero House is St George's Cathedral, the Cathedral for the Archdiocese of Southwark. In that Cathedral is the newly dedicated National Shrine of St Oscar Romero, with the current Archbishop, John Wilson, a most ardent supporter of the life and ministry of the Saint. Next time you're in London, please do visit,

take the tube to Lambeth North, turn left and you'll be there in 15 minutes!

I wondered what Romero would make of CAFOD's 'Seeds of Change' campaign? I imagine quite a lot. His last homily was on that wonderful text from John's Gospel, the reflection on the dying and rising of the seed to a harvest. The dying of Rutilio gave way to the harvest of Romero and his witness. He was frequently outspoken about the power of the dominant rich families who continued to exploit the campesinos. St Romero once described the worst of the rich families as 'baptised pagans'. He never minced his words! He would unquestionably have some very clear things to say about governments across the world who have adopted seed laws which restrict the small farmers' abilities to use their own local varieties of seeds to sustain them throughout the year. I suspect he would be extremely articulate about the World Bank supporting giant corporations which seriously limit the options of the poor farmers in favour of their own massive profits. I think Romero would gently whisper into the ears of all of us that we are capable of overcoming feelings of impotence. Jesus is a radical

alternative! I'm sure he would say to CAFOD supporters that the seeds issue, the climate change issue, the poverty issue and the literacy issue are all central to preaching the Gospel! I'm sure that Romero would say that encouraged by CAFOD and our Justice and Peace networks, our Church can encourage compassion and solidarity on behalf of all of our sisters and brothers.

I'm conscious that we're here on this hallowed piece of earth, Holy Island. The island of Aidan, Cuthbert, the genius scribe Aldred who created the Lindisfarne Gospels, the most magnificent book to emerge from Anglo Saxon England. Aidan's little school of 12 pupils produced at least 4 bishops, the two brothers Chad and Cedd as well as Wilfred and Eata. Aidan was also the mentor of Hilda of Whitby. These people are voices of the Lord. One of Romero's favourite sayings was that we are all meant to be 'Microphones of God'. He once said: *'God's best microphone is Christ, and Christ's best microphone is the Church and the Church is all of you'*. He said, not long before he died: *'If some day ...they kill all the priests and the bishop, too, and you are left – a people*

without priests – then each one of you must be God's microphone, a messenger, a prophet...'

I doubt that in our small part of the world, that priests and bishops will be martyred! Along with lay men and women, Christians are indeed martyred – but not in our part of the world. I fear that this weakens the voices of all those baptised. We're inclined to leave it to 'clergy' – this is simply not good enough. We're all baptised, we're all called to be microphones!

What a fantastic affirmation for all the baptised. It is tough, but nowhere near as tough as it was in the 1980s in El Salvador. But we too, can be mightily encouraged and affirmed by St Oscar's words, let us all fully realise that we, the body of Christ, are the Body Language of God, when we speak, let's speak the words of the Lord. Let's be totally inspired by our local saints, St Oscar and the work of CAFOD – and let's just get on with it!



El Salvador Update

I) Drift to Authoritarian Rule

Since March 2022 El Salvador has been living under a State of Exception which suspends constitutional protections against arbitrary capture and detention and allows people to be thrown into prison for months on the slimmest of allegations. An anonymous phone tip can be sufficient to have someone captured.



Prisoners held without hearings or trial

The "exceptional measures," which are flaunted by President Bukele for their impact in reducing gang-related crime in the country, have been used, say human rights organisations, to silence and threaten activists and community leaders who protest against business projects linked to friends the Bukele regime.

The State of Exception has also been marked by the destruction of the rule of law and judicial safeguards designed to protect the innocent. Cardinal Rosa Chávez has been outspoken in his criticism of the brutality of the measures and the closing down of democracy. There is another cost: the cost of imprisoning tens of thousands of Salvadoreans, a greater percentage of the population than any other country in the world, purportedly for decades as the President claims that those arrested will never be released.

On the night of January 31, El Salvador's president Nayib Bukele broadcast nationally his tour of the country's new mega-prison, designed to hold 40,000 prisoners. The new prison, known as the Terrorism Confinement Centre, was needed to some of more than 63,000 persons arrested in the country under the State of Exception, accused of being gang members or collaborators. A new opinion poll shows the possibility that, after national elections in February 2024, President Bukele and his *Nuevas Ideas* party will have firmly consolidated one party rule over all branches of the Salvadorean government.



