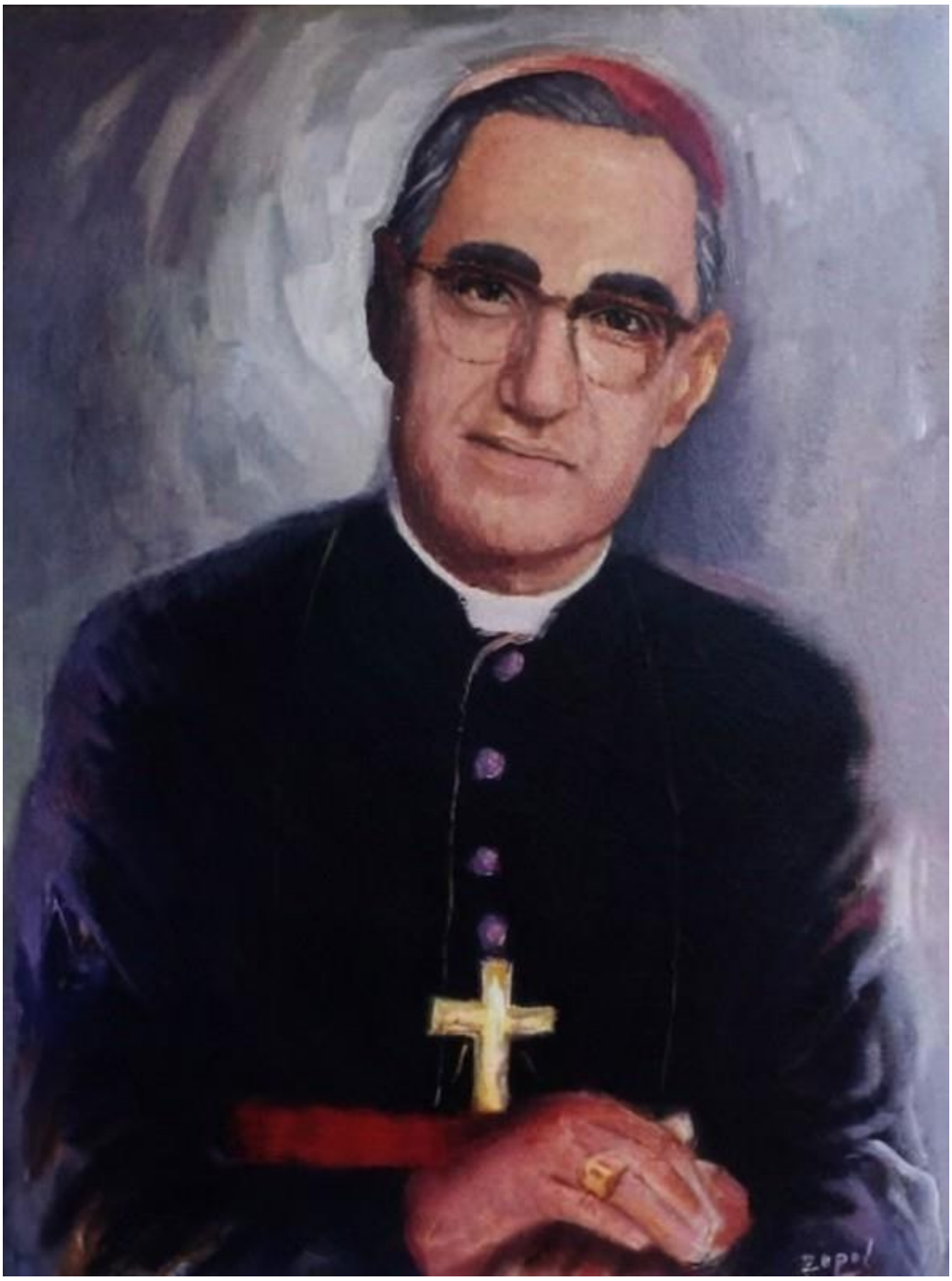
Romeronews

Issue 30: September 2022 **Registered Charity no. 1110069**

Romero Remembered



IN THIS ISSUE

Future Edinburgh Event

I
Microphones of God
Edgar Colón-Emeric

II
Romero and El Salvador Today
Rodolfo Cardenal SJ

III
CELAM's Celebration of Romero
Archbishop Jorge Eduardo Lozano

IV
A Contradiction of our Christianity
Romero and the Scandal of Inequality
Matthew Whelan

V
Rory Young Sculptor Extraordinaire
David Skidmore

VI
Film review: What Lucía Saw

VII
Democracy under Threat

Prayer Cards
Books and Resources

FORTHCOMING EVENT

Friday October 14th at 7pm

On the fourth anniversary of the canonisation of Saint Oscar Romero, the Edinburgh Jesuit centre, in conjunction with SCIAF, the Archbishop Romero Trust and the Scottish Bishops' Justice and Peace Commission, will inaugurate a new series of 'Romero and Rutilio' lectures in Scotland.

Major speakers will explore their legacy and significance for us today. Distinguished theologian Fr Martin Maier SJ, Director of the German Bishops' international pastoral agency Adveniat, who has extensive experience of El Salvador, will give this first address on "The Life, Loss and Legacy of Romero"

The lecture will take place at the Jesuit Church of the Sacred Heart in Lauriston Street, Edinburgh. It will be preceded at 6.00pm in the church by a Mass of Thanksgiving celebrated by Glasgow's Archbishop William Nolan.

Microphones of God - Romero's Message for the Present Time

In March this year, to celebrate the Feast Day of St Oscar Romero, the Romero Trust was privileged to be able to host a 10-day visit to Britain by Edgardo Colon-Emeric, Methodist theologian and Dean of the Divinity School at Duke University in North Carolina.

He is Co-chair of the Roman Catholic-Methodist International Commission. For some years he has studied Archbishop Romero's ministry and written an inspirational volume on Romero's theological vision as liberation and the transfiguration of the poor.

Edgardo gave the Address at the Trust's annual ecumenical service in St Martin-in-the-Fields; he also preached in St Alban's Cathedral and Wesley's Chapel, and gave two wonderful lectures in Durham Cathedral and at the CYTUN venue in Cardiff. Here is the SMITF Address; but his texts, five in all, can be found on the Romero Trust website at www.romerotrust.org.uk/2022 - and every one of them is well worth reading.

Edgardo Colon-Emeric

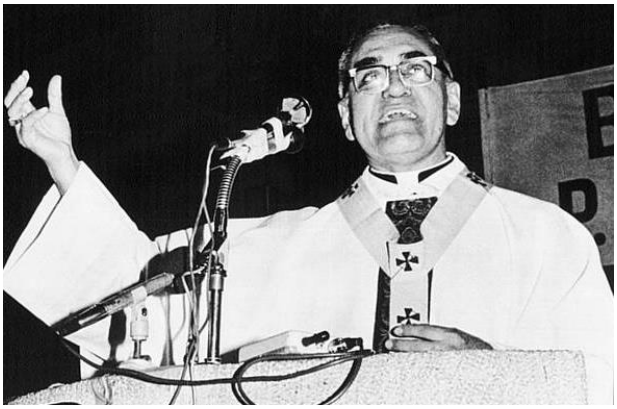
In addressing this topic, I am claiming that Romero has a message for the present time. Celebrating Romero's martyrdom is an act of thanksgiving to God for the life of his servant. In so doing, we are engaging in an ecumenical act because the saints belong to God. The ecclesial communions from which they arose receive honour for their contribution to the formation of these living icons of grace. Romero has a message for us, not just as a saint, but also as a teacher and theologian. This son of the church is also a father of the church and I dare say a doctor of the church. He is not just to be remembered and revered - but studied. In the present time, when there is a torrent of news but a drought of truth, Romero invites all Christians to be transfigured into microphones of God.

