

The Century of Romero: 1917 – 2017

In August 2017 we celebrated the centenary of Blessed Oscar Romero's birth. This is the timeline of those one hundred years with key dates in his life and the subsequent road to canonisation.

1917

Oscar Arnulfo Romero y Galdámez was born in Ciudad Barrios on August 15th, into a family of modest means, the second of eight children of Santos Romero and Guadalupe de Jesús Galdámez.

1931

He left behind his apprenticeship to a local carpenter and entered the minor seminary in San Miguel, run by the Claretians.

1937

In January he began studies at the major seminary in San Salvador. In September he was sent to the Pío Latino College in Rome and studied for the priesthood at the Gregorian University.

1942

Romero was ordained priest in Rome on April 4th and then began studies for a doctorate on ascetical theology.

1943

With the intensification of World War II he was sent back to El Salvador, via Cuba where he was interned for three months, arriving in his home diocese of San Miguel in December.

1944 He celebrated his first Mass in Ciudad Barrios on January 11th. Soon afterwards he was appointed Parish Priest of Anamorós and subsequently as Pastor and Cathedral Administrator in San Miguel.

There followed more than two decades of devoted priestly service to the Church in San Miguel.

1967

On April 4th Romero celebrated the silver jubilee of his ordination and received the title 'Monsignor'. He left San Miguel behind and moved to San Salvador to take up the position of Secretary of the Salvadoran Bishops' Conference. He lived at the major seminary where he befriended the Jesuit priest, Rutilio Grande, who was on the staff there.

1970

On June 21st Romero was ordained an Auxiliary Bishop in San Salvador, with Fr Rutilio Grande as his Master of Ceremonies. He chose as his episcopal motto *Sentire cum Ecclesia* - 'To think and feel with the Church'.

1971

Following a spiritual retreat in Mexico, Romero determined to tackle his scrupulosity and certain obsessive compulsive traits in his personality. He undertook counselling with cognitive therapy and subsequently overcame them.

1973

Romero became involved in a public dispute with the Jesuits, whom he accused of promoting Marxism dressed up as 'liberating education' in their High School.

1974

Romero was appointed Bishop of Santiago de María, a small rural diocese in the coffee growing region.

1975

A massacre of five campesinos by the National Guard at Tres Calles in the diocese profoundly shocked Romero, and he wrote a letter of protest to the country's President.

1977 February

Romero was appointed and installed as Archbishop of San Salvador amidst unprecedented national tension following fraudulent presidential elections and the massacre of protesters.

1977 March

On Saturday March 12th Romero's friend, Fr Rutilio Grande, was assassinated by a death squad together with two companions (Manuel Solórzano and Nelson Lemus) as they drove into the countryside to say Mass. Romero ordered that the following Sunday, March 20th, the Churches of the diocese be closed and all the masses cancelled. He celebrated a 'single mass', attended by 100,000 people, in front of the Cathedral. At the end of the month Romero was received in audience in Rome by Pope Paul VI. Romero explained to him the background to the crisis in El Salvador.

1977 May

On May 11th Fr Alfonso Navarro was assassinated at his rectory, together with a young parishioner, Luis Torres. A week later the town of Aguilares was occupied by the army and the parish church was used as a barracks with the desecration of the Blessed Sacrament.

1977 June

On June 21st, the White Warrior Union issued their infamous "War Order No. 6," threatening to kill all Jesuits in the country who had not left within 30 days.

1977 July

Since there had been no attempt to identify the perpetrators of Rutilio Grande's murder, in an unprecedented gesture, Romero did not attend the inauguration of the new President on July 1st.

1978 February

Romero was awarded an Honorary Doctorate from Washington's Georgetown University. It was conferred in the Cathedral in San Salvador on February 14th.

1978 June

Romero made a second visit to Rome. There were frosty meetings and admonitions from Curial officials but Pope Paul VI once again gave Romero his firm support.

1978 August

Pope Paul VI died on August 6th. Dated that same day, Romero issued, jointly with Bishop Rivera Damas, a Pastoral Letter examining the critical issues surrounding the Church and the Popular Political Organisations. Two days afterwards a hasty riposte was issued by four other bishops - publicizing dramatically the deep divisions in the hierarchy.