The new "terrorism confinement centre"

Meanwhile, President Bukele has an overwhelming lead in his campaign to be re-elected president for a second five-year term. The highly popular Bukele is preferred by more than 68% of respondents, while no other party's candidate reaches even 5%. El Salvador's constitution states multiple times that a president may not be re-elected for successive terms yet a panel of Bukele allied judges in the constitutional court decided to overrule this prohibition, thereby allowing Bukele to run again. If the election results reflect the poll, his party would capture 58 of the 60 seats in the legislature, leaving one seat to each of ARENA and the FMLN.



II) New Saints for El Salvador?

On Sunday August 6th, the Archbishop of San Salvador, José Luis Escobar Alas, announced that the country's bishops' conference had initiated the canonisation process "of a large group of our martyrs from the recent armed conflict suffered in our country." Whilst the archbishop did not share any specific names from the list submitted to Rome, he cited Fr Ignacio Ellacuría, one of the UCA Jesuits martyred in 1989, as an example for contemporary El Salvador. Local sources expect the list to include the victims of the UCA massacre, the US missionary sisters and many others who were killed for their faith.

Referring to the current situation in the country, Bishop Escobar said: "Violence has struck and led to the deaths of many Salvadoreans, mainly the poorest," There are many challenges to be addressed so that history of fratricidal violence is not repeated." Archbishop Escobar also urged the government of President Nayib Bukele "to avoid the imprisonment of innocents" and called for the prompt release of those unjustly detained.

Nicaragua Repression of the Church

Whilst the political situation in El Salvador drifts relentlessly towards authoritarianism, in neighbouring Nicaragua democracy is already in deep crisis. In the latest escalation of anti-Church repression, on 15th August the Nicaraguan government seized and confiscated the UCA, the Jesuit-run University of Central America in Managua, and expelled the community of Jesuit priests from their residence on the campus. The government claimed the highly respected University was a “hub of terrorism”.

In April 2018 massive peaceful protests, calling on the Nicaraguan government for greater political freedoms, were met with unprecedented violence and repression from the police and pro-regime mobs. Hundreds of protesters were killed, many of them young millennial students, and countless thousands have since fled the country to escape imprisonment. Efforts led by the Church and community leaders to broker an end to the violence and seek long-term solutions came to stalemate. Since then, President Daniel

Ortega and his wife and Vice-President Rosario Murillo have overseen an unparalleled crackdown on all elements of Nicaragua society whom they regard as critics. In the last two years more than 3,000 local voluntary agencies, community associations, charities and welfare organisations have been disbanded. Almost all international aid agencies have had their registration cancelled. Many of these, including the Red Cross, have had their premises and assets seized by the government.

President Ortega and his wife have vented particular fury against the Catholic Church, one of the few bodies in the country with the moral authority to challenge the excesses of the regime.



In April 2019, auxiliary bishop of Managua, Silvio Baez, had to flee the country over fears for his life and he is now based in exile in Miami. A year later, Fr José

Idiáquez, Vice-Chancellor of the Jesuit-run University – UCA - was blocked from

entering Nicaragua after a visit to Mexico and has been unable to return. Fr Idiáquez drew the particular ire of the government when he threw open the gates of the University campus in April 2018 to allow protesting students to flee from the attacks of the police.



Fr José Idiáquez – Vice Chancellor of the UCA

Since then, he has come under repeated death threats after declaring: “the UCA, loyal to its Christian principles, will continue to call for justice for the dozens who have been murdered and a democracy that guarantees the entire citizenry of our country true peace and development.”

Both Bishop Báez and Fr Idiáquez had played a leading role in the 2018 efforts to mediate with the government, along with the Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Waldemar Sommertag. In March 2022 the government went even further and withdrew its approval of the Pope’s

ambassador, forcing him out of the country. Vatican News noted that “Such a measure seems incomprehensible as Archbishop Sommertag worked with profound dedication for the good of the Church and the Nicaraguan people, especially the most vulnerable, always seeking to foster good relations between the Apostolic See and the authorities of Nicaragua.”

Over the last 18 months the situation has deteriorated dramatically with the government’s expulsion of numerous priests and religious congregations, including the deportation of a group of fifteen sisters belonging to Mother Teresa’s order, the Missionaries of Charity, forced by police into a vehicle and dumped unceremoniously at the border crossing with Costa Rica. According to the Ministry of the Interior, the Missionaries of Charity had failed to comply with their obligations under the law, as well as the law against money laundering, financing of terrorism and financing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

In February this year Bishop Rolando Álvarez of the Matagalpa Diocese, who was arrested in August 2022, for calling

for greater respect for human rights and democracy, was sentenced to 26 years in prison and stripped of his Nicaraguan citizenship. The following month tensions peaked when President Ortega launched a scorching attack on Pope Francis and threatened to break diplomatic relations, leading to the Vatican's decision to close its Embassy in Managua.