Microphones of God

Romero was well acquainted with the promise and peril of the amplifying power of microphones. On January 23, 1980, a bomb blew up the transmission equipment of YSAX, the diocesan radio station known as the *Voz Panamericana*, the Pan-American voice. These attempts to silence the church had become increasingly common in El Salvador. Working feverishly, technicians finished repairs just in time for Romero's Sunday homily, four days later.

When Monseñor stood at the pulpit, he spoke the words found in your bulletin. "God's best microphone is Christ, and Christ's best microphone is the church, and the church, is all of you." When the *Panamerican Voice* was destroyed by a bigger bomb on February 17, many parishioners showed up the following Sunday carrying tape recorders so that they could rebroadcast the sermon when they returned to their communities. The people of God, not YSAX, was Romero's best microphone.

What Romero said 42 years ago, remains true: "Each one of you has to be God's microphone." The vendor in the corner shop; the taxi driver dropping off a passenger; the student learning the multiplication tables; the Christian accountant, the Christian homemaker, the prelate, the pauper—microphones of God, each and every one of them.



Romero – Microphone of God

There is a rich incarnational theology in this metaphor. It builds on and makes real the Augustinian distinction between the voice made flesh in John the Baptist and the Word made flesh in Jesus. There is deep missional spirituality in this image. It makes *"Sentir con la Iglesia"* not simply Romero's episcopal motto but the people's commission.

Microphones of God. Each one of you personally and collectively has a message to bear. This is your baptismal gift and task, but it does not happen automatically. Some microphones appear to be on permanent mute. Others seem to have a poor connection. Still

others are picking up all kind of background conversation that is distractive and even destructive. Too often, the church's microphones have simply served to amplify partisan propaganda, promote pious platitudes, and hype harmful hopes. Romero would encourage us to consider today's gospel story as a sound test. In order to be transfigured into true microphones of God, you must listen to Jesus, find your voice, and preach peace.

Listen to Jesus

In doing my research for a book on Oscar Romero's theological vision, I did what scholars do, I went to a library in San Salvador. Reading entries in the church's newspaper, called Orientación, I came across plans for remodelling Romero's cathedral. The drawings showed the words spoken by God to overwhelmed disciples in today's reading, etched in stone above the main entrance: *ipsum audite.* Listen to him. The planners hoped that the cathedral would serve as a mount of transfiguration, a Salvadoran Mount Tabor. For Romero, the transfiguration of Christ was not an odd biblical story; it was a major feast and the focus of his theological vision. The ecumenical potential of this vision remains untapped. Romero's emphasis on the transfiguration of Christ, the God of the poor, can bridge differences between Christians from the north and the south, and also between Western and Eastern Christianity. Moreover, this vision is word for us because the transfiguration is an epiphany for Lenten times.

Days of sackcloth and ashes are upon us. Ever since the pandemic, my sense of the passage of time has become blurred. In many ways, March 2022 feels like a continuation of March 2020. It seems like I am living in a strange land where it is always Lent and never Easter. How much has really changed in El Salvador since Romero was martyred? I doom-scroll through the events of the world around us with a sense of déjà vu: runaway inflation, fuel shortages, a growing wealth gap, democracies overrun by dictators in Latin America; new waves of refugees in Europe. Days of mourning and lament have overtaken us. And then the gospel of transfiguration.

In the middle of the Lenten journey, God gives us a glimpse of the end: the transfigured Christ. Today's scripture reading is not a misplaced Easter story, as some scholars suggest. The story of what happened on that unnamed high mountain traditionally called Tabor is there to remind us that Lent has a point. The point is not surviving till Easter. The point is transfiguration. We are dust and to dust we shall return. But this dust is bound for glory. The transfiguration is a Lenten epiphany. Listen to Jesus because "Christ is God's best microphone." His transfigured human flesh modulates the eternal will to the audible range. In Christ, the God that seemed far off becomes intimately near. Jesus is God's most eloquent sermon, and you are Jesus' best sermon. In the mirror of Lent, we see our failures but in the light of Tabor, all of us, says Paul, "are being transfigured into the same image from one degree of glory to another." And "This comes from the Lord, the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:18).

It is this Lenten wisdom, which allowed Romero to look at his poor, persecuted church and say without a trace of irony: "it is good for us to be here." Even as he was hurt by gossiping priests and bishops, even as he struggled with self-doubt, even as he received death threats, he could affirm the goodness of his church as the transfigured body of Christ in history because he listened to Jesus. And Romero learned to listen to Jesus in the company of the poor, the weak, and the wounded.

It is significant that during his years as archbishop, Romero lived at the Hospital of Divine Providence, a cancer hospice centre run by Carmelite nuns. All his Sunday homilies were prepared at the *Hospitalito*, as it is affectionately called, where he is said to have remained awake in prayer late into the night.

Archbishop Romero at the Hospitalito Chapel

The *Hospitalito* was both home and Gethsemane, a Lenten place where he encountered God. In the cancerous bodies of the patients, he saw the agony

of the mothers of the disappeared and heard the hopes of an entire nation.

Romero could be the voice of the voiceless because he first listened. When preaching at the Cathedral, Romero declares *Ipsum audite*. Listen to him! When praying at the *Hospitalito*, he heard *Ipsos audite*. Listen to them! In order to be transfigured into true microphones of God, you need to listen to Jesus and to the groans of his poor, suffering body. You also need to find your voice.

Find your voice

In March 2020, the award-winning poet Carolyn Forché visited Duke Divinity School and met with some of my students. In our conversation she shared with us the backstory to her book "*What you have heard is true: A memoir of witness and resistance"*. She told us of how a mysterious stranger, Leonel Gómez, showed up unannounced at her front door and invited invite her to travel with him to El Salvador. The year was 1977. Romero had just become archbishop. The pitch was simple: come and witness the beginning of another Vietnam. She tried to demur by announcing her lack of experience in covering news. Leonel did not want a journalist. He wanted a poet. I will not spoil the book but she accepted the offer. Leonel got a poet.

In today's scripture, Tabor is a school of prophecy and poetry. When the disciples testified to what they had seen, heard, and felt on the high mountain, they became poets. Peter compares the transfiguration "to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts." John in his gospel does not offer a narrative of the transfiguration like Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Instead he testifies, "we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son" and offers lyric verses to "the light of all people," "the true light which enlightens everyone," "the light of life," "the light of the world." Similarly inspired, James writes that "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change."

It is significant that in the Bible and in church history, most prophets and mystics speak in poetry. God has spoken by his prophets and by his poets. When prose falls short, poetry comes to our aid.

This is why in the midst of the violence in El Salvador Romero commissions Guillermo Cuéllar to write a hymn for the transfiguration. The first line of the hymn is *"Vibran los cantos explosivos de alegría"* (The songs resound with outbursts of joy) and it tells of the people of God going to the cathedral to praise the transfigured Christ. The final stanza was Romero's favorite "*Pero los dioses del poder y del dinero se oponen a que haya transfiguración."* (But the gods of money and of power are opposed to there being transfiguration). It took a poet to see something that the theologians missed. The transfiguration is a scandal. Throughout most of its history, the Salvadoran celebration of this feast was a patriotic extravaganza with military parades, trumpets, and cannon fire. It only became problematic when Romero celebrated it from the world of the poor. The transfiguration of the body of Christ in history begins with the Lenten faces of the landless *campesino*, the overlooked market woman, and the unemployed labourer. Make no mistake there are gods opposed to transfiguration. There are gods content with things remaining as they are. There is a battle to be fought, but Romero says, that it is to be fought "with guitars and church songs."

