

The breathtaking audacity of Romero

Julian Filochowski says the martyred archbishop had a Christ-like boldness



This Sunday, the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, would have been the 93rd birthday of the martyred Archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero. No doubt there will be a fine celebration for him with the angels, archangels and all the company of heaven.

This year has already seen an astonishing explosion of liturgical celebrations and special events in El Salvador, Britain, and across the globe in remembrance of Archbishop Romero, this year being the 30th anniversary of his assassination.

It was a veritable “magnicide”. A Hollywood film set and choreography could not have matched this real 20th-century martyrdom. In a Catholic country, named after Christ the Saviour, the Metropolitan Archbishop was shot dead in the middle of Mass. As he ended his homily and moved to the centre of the altar to present the bread and wine at the Offertory he was killed with a single bullet fired by a death squad marksman, who was driven away and never definitively identified to this day.

It all happened in the Chapel of the Divine Providence Cancer Hospital where Archbishop Romero lived, at 6.26pm on Monday, March 24 1980. There was shock, disbelief, despair and weeping across the land but especially in the poor communities among the simple rural folk and city dwellers whom he had loved so dearly, defended so courageously and for whom in the end he gave his life. But there were very different reactions amongst the military officers and the country’s most powerful and wealthy elites whose interests the security forces protected with brutal and deadly repression; in fact, there were champagne toasts and fireworks let off to celebrate the Archbishop’s passing by those who had vilified him and come to hate him with a ferocious passion.

It brought to an end three dramatic and unforgettable years of his ministry at the head of the archdiocese of San Salvador. They were three years when Oscar Romero gradually became visible to the world through his now legendary preaching and his presentation of Catholic social teaching and the Magisterium of the Church to a nation engulfed by explosive social tensions. But especially through his weekly homilies which included factual accounts and denunciations of kidnappings, killings and atrocities perpetrated by both the military regime and Left-wing guerrillas.

In a country racked with human rights abuses, a land of lies and cover-up that was edging every day closer to civil war, Archbishop Romero fearlessly spoke the truth, week in and week out. He took on the wealthy landowners for their exploitation of seasonal workers, and he took on the military for their torture, killings and terrorisation of the rural population. This brought down persecution on the Church and six priests and dozens of lay catechists were killed in those three years leading up to his own assassination.

But he also took on the militant Leftist groups for their idolatry of “the party” and the kidnappings and executions that flowed from that; and he condemned all those who attempted to manipulate the Christian communities for ideological ends. There was to be no ambiguity or confusion of purpose between the local ecclesial communities and the pastoral action of the diocese with any other groupings organised towards partisan political goals.

Parallels are increasingly being drawn between Oscar Romero’s three years as Archbishop of San Salvador and the three years of the public life of Jesus Christ. The preaching, the teaching, the prayer and solitude, the closeness to the poor and the tender love of the vulnerable and destitute, the courage and resolution, the insults hurled, the pharisaic plotting against him, the doubts and the fears. There was the moment of Gethsemane for Romero as he prayed beside the body of the murdered priest, Rutilio Grande, and realised that if he were to follow this through to its final consequences it would, as he wrote “put me on the road to Calvary”. And he assented; he made a fundamental option for the poor and it took him to his martyrdom.

On the day before his death he spoke in his sermon to the rank and file soldiers in the army being ordered to fire on innocent civilians. With great passion he pleaded with them to ignore an unjust command to kill which was superseded by the Law of God which says: “Thou Shalt Not Kill.” And in concluding he ordered them “in the name of God: stop the repression”. It was interpreted as encouraging the enlisted soldiers to mutiny and insurrection when the country was “drenched in bloodshed” on the very eve of civil war.

In retrospect it seems similar to Jesus’s action in overturning the tables in the Temple prior to his Crucifixion. Romero spoke with breathtaking audacity to try to save his people even though he knew it might well hasten his death – which like Christ’s was in the end an execution in public.

But the spirit of Archbishop Romero is very much alive today, especially in El Salvador. In a newspaper interview, the week before he died he said: “If they kill me I will rise again in the Salvadoran people. I am not boasting, I say it with the greatest humility... Martyrdom is a grace from God which I do not believe I deserve. But if God accepts the sacrifice of my life, then... I pardon and bless those who do it... But I wish that they could realise they are wasting their time. A bishop may die, but the Church of God, which is the people, will never die.”

Twelve long years of civil war followed with a toll of over 70,000 deaths including still more priests, nuns and pastoral workers. The 1992 Peace Accords brought a Truth Commission which identified those who had planned, financed and arranged the killing of Archbishop Romero, although not the one who pulled the trigger. It took

until this year for a new president of El Salvador, Mauricio Funes, to break with the past and admit to what had been done. In the name of the government of El Salvador he made a public, emotion-laden, apology to the Romero family, the Church and the people of El Salvador for the complicity of the state and its agents in Archbishop Romero's killing and in the subsequent cover up and blocking of justice. It was like Henry II going to Canterbury Cathedral to beg pardon for the killing of Thomas Becket.

In 1990 the Cause for Oscar Romero's beatification was opened with the blessing of the Vatican. Pope John Paul II did not so much link Romero's killing to Becket of Canterbury but to his own predecessor as Bishop of Kraków centuries earlier, Stanislaus Szczepanowski. It was a haunting throwback to the patron saint of Poland, to whom John Paul was devoted, killed in Kraków cathedral in 1079 on the orders of King Bolesław and canonised in 1253. In his later years John Paul more than once expressed his desire to beatify Archbishop Romero, whom he had come to admire greatly: but the process suffered many delays and it remains today part of the unfinished business of his pontificate.

Pope Benedict stated publicly in 2007 that Archbishop Romero "merits beatification", thereby giving great encouragement to the millions who have already "canonised him in their hearts". But the continuing delays breed frustration. It is the fervent hope of those who offer private prayer for his intercession that there will be some formal announcement from Rome, before this anniversary year is over, that the recognition of Romero as a holy martyr of the Church is finally in sight.

He is today, ironically, a focus of unity in the Church and between communions. Archbishop Romero stands as a truly credible witness to the Gospel and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ for the 21st century, a figure the Church can proudly hold aloft in these doubting and sceptical times.

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Julian Filochowski writes as chairman of the Archbishop Romero Trust. The texts of Archbishop Romero's homilies and pastoral letters together with full details of the Trust's work can be found on its website at www.romerotrust.org.uk