Bishops Rolando Álvarez and Silvio Báez

In September the European Parliament nominated Bishop Álvarez for the "Sakharov Prize 2023" which honours outstanding defenders of human rights and freedoms. A week later, in an address to the UN General Assembly in New York, the Vatican's foreign minister, Archbishop Paul Gallagher, said: "A special thought goes to Nicaragua with which the Holy See hopes to engage in respectful diplomatic dialogue for the

good of the local Church and of the entire population".



Confiscated by the Ortega regime

Meanwhile, that dialogue remains little more than a distant hope, and the 5,000 students who enrolled in the UCA Jesuit University face an uncertain future, as the government threats and violence against the church continue apace.

ROMERO TRUST PILGRIMAGE TO EL SALVADOR NOVEMBER 2024



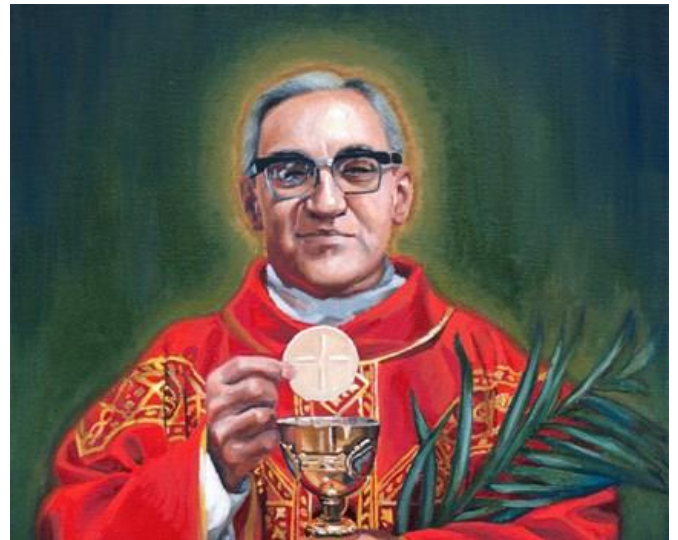
The view of the San Salvador volcano from the Loyola Centre pilgrimage accommodation.

Since 2010 the Romero Trust has organised four pilgrimage tours to El Salvador with some thirty participants: admirers of Romero from UK, Ireland, USA, Australia and New Zealand. Each visit has been a unique and unforgettable experience for all the pilgrims. We travel in the steps of Saint Oscar Romero, learning about the hopes, the sufferings and the joys of the people of El Salvador who inspired Saint Oscar to say, “With these people it is easy to be a good pastor”.

In November 2024, to coincide with the 35th anniversary of the UCA martyrs, we hope to organise a further 10-day visit to this beautiful and inspiring land and to meet the people for whom St Oscar Romero and so many martyrs offered their lives.

The all-inclusive cost from UK covering flights, local accommodation, local travel and all meals will be around £1700.

If you are interested in joining a pilgrimage to the land of Romero, please contact romerotrust@gmail.com



The Southwark Romero Cross

The beautiful Romero Cross in St. George's Cathedral is the work of the celebrated Salvadorean artist, Fernando Llort, who was present in Southwark at the inauguration of the Romero shrine in 2013. His work is inspired by his deep faith and is celebrated both in El Salvador and internationally. The Llort family workshop has produced copies of the double-sided cross and the Romero Trust has them available for purchase.

The small cross measures 4 inches and costs **£5 or 3 for £12 (+ p&p)**

The large cross with a stand measures 12 inches and costs **£ 12 (+ p&p)**

MARTYRS OF EL SALVADOR PRAYER CARDS



Front of Cross represents Christ and Romero



Reverse of cross represents the People of God

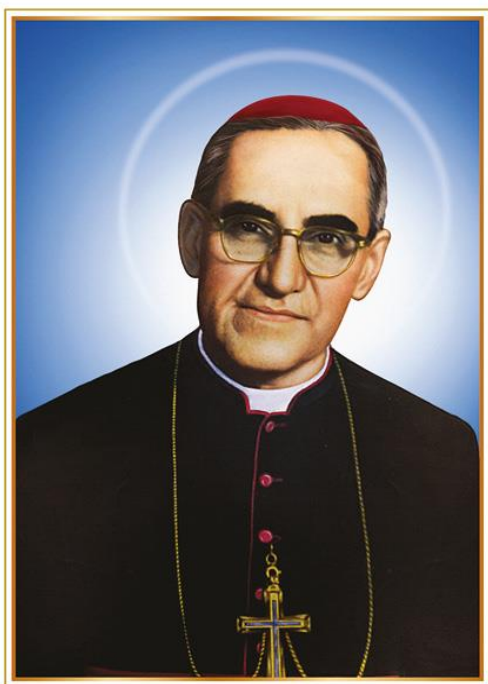


The Romero Trust has produced prayer cards of this beautiful portrait of Rutilio Grande and his companions, Manuel Solórzano and Nelson Lemus, by Salvadorean artist Cristián Lopez.