Romero calls Lent, "God's plan for the transfiguration of all peoples from Christ" because giving a microphone to a person whose voice has been ignored is a transformative experience. Every baptised Salvadoran, each child of God, can say with the prophet Ezekiel, "The Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet." God opens the mic to stutterers like Moses, side-lined disciples like Mary, fumbling orators like Paul, and even to Balaam's donkey. You have a voice and your voice is wanted. Your poor verses are wanted. Your accents are wanted. Your rhythms are wanted. Romero was not Methodist, if he had been, he might have said: O for a thousand mics to sing my great redeemer's praise! In order to be transfigured into true microphones of God, you need to listen to Jesus, find your voice, and preach peace.

Preach peace

Preaching peace does not mean avoiding ruffling feathers. The transfiguration of Christ is not a light show. It is God's plan for reconciling a violent world. Romero notes that the five

people whom Jesus gathered on Mount Tabor were aggressive in their temperament and their actions on behalf of justice. Moses killed the Egyptian who was oppressing the Hebrew people. Elijah ordered the slaying of the prophets of Baal. Peter drew his sword against the guards coming to arrest Jesus. James and John, the sons of thunder, called for fire to rain down from heaven on the Samaritans who had refused to extend hospitality to Jesus and his disciples. This is no coincidence. Moses, Elijah, Peter, James, and John are not only stand-ins for the people of the Old and New Covenant but for the story of humanity's addiction to violence, a story as old as Cain's murder of Abel and as recent as Putin's invasion of Ukraine.

A pedagogy of death has been at work throughout human history and the history of the Americas. Love of violence moved the Spanish *Conquistador* Pedro de Alvarado to hack his way through the indigenous peoples of Central America until he conquered them on August 6, 1526 and dedicated the victory and the spoils to El Salvador, the Saviour: a violent transfiguration. Love of violence moved lynch mobs, death squads, drug cartels, and brother Herbert.

I met Herbert on a Thursday night, December 6, 2007 at Bethel Methodist Church in Zacamil. This church is in the heart of gang territory. The bullet holes on the church building spoke for themselves but Herbert's witness was more eloquent still. He had once been a gang leader with the MS13. Feared by his community, he was known as *El diablo* – the devil. He constantly harassed people attending Bethel Methodist Church. On one occasion, he assaulted the pastor, beat him and left him for dead. After years of this dance macabre, the bill came due. Herbert was hospitalized after a shootout with a rival gang. He was in need of a blood transfusion, but for this to happen he needed a blood donor. No one would donate. Not his gang brothers for fear. Not his family for shame. The only person willing to step up was Wilfredo, the local Methodist pastor.

When Herbert was discharged from the hospital, he set his sights on Bethel. He barged into the church in the middle of a worship service, walked up to the pulpit, faced the pastor and asked, "Why? Why

did you do it?" The pastor's answer was simple. "Christ did the same for me." The answer may sound like a cliché to cultured ears but it sounded like gospel to Herbert who at that moment gave his heart to Jesus and became a Christian. Herbert went on to lead the youth group. He was also given responsibility for a rehabilitation house next door to the church. Through Herbert's ministry, three of his fellow gang members were converted and eventually became pastors.

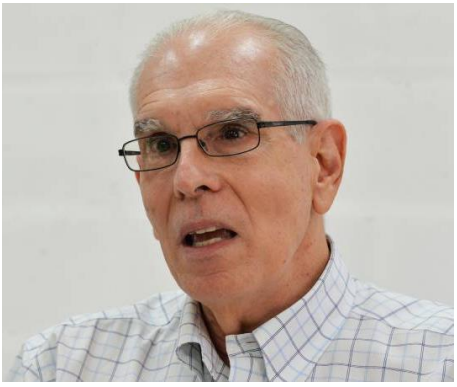
Brother Herbert was transfigured into a true microphone of God. He preached peace. Bethel Methodist Church became a Salvadoran Tabor. "But the gods of money and of power are opposed to there being transfiguration." Two years after I met Herbert, he was dead. A gang member gunned him down in front of his son while selling newspapers because Herbert's witness was bad for business. But here is the thing, Jesus wants transfiguration. He still has the power to transfigure the love of violence into the violence of love, gang bangers into God's servants, failure into hope, a sinful story into salvation history, supporting actors into protagonists, and senseless tragedies into Lenten tales that end in Easter resurrections.

True microphones

Learn from Oscar Romero, this doctor from the Latin American Church for the whole church. His teaching on transfiguration is timely. Do not become conformed to this world, become Christ-formed. Jesus is God's best microphone. You are being transfigured into Jesus' best microphone. Listen to him. Find your voice. Preach peace.

Romero and El Salvador Today

Rodolfo Cardenal SJ is the Director of the Romero Pastoral Centre at the UCA, the Jesuit University of El Salvador and a prominent social commentator as well as biographer of Blessed Rutilio Grande.



President Nayib Bukele usually appears before the nation under an appealing portrait of Archbishop Romero. He did

not put the portrait up, but he has not taken it down either. That is where the coincidences end. Bukele's government has no connection with the martyred archbishop. The country is once again in a situation similar to the one that led to the civil war. The institutions of democracy that had begun painfully to be built, starting with the 1992 peace agreements that put an end to the war, have disappeared.

There is no separation of powers, but rather just the dictatorial and repressive will of Bukele, who feels justified by his popularity. The centralisation of power and authoritarianism are accompanied by the militarisation of the state and society. Lawlessness prevails in every sphere of society.

Arbitrariness and authoritarianism have led to the suspension of basic citizens' rights since last March. Under emergency legislation the militarised security forces are authorised to capture gang members, their collaborators and any suspected associates. In other words, soldiers and the police capture whoever they want. Since March more than 50,000 detainees have been thrown into Bukele's jails, with no incriminating evidence, with no defence and in inhumane conditions, including torture. The country has the highest rate of prisoners in the world, almost 2 percent of its adult population. Security forces break into people's homes in poor neighbourhoods, interrogate residents, threaten them with imprisonment, beat them and strip them of valuables. Being young and living in a low-income neighbourhood are sufficient grounds for being caught as "suspected of illegal actions". More and more corpses are coming out of the regime's prisons.

Family members queue outside prisons seeking news of their loved ones

Police and military brutality is now another powerful reason for Salvadorans to try to emigrate. "Not to dramatise", says a woman from a small town, "they really are much worse than the three gangs put together". To the violence of

the gangs and that of the security forces are added unemployment, informal and precarious employment, inadequate and poor-quality basic services. Bukele presents himself as a young, modern and likeable president, announcing large-scale and costly infrastructure projects that, even if implemented, would only indirectly benefit the impoverished and vulnerable majority of the people. More than a quarter of the population live in poverty, most of them in rural areas. Almost 8 percent survive in extreme poverty.

Nevertheless, Bukele enjoys surprising popular acceptance. There are several reasons for this paradoxical phenomenon. The first is the public's visceral rejection of the governments of the two main parties from the time of the civil war, the right-wing ARENA and the leftist FMLN. The second is the enormous expectations created by Bukele. The third is his skilful management of social media, which exploits this rejection of traditional political parties and the president's promises of a better life. A large part of society has come to believe that the announcement of major infrastructure programmes is enough to make them a reality. The fourth reason is the belief, firmly rooted in the collective consciousness since the beginning of the last century, that the solution to national problems is the heavy hand of dictatorship, institutionalised violence and repression.

President Nayib Bukele

Breaking the vicious circle of violence is no easy task. However, it is necessary to try to achieve this without losing heart, because a large part of society confidently expects salvation through violence. It is the same expectation that led to the civil war and which Archbishop Romero prophetically denounced in his homilies. It is urgent to unmask this expectation because it breeds hatred and revenge, both personal and social. And it is vital to build peaceful social coexistence. The violence of Bukele's regime is class-based. It rages against

the impoverished and those abandoned to their fate. The current situation makes it necessary to revisit the insistent calls of Archbishop Romero to seek dialogue, to build broad consensus and to agree on pacts that facilitate reconciliation and coexistence in society.

Here there is a significant difference with the time of Archbishop Romero. Bukele's regime seeks to justify dictatorial and repressive practices on the basis of his popularity. Contradictorily, much of his popularity comes from the same poor social sectors that have been most punished by the savagery of brutal capitalism, inherited from previous governments and preserved intact. Today, middle and high-income sectors make up the core of the opposition to the regime. In other words, Bukele has alienated an important sector of society by skilfully manipulating their feelings and expectations. The scattered people, whom Archbishop Romero wanted to reunite to become the people of God, have returned to Egypt, attracted by “garlic and onions” that are not real.

Social alienation poses two challenges: the first is how to convince the great majority of the population about the huge confidence trick of which they are victims. The promises of well-being will not be fulfilled. The second is to unmask the idea that a simple majority and popularity can justify, condone or authorise the disregard of democratic institutions, the violation of human rights and repression, in order to administer public affairs more efficiently and to provide a better life for the people. As in the time of Archbishop Romero, these deceptions call for prophecy.

Romero invites us, today just as yesterday, to stand up for justice and the rights of the oppressed and the violated and not to despair because there is no obvious solution before us. It is not enough just to repeat his most rounded or best-known statements. The current crisis of humanity forces us to take charge of it with audacity and creativity, hand in hand with prophecy and utopia. The desired outcome is not a goal to be achieved, because it is considered possible, nor a goal to be renounced, because it is considered impossible, but a goal in whose direction we must walk with hope.

CELAM's Celebration of Romero

On the 22nd August a relic of Saint Oscar Romero, was placed in the chapel of the new headquarters of CELAM, the Latin American Bishops' Council in Bogotá. During the ceremony, Archbishop Jorge Eduardo Lozano, Secretary General of CELAM, pictured below, offered the following address.

Shortly before 6.30 p.m. on the evening of Monday 24 March 1980, Archbishop Romero was celebrating Mass, as he did every day, in the chapel of the hospital *"La Divina Providencia"*, which treats cancer patients. He had dedicated his sermon to meditating on the meaning of life and death. In the middle of the celebration, at the moment of offering the bread and wine, a sniper shot him in the heart from the church door, causing his instant death. His body was immediately covered with sheets; a piece of that bloody cloth is what we will place today as a relic on our altar. We are especially grateful to our brother bishops of the Bishops' Conference of El Salvador for accepting our request.

The word "martyr" is of Greek origin, and translated means "witness", and Saint Oscar Romero is a witness to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Martyrdom is the high point, but we must not fail to appreciate his life and work.

When he was appointed auxiliary bishop in 1970, he chose as the motto of his episcopal consecration "to feel with the Church". And so he did. He grieved for the Church, which he loved deeply. Cardinal Eduardo Pironio was a friend who gave him encouragement and comfort in difficult times. On one occasion - October 2015 – Pope Francis referred to the fact that he was killed twice; once by bullets, once by slander: "once he was dead, he was defamed, slandered, sullied, soiled. His martyrdom was continued even by his brothers in the priesthood and the episcopate". He continued to be "stoned with the hardest stone in the world: the tongue".

But that is what saints are like, factors of unity and communion even in the face of the hatred of their enemies. It makes one want to imitate their dedication and clarity. Today we caress and kiss his relic, his memory and his life. Before his tomb in the crypt of the Metropolitan Cathedral of San Salvador, pain, silence, unction, tears, music, dance and celebration are combined in special harmony. Expressions of the people's love for their Shepherd who gave his life for love of them.

Some years ago I heard Cardinal Gregorio Rosa Chávez say that "a Church of martyrs is an attractive, fascinating Church".

As archbishop he spent much of his time in the poorest neighbourhoods, visiting families and religious communities. His shoes got to know the mud of the city's peripheries, soaking up the smell of the roads trodden by the poor. As we say among ourselves, he prepared his preaching by "kicking around in the streets". It is beautiful what he himself tells us about how he matured in his heart what he then taught: "...That is why I ask the Lord, throughout the week, as I go about gathering the cry of the people and the pain of so much crime, the ignominy of so much violence, to give me the opportune word to console, to denounce, to call to repentance, and although I remain a voice crying out in the desert, I know that the Church is making the effort to fulfil its mission". (23/3/80, the day before his martyrdom)

Romero was also a man of deep prayer. Every day he got up early and spent a long time meditating on the Word of God and telling the Lord about the faces he had met. "We must incorporate this value of prayer into human promotion, because if we do not pray, we look at things with huge shortsightedness, with resentment, with hatred, with violence; and it is only by delving deep into the heart of God that we understand God's plans for history, it is only by being drawn into moments of intimate prayer with the Lord that we learn to see in the face of man, especially the most suffering, the poorest, the most ragged, the image of God, and we are working for Him". (16/10/77)

Our pastor Romero spoke of this contemplation of the mystery of human suffering and the depth of God's love. That is why his homily was awaited every Sunday as a light that illuminated the

path to follow and as a balm, a source of hope and consolation.

His preaching and his gestures always expressed closeness to those who felt they were nothing. His soul knew the pain of the contempt for life that is felt in every war. His people were suffering in those years of armed confrontation. His heart ached when he heard of the tortures, of the killings of peasants for claiming their rights. He suffered from the fratricidal violence. "I wish I was being listened to by those men whose hands are stained with murder. There are many of them, unfortunately! Because he who tortures is also a murderer (...) No one can lay his hand on another because man is the image of God. Thou shalt not kill!" (18/3/79).

The bloodstained relic placed in the altar of the CELAM chapel

Romero pointed out and questioned without giving a sanitised description of reality. He denounced with firmness and clarity, without ambiguous or obscure language. His was not "equidistance" but closeness to the weakest, the vulnerable, the vulnerable, the poor, the exploited and oppressed peasants.

He recognised that he was deeply loved by Jesus and upon this certainty he based his hope. "Throughout history no one has ever known a love, we would say, so crazy, so exaggerated: of giving oneself to the point of being crucified on a cross. (23/3/78)

That love of Jesus did not make him live in the clouds but shattered the numbness of what Pope Francis calls the "isolated conscience" of a few Christians who led a life of luxury and waste, indifferent to the hunger and misery of the exploited peasants and workers. That is why he taught that "a religion of Sunday Mass but of unjust weeks does not please the Lord. A religion of much prayer but with hypocrisy in the heart is not Christian". (4/12/77)

He dealt with many subjects in his catechesis: the family, the elderly, children, the mission of the Church,

agrarian reform, prayer.... He liked to be called "the catechist of the diocese" (16/9/79). I was told that when the archbishop arrived in a poor neighbourhood - such as a slum or squatter settlement - the first people to run out to greet him were the children. He had a particular weakness for them. He once preached: "How much more valuable it is to me that a child has the confidence to smile at me, to hug me and even to give me a kiss when I leave the church, than if I had millions [in money] and was frightening to children! “

He always sought peace and justice and made a strong condemnation of violence. Addressing the army, the national guard, the police, he preached on the Sunday before he was killed: "In the name of God, then, and of this long-suffering people whose cries rise to heaven more and more tumultuously every day, I beg you, I beseech you, I command you in the name of God: Stop the repression...!" (23/3/80).

His death was neither accidental nor random. They wanted to silence his voice. And Archbishop Romero did not evade the hour he had to face. Contemplating Jesus he knew that the good shepherd lays down his life for the flock, he does not run away when he sees the wolf coming. He knew how demanding the following of Jesus is: "Love of God to the point of letting oneself be killed for Him; and love of neighbour, to the point of being crucified for one's neighbour". (3/7/77)

Let us give thanks to God for this Pastor who lived the Gospel to the full, and let us be encouraged to look at ourselves in the mirror of his life.