We also have available prayer cards of the "Great Amen" by Peter Bridgman.



And the official portrait of Saint Oscar Romero is still available from the Trust.



ST OSCAR ROMERO
BISHOP AND MARTYR

Individual prayer cards are free of charge, just send us a self-addressed envelope. For bulk orders the charge is £10 for 250 cards.

RESOURCES

A range of inspiring documentaries and feature films are available, free to view, on the Romero Trust website.

We particularly recommend:

Roses in December: *A moving account of the life and the death of Jean*

Donovan, as remembered by her friends and family.

Righting the Wrong: *An excellent overview of Romero's life and martyrdom. and the long 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:

<http://www.romerotrust.org.uk/videos>



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by Rhina Guidos. A

short and well-written

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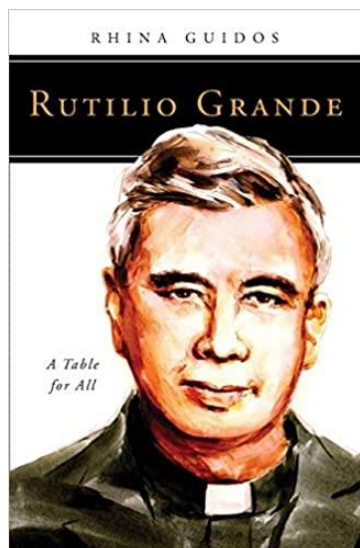
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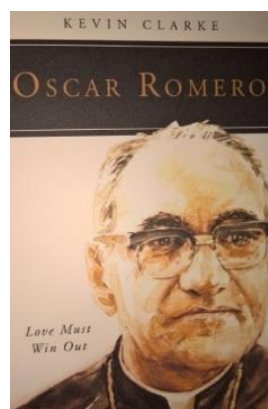
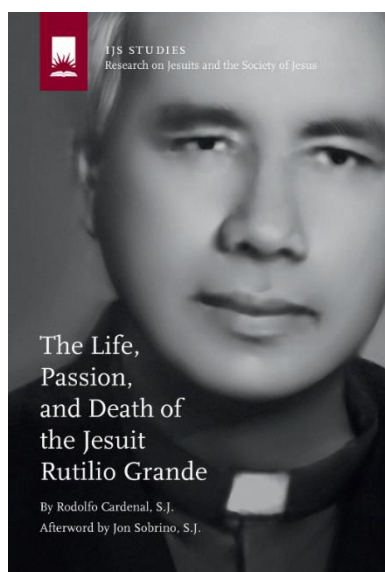
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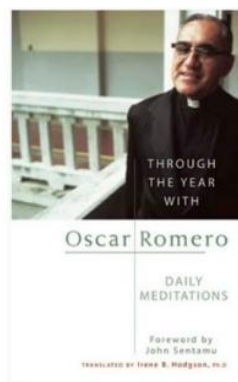
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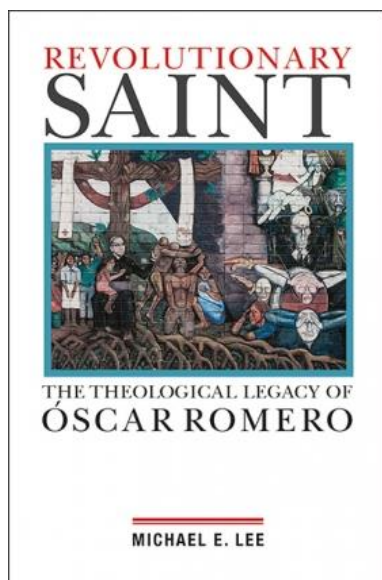
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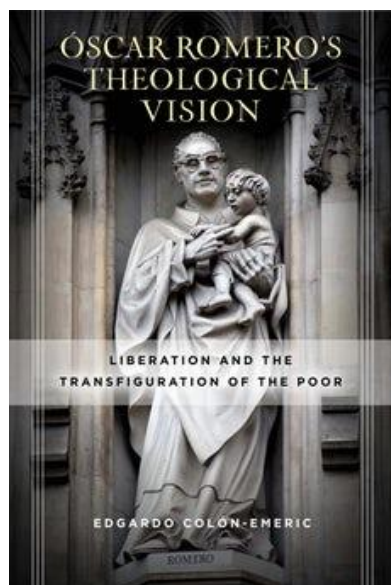


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Michael E. Lee.
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