+Jorge Eduardo Lozano

Archbishop of San Juan de Cuyo - Argentina

Secretary General of the Latin American Bishops' Council (CELAM)

.

A Contradiction of our Christianity Romero and the Scandal of Inequality

Matthew Philipp Whelan

Matthew Philipp Whelan is a theologian and lecturer at Baylor University, Texas

In recent years, the scandal of inequality has increasingly galvanised public discussion. According to the World Inequality Database the richest 1% of the world's share of total private property is five times larger than that held by the poorest 50%, with the latter owning only

a little more than 5% of the total. Such extraordinary concentration of wealth has become ordinary, part of what the French philosopher Emmanuel Mounier famously described as *le désordre établi* (the established disorder).

But just as inequality has been on the rise in recent decades, so, too, has the fight against it. The Occupy Movement in the U.S. and the U.K., along with Yellow Vest protests in France, are among the best-known examples of a truly global phenomenon. The Global Protest Tracker shows there is a worldwide proliferation of movements and protests against inequality. To cite just one example: in 2019, a metro fare price rise in Chile brought more than a million Chileans into the streets. A price rise of 30 pesos (or about £0.03) led to massive calls for fare-evasion, turnstile hopping, looting, rioting, and even torching of a metro station. When the government responded with repression, the protests only grew. Despite Chile's economy being one of the fastest growing in Latin America, inequality is rampant. The benefits of economic growth are not widely shared, as the top 10% of the population hold over 60% of pre-tax income and about 80% of net personal wealth.

The figure of St. Óscar Romero merits returning to in the light of this situation of inequality and its discontents, for inequality was very much a matter at the very heart of his whole ministry as archbishop. In what follows, I want to suggest some reasons why Romero's life and thought continues to be a source of wisdom and inspiration for those of us who regard inequality to be the scandal that it is.

Romero became archbishop of San Salvador in 1977—a time when inequality in El Salvador, like elsewhere in the world—was on the rise. However, it is crucial to see that during this same time, El Salvador's economy was actually *growing*, largely as a consequence of the development of industry and manufacturing beginning in the 1960s when the Central American Common Market was founded. In other words, one way of describing the social crisis that Romero faced as archbishop was that El Salvador's economic growth was not being justly distributed among all its people. The fruits of economic growth disproportionally benefited some and

failed to reach others, an injustice that can easily be obscured by a focus on measures like economic growth alone.

By the time he became archbishop, Romero was especially concerned with the way one particular group of Salvadorans was being excluded from that growth, namely, smallholder farmers or *campesinos*. As Romero put it in a February 1979 homily: in El Salvador "there is an ever-increasing distance between the many who have *nothing* and the few who have *everything*."

Romero Your People already made you a Saint

Among those who had nothing, those who were being excluded from the growing economy, were the vast number of *campesinos* who, over the course of the twentieth century, had lost much of the land they once possessed. By the 1970s, most of those who once had land were working as labourers on farms, following harvests across El Salvador for work, migrating to Honduras in search of livelihood, or squatting on land belonging to others.

Another way to describe what was happening is that Romero confronted a situation in which *campesinos* and other workers were not simply being *exploited* or *oppressed*; he confronted a situation in which they were being *excluded* altogether from the social and economic life of their country, treated as if they were garbage, as if they had no dignity.

More recently, Pope Francis has underscored the social significance of this phenomenon. "Exclusion," he writes, "ultimately has to do with what it means to be a part of the society in which we live; those excluded are no longer society's underside or its fringes or its disenfranchised—they are no longer even a part of it."

As Francis's words make clear, this is a phenomenon by no means unique to Romero's El Salvador. We see it in our own day, for instance, in the growing inequalities between rich and poor. We see it in the outrage people feel when basic goods they depend upon as members of society—goods like food,

clothing, shelter, and even metro cards—all of a sudden are out of reach, and the response is indifference or worse. But what especially concerned Romero was that the disparities between rich and poor in El Salvador were growing so vast that it was nearly impossible to describe all Salvadorans as being members of the same society in any meaningful sense. For as a consequence of their exclusion from land and sufficient livelihood, *campesinos* were being excluded from participation in society, thrown to its edges like refuse. In 1980, soon after Romero's death, civil war broke out, tearing apart the social fabric as Salvadorans took up arms against one another. But it is crucial to see that, in the years prior to war, Romero was hard at work, trying to heal less visible, though no less significant, tears to the social fabric stemming from inequality.

How did Romero work to repair the social fabric? One way can be found in the same homily mentioned above, in which Romero responds to the exclusion of *campesinos* by arguing for the need to defend their human rights. And "what we understand by rights," he specifies, "is that *campesinos* should have land, the workers should have their right to organise respected, and they should be paid a just wage."

In arguing that *campesinos* should have land, Romero is advocating for agrarian reform—or a more just distribution of land and property in El Salvador. That advocacy was among the most controversial aspects of his ministry, and it is a main reason many of his critics thought he was a communist. But for Romero, the rationale for agrarian reform was straightforward and followed directly from his theological convictions: God gives the earth for everyone, as a common gift for the use and enjoyment of benefit all people. And God gives the earth in common in order to build up a common life among people. Consequently, Romero believed the stark social inequality that reigned in El Salvador—in which some possessed everything and left the rest with nothing—repudiated what creation most fundamentally was. "These unjust inequalities and these massive miseries," he said in a 1977 homily, "cry out to the heavens and are a contradiction of our Christianity. They convey that we believe more in worldly things than in the

covenant of love that we have sealed with God, a covenant by which we should regard ourselves as brothers and sisters." In this way, inequality also denied the fundamental dignity of all God's human creatures. As Romero puts the point in a December 1979 homily, "There are not two categories of people. There are not some born to have everything and leave the rest with nothing; and a majority that has nothing and that cannot enjoy what God has created for all." Rather, there is only *one* category of people: those who are made in God's image and whose equality and dignity as creatures derives from that relationship to God.

I offer my blood for the redemption and resurrection of El Salvador. May my blood be the seed of freedom

For this reason, Romero's advocacy for a more just distribution of land, like his advocacy for more just wages and working conditions, as well for the ability of workers to organise, can be described a politics of common use. By this phrase, I simply mean a politics whose basic shape is patterned upon the theological claim Romero makes above: that God gives creation in common, and that it is a matter of elemental justice that all people should be able to benefit from what God has made. Because this politics prioritizes the access of all peoples to God's gift of creation and the need for sufficient livelihood, it is a politics that is necessarily focused upon those who are presently excluded from sharing in what God has created for all, as was the case for the many in El Salvador who had nothing—and that continues to be the case today.

Ultimately, Romero thought learning to share God's gift of creation was essential to what it meant to be Christian. For Christians believe that God not only gives the gift of creation in common. Christians also believe that in sending Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, God gives *God's own life* in common, and that

the overarching purpose of God's giving God's life is for *all* people to share in it and in enjoy it. Put differently, salvation is also a gift that can only be enjoyed together with others or not at all; it is an essentially social reality. And we learn to share in God's great gift of salvation, Romeo believed, by learning to share God's gift of creation together with others. Learning to share creation is how God teaches us to share in God's life—a life that, once again, is not only essentially social, but that also calls upon us to share everything we have and are.

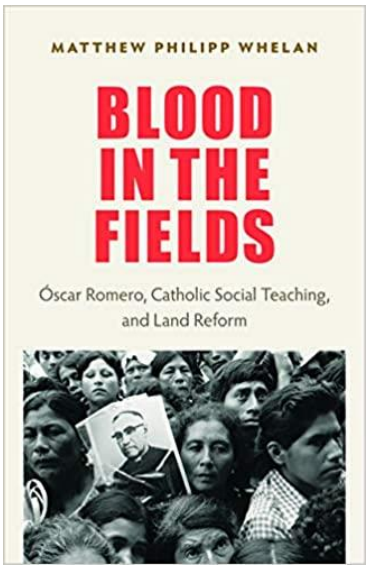
There is a passage in the early Christian treatise called the *Didache* that helps us to understand Romero's way of thinking on this point. "Do not turn away from the needy," the author of the treatise writes, but "share everything … and do not say: 'It is private property.' If you are sharers in what is imperishable, how much more so in the things that perish?" What the author means is that Christians are supposed to share the perishable things they have been given by God—things like land, money, talents—because of the even greater, imperishable things they have been given in Christ. For Romero, like for the author of the *Didache*, learning to use what is imperishable for the benefit others, especially those in need and who have been excluded from the gifts of creation, was mysteriously tied to our final destiny.

What does Romero's witness on these matters mean for us today, and for addressing inequality? First and foremost, I think Romero would urge us, much as Pope Francis does in *Laudato Si'*, to recover a sense in our own lives and habits that we are not God, that God's gift of the earth precedes our presence upon it and will outlast it as well. In the words of scripture, "the earth is the LORD's" (Ps. 24:1), and to the Lord belongs "the earth with all that is within it" (Dt. 10:14). Cultivating such a spirituality and the habits associated with it will go a long way towards transforming our own sense of what belongs to us and what belongs to others, as well as instil within us the courage and conviction to critique all claims to absolute ownership over what belongs to God.

But beyond this, as we have already seen, Romero's practice of the politics of common use focused especially upon land. Land was, after all, the traditional heart of El Salvador's agrarian economy.

And for many in the world today, it still is. Because of this, in various speeches and writings, Pope Francis frequently mentions the need for land, labour, and lodging for all. In so doing, Francis shows that the politics of common use is not just about land; it is also about the struggle against the structures and institutions that continue to exclude so many from work, housing, and other goods they need in order to participate in and contribute to life of their societies. “If we accept the great principle that there are rights born of our inalienable human dignity,” Francis writes in *Fratelli Tutti*, “we can aspire to a world that provides land, housing and work for all. This is the true path of peace.”

Finally, apart from these exclusions from land, labour, and lodging, Romero would also encourage us to ask, what are the other forms of exclusion present in our societies, exclusions that prevent people from more fully participating in and contributing to them? How can a common life—a life that transcends the divisions that mark our world and that enables us to glimpse the equality and dignity we all share—be fostered in the places we are? For, as Romero reminds us, “All people have received from God the capacity to contribute to the common good. Preventing them from doing so is also an abuse of power. It is another form of hoarding goods God has given for the benefit of all.”



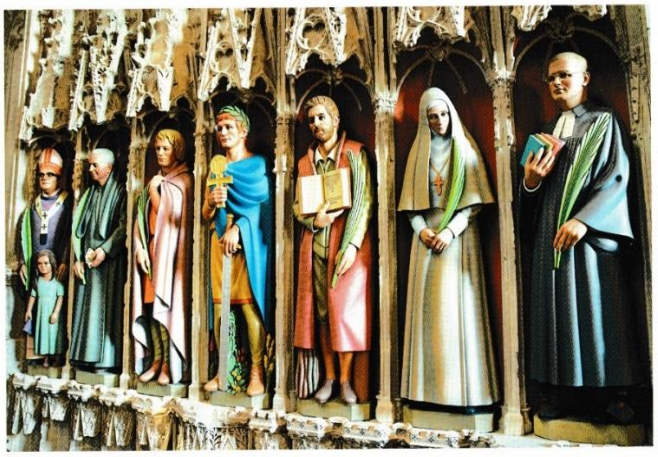
Matthew Whelan’s study “Blood in the Fields” on Romero and the urgency for land reform, is now available in paperback from Amazon. Read the review in Issue 26 of Romero News.

Rory Young - Sculptor Extraordinaire

David Skidmore

Romero Trustee, David Skidmore pays tribute to his friend, Rory Young, (seen here at work) who has been diagnosed with terminal cancer.

Many visitors to St Alban's Cathedral first learn about St Oscar Romero when they see his statue carved in stone by Rory Young and standing with six other martyrs on the medieval nave screen.



The nave screen in St. Alban's Cathedral

There are many other examples of Rory's work around the country. His exquisite carving of the Genesis cycle around the arch of the main west door of York Minster, his Millennium Pilgrim in Southwell Minster, and his memorial stone for Octavia Hill in Westminster Abbey are other examples. For every project Rory does a huge amount of research into the subject matter and the materials to be used before translating the written or drawn documentation into small-scale models and then completing the final sculpture. What is striking is that, although Rory has an encyclopaedic knowledge of the historical background to his commissions, he is driven by a recognition of the contemporary relevance of his projects.

This was vividly illustrated in 2013 when Rory was still working on the statue of Oscar Romero and he received a visit from Gaspar Romero who had come to Britain to attend the dedication of the Romero Shrine in Southwark Cathedral. Jeffrey John, who was Dean of St Albans when Rory's statues were commissioned, explained why it was important to fill the Nave Screen niches which had been empty since the destruction resulting from past religious conflicts: 'Niches which have been robbed of their statues speak of loss, emptiness and absence. But in the cathedral, and especially when gathered at the altar for the Eucharist, we know that we are surrounded by St Alban and the joyful Communion of Saints, who are alive and worshipping with us as members of the one Body of Christ.' For readers of this newsletter that will be especially true of St Oscar Romero - so Rory's other Romero work will also be of particular interest.

It was suggested by the Romero Trust that he create a bust of Archbishop

Romero wearing a mitre as in the St Albans statue. He was fascinated by Romero and jumped at the opportunity. Four copies were made – in dark brown bronze-surfaced gypsum plaster. The first is in Liverpool's Metropolitan Cathedral as the centrepiece of the Romero shrine there; the second was placed in the Great Hall at the Caritas International headquarters in the Vatican after he was proclaimed a Patron of the global Caritas confederation; the third is displayed in St Ignatius Church in Stamford Hill, London; but to Rory's great delight, the fourth has a place of honour in the chapel of the Hospitalito in San Salvador, a few feet from Romero's martyrdom site.

Sister Maria Julia Garcia with Rory Young in the Chapel of the Hospitalito in San Salvador

In 2017 Rory travelled to El Salvador to present his bust to the Carmelite Sisters there.

Rory's work in those places reminds us of what Rowan Williams wrote in his review of Catherine Pepinster's book: ***"Martyrdom is not just about unimaginably courageous individuals but also about the hopes and prayers of the whole of Christ's body. As such, it is a sign of healing and reconciliation"*.**

The news that Rory is terminally ill has come as a huge shock to his many friends, but he remains positive. 'I've had a fantastic life', he wrote to me in June, 'and am cherishing every day of this summer'. His gratitude for the care he received from the NHS led him to auction the polystyrene model of the stone gargoyle he carved for Christchurch Priory in Dorset This became a key focus of a very special celebration held on a gloriously sunny Saturday afternoon in the Gloucestershire countryside. It was his 'Fête Champêtre' - a kind of farewell thanksgiving jamboree for scores and scores of his friends and family.

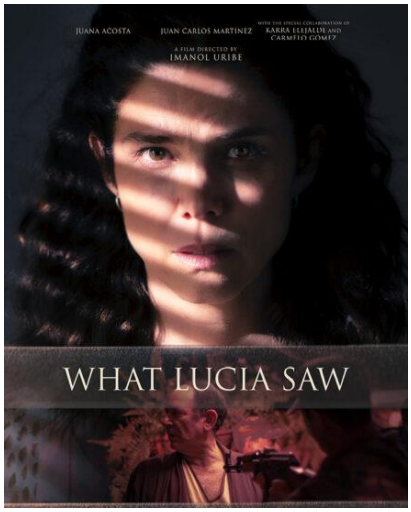
As we pray hard for Rory and thank God for his life we know that 'if you seek his monument, look around you'. In 2018 Rory was the speaker at the AGM of the Friends of St Albans Abbey and he gave a masterly talk on the statues he had carved for us. I shall always treasure that occasion and be grateful for Rory's friendship and the maquette of his St Oscar Romero which he generously gave me on that occasion.

Film Review – What Lucía Saw

To mark the end of the Ignatian Year, the British Jesuit Province organised a premiere showing of the film "What Lucia Saw":

This new film from Spanish director Imanol Uribe is set against the backdrop of the civil war in El Salvador. It is based on the events of 16 November 1989, when an elite team of the Salvadorean army murdered six Jesuit priests, and two women domestic staff at the UCA – the Central American University in San Salvador.

The soldiers had been ordered by their superiors to leave no survivors. But their killing spree had a witness: the Lucía of the film's title. The focus of the film is not on the UCA Jesuit martyrs, whose story



has been told many times, but on a less well-known victim of the UCA massacre – Lucía Cerna – a cleaner at the University who witnessed the murders. Lucía has to decide whether to tell the truth about what she saw even though she knows that this will mean that she and her family will have to flee the country and everything they have known and expose themselves to persecution by the Salvadorean government, and the CIA.

The film's director has reproduced with impressive accuracy the setting, the locations and the sense of horror and tension of El Salvador in the midst of civil war. Colombian actress, Juana Acosta, is totally convincing in the role of Lucía. Her determination to tell the truth under brutal interrogation is testimony to so many victims who have risked all for the truth.

In his review of the film, Spanish Jesuit José María Rodríguez Olaizola recounts: 'Lucía reflects the fidelity, strength, constancy, and tenacity of a strong woman. She is a figure in whom we can recognise many committed and courageous women who do not give in. The contrast between her attitude and that of all the sinister characters who surround her during the CIA interrogations is also a question about morality.' The film does not make a simplistic analysis of the conflict. It does not go deeply into the causes of the war but concentrates on the Jesuits' option for reconciliation and non-violence in El Salvador. It condemns violence and repression, and a situation in which we see the conditions of a terrorised population. And it also shows the role of the CIA as an accomplice in those situations.

In the world of today, where sometimes only the negative aspects of the Church make the news, this film shows a different reality. For in many places across the world the Church is a community of people who serve, who give their all, who accompany the suffering of the poorest, who fight for justice and who go so far as to give their lives. In the words of Fr. Dean Brackley, "it is the martyrs who make our Church credible".

We hope that the Romero Trust will be able to acquire a copy of the film and arrange showings in due course. Please look out for updates on the website.

Mural of the martyrs on the UCA campus

Democracy under Threat

A year ago, El Salvador's president Nayib Bukele declared Bitcoin legal tender in the country. Since then, Bitcoin has lost half its value. Many Salvadorans cashed in on a government bonus of $30 offered as an incentive to download a dedicated Bitcoin app, only to delete it once they received the money. Their lack of enthusiasm may have protected people from losses due to Bitcoin's volatility. But many in the country have sunk deeper into poverty in the past year. One reason – in addition to the country's

overall financial struggles – is the crackdown on gang violence by the president that has seen more than 52,000 alleged gang members rounded up since March. Instead of catching criminals, countless innocent people are being arrested to meet quotas. The majority of those detained may not even have links to gangs, according to local media and human rights organisations, and the arrests have left many poor families without breadwinners.

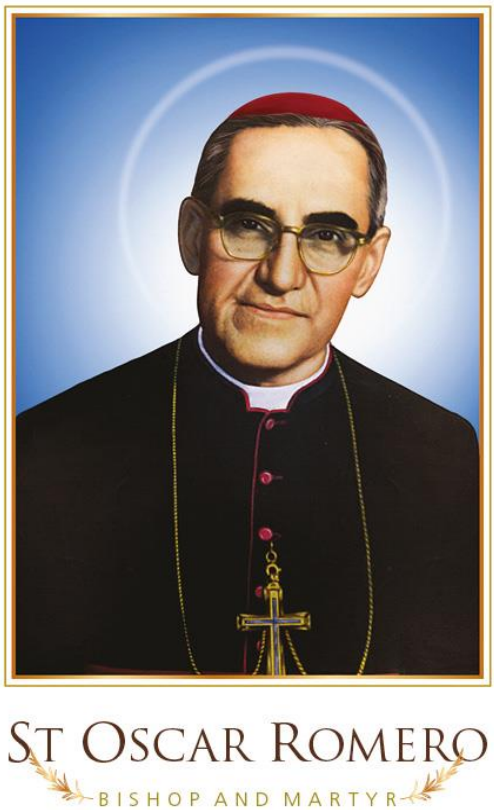
Against this background, in a speech he made to the nation on 15th September, El Salvador's Independence Day, Bukele announced that he will run for re-election in 2024 - a measure which is strictly forbidden by the Constitution. The day began with a military parade in San Salvador with all the units of the military and police security forces. It took more than two hours for thousands of troops, most carrying automatic weapons, to march past statues of the Divine Saviour of the World and Saint Oscar Romero. The parade came complete with a simulated capture of gang members by military special forces members in front of the parade watchers. At the same time as the troops were on parade, protesters marched with signs and banners denouncing actions of the Bukele regime, from arbitrary detentions under the State of Exception, to Bitcoin, to the ruling by constitutional judges put in place by Bukele which permits him to run for a second successive five-year term as president.

MARTYRS OF EL SALVADOR PRAYER CARDS

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.



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.*

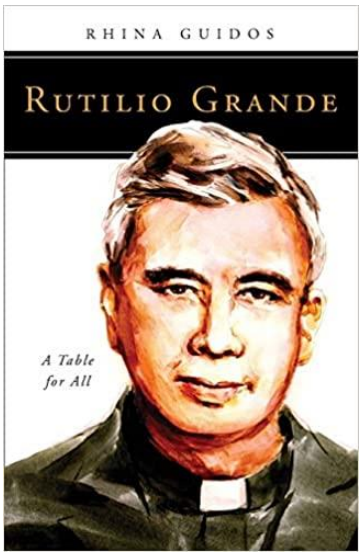
Find all the videos on:

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

CARDS, BOOKS AND RESOURCES
All available from
romerotrust@gmail.com
or by post
Archbishop Romero Trust
PO Box 70227
London E9 9BR

BOOK OFFERS

'Rutilio Grande - A Table for All'

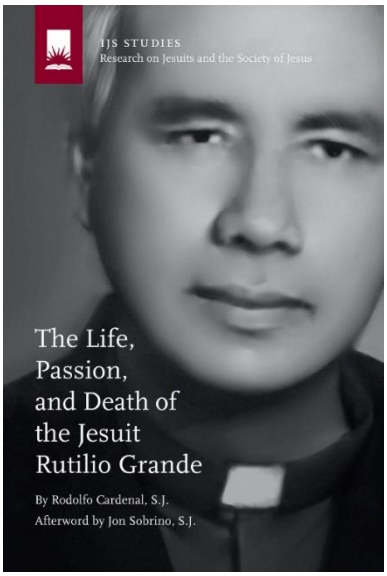


by Rhina Guidos. A short and well-written biography which beautifully captures the life and ministry of the soon-to-be-Blessed Rutilio Grande".

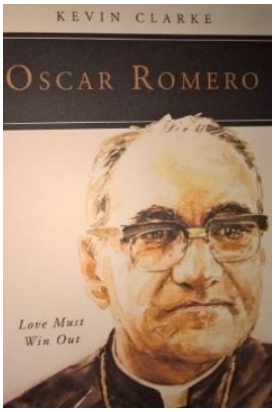
£9 (incl. p&p)

The Life, Passion and Death of the Jesuit Rutilio Grande 482 pages

This is **THE definitive** biography of Rutilio by his colleague, historian and theologian Rodolfo Cardenal SJ. With an after - word essay by Jon Sobrino SJ.

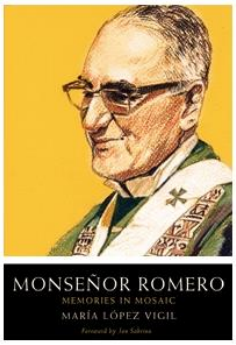


£16 (incl. p&p)



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

£8 (incl. p&p).

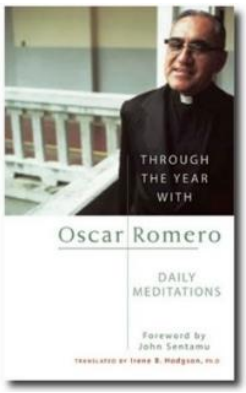


Oscar Romero: Memories in Mosaic

Romero remembered by the people who worked with him, lived with him and prayed with him compiled by María López Vigil.

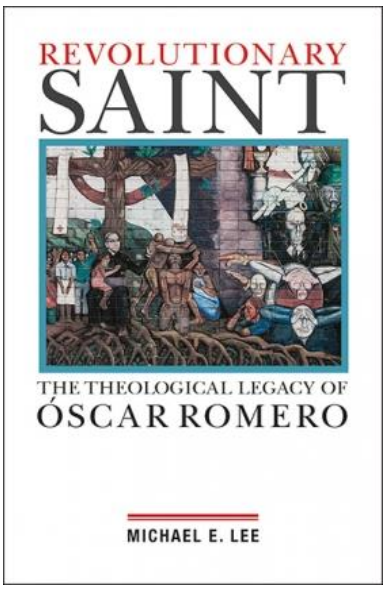
Arguably the best book on Romero. Unput-downable. Highly recommended.

£16 (incl. p&p)



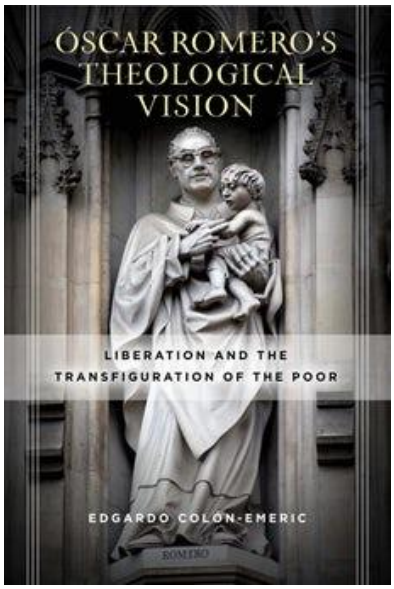
Through the Year with Oscar Romero: Daily Meditations

Powerful and moving selections from Saint Oscar Romero's homilies. **£9 (incl. p&p)**



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



Throughout this remarkable book the author takes us ever deeper into the theological development of the martyr bishop Saint Oscar Romero.

Special price of **£25 (incl p& p)**

FRIENDS OF ROMERO

Thank you so much for your continued support. Your donations help produce this newsletter and put on events such as Romero Week, the Romero Lecture, and to work for the canonisation of the Martyrs of El Salvador.

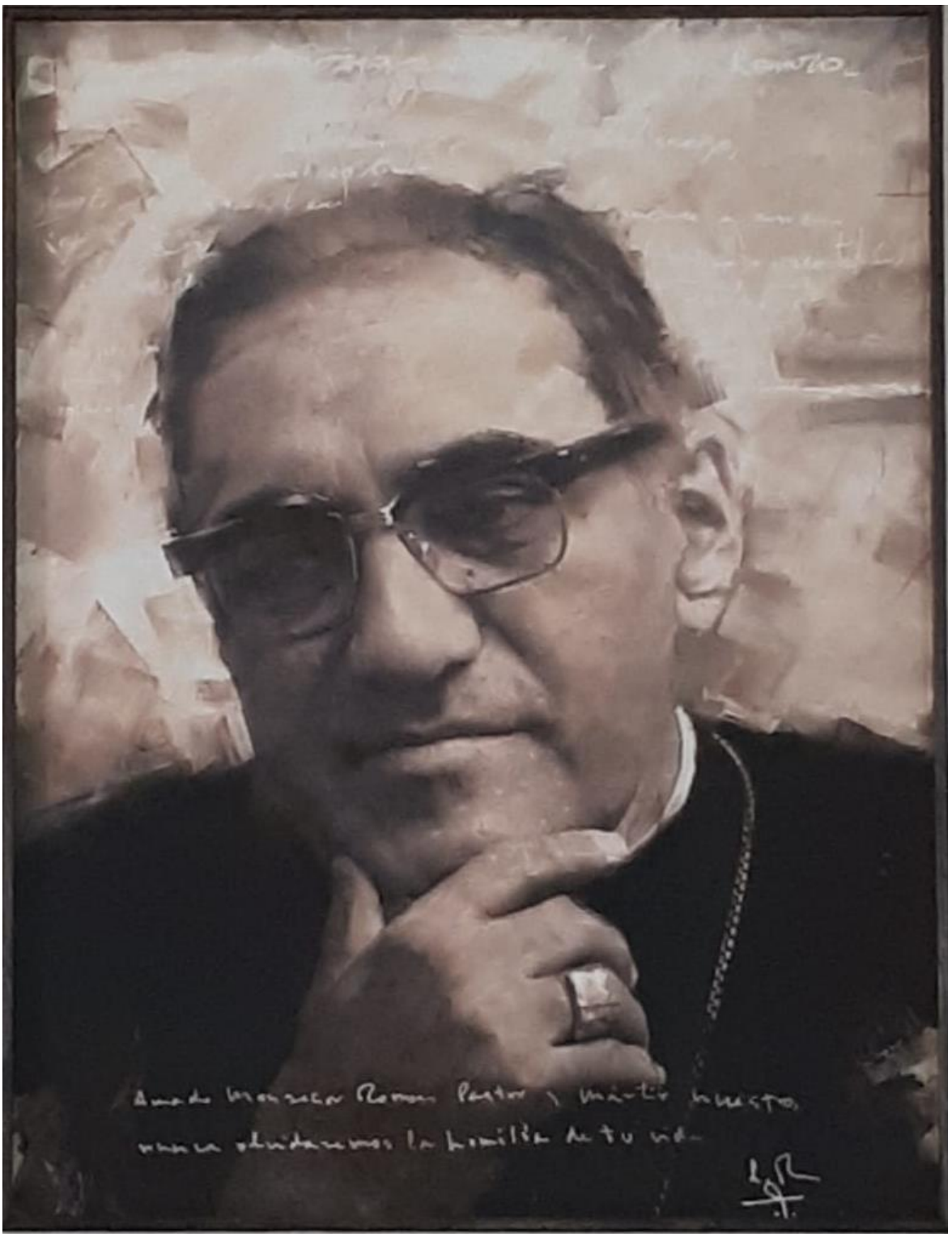
The Trust's reserves are modest, and we rely entirely on volunteers to carry out our work. If you would like to make a donation, we would be hugely grateful. Please send cheques payable to the Romero Trust to our PO Box address:

Archbishop Romero Trust,
PO Box 70227, London E9 9BR

or give online at our website – www.romerotrust.org.uk

Please remember that if you Gift Aid your donation we can claim an extra 25%.

Picture credits and acknowledgements:
Canonisation Office – San Salvador, ICN
Universidad Centroamericana-UCA
El Salvador Perspectives, David Skidmore
The St Albans Cathedral Martyr Statues. Photo © Mike Smith *With permission of the Dean and Chapter of St Albans*



The dedication reads: Beloved Monseñor Romero, our Pastor and Martyr. We shall never forget the homily of your life.