1978 October

After John Paul I's untimely death, Karol Wojtyła became Pope John Paul II.

1978 November

The Nobel Committee in Oslo received Romero's nomination for the 1979 Nobel Peace Prize signed by 118 British MPs and Peers. On November 28th in San Salvador Fr Ernesto Barrera was killed by the security forces under disputed circumstances.

1978 December

A three-person delegation from the British Parliamentary Human Rights Group visited El Salvador to offer support to Romero and to investigate the human rights situation. They discovered interrogation and torture cells inside the National Guard headquarters. On December 14th Argentine Archbishop Antonio Quarracino arrived in San Salvador on an Apostolic Visitation to the diocese, to investigate the divisions in the episcopate - and Romero.

1979 January

Fr Octavio Ortiz and four young retreatants were killed by security forces at the El Despertar Centre in San Antonio Abad parish on January 20th. Two days later Romero travelled to Puebla, Mexico, for the CELAM Latin American Bishops' meeting. Although he was not sent as a representative of the Salvadoran bishops, his presence was a *cause célèbre* at the meeting.

1979 February

The Puebla Conference concluded. Romero received expressions of solidarity from bishops across the continent shocked at the persecution of the Church in El Salvador.

1979 May

In the first days of the month Romero visited Rome for the third time as archbishop and was received in private audience by Pope John Paul II. The meeting was difficult but the outcome was satisfactory for Romero. On May 8th, whilst Romero was away, police fired on a peaceful

demonstration taking place in front of the Cathedral, leaving 25 dead and 70 wounded. Foreign journalists filmed the whole scene.

1979 June

Fr Rafael Palacios was assassinated in the street in Santa Tecla after receiving death threats.

1979 July

The Sandinista Revolution overthrew the Somoza dictatorship in neighbouring Nicaragua.

1979 August

Fr Alirio Napoleon Macias was gunned down by three police agents inside his parish church, San Esteban Catarina, in San Vicente diocese.

1979 October

A military coup on Monday October 15th brought to an end the regime of General Carlos Romero and installed a civilian-military junta to govern the country. Romero gave a guarded and conditional welcome to the change. This was denounced as a betrayal by some leftist groups.

1979 December

In the last days of the month Brazilian Cardinal Aloisio Lorscheider made an unofficial fact-finding mission to El Salvador on behalf of the Holy See.

1980 January

The civilian-military junta collapsed and was replaced by a second junta following an agreement between the military and the Christian Democrat party. Escalating repression culminated in the firing on an orderly demonstration on January 22nd leaving 20 dead and 120 wounded. Civil war was in the air.

1980 February

Romero made a lightning visit to Belgium to receive an honorary doctorate from Louvain University on February 2nd. On February 17th Romero sent an Open Letter to US President Jimmy Carter pleading for an end to military aid to the Salvadoran security forces.

1980 March

A suitcase of dynamite was discovered behind the altar at the Basilica where Romero was to deliver his Sunday morning homily on March 9th. In his last Sunday homily on March 23rd Romero pronounced his own death sentence when he demanded that rank and file soldiers refuse to obey sinful orders to fire on innocent civilians.

1980 Monday March 24th

Romero was assassinated at 18.26 in the evening as he celebrated mass in the chapel of the Divine Providence cancer hospital where he lived.

1980 Tuesday March 25th

Within twelve hours of Romero's killing, in Canterbury Cathedral, the site of Thomas a Becket's 12th century martyrdom, Robert Runcie was installed as Archbishop of Canterbury becoming the spiritual leader and symbolic head of the worldwide Anglican Communion. A special bond was thus established between Oscar Romero and the Anglican Church.

1980 Sunday March 30th

It was Palm Sunday. Romero's funeral mass in front of the Cathedral was disrupted when bombs were thrown into the crowds. Some 40 people died in the shooting and stampede that followed.

1980 May

On May 7th former army Major Roberto D'Aubuisson was arrested with a group of civilians and soldiers at a farm. The raiders found documents connecting him and the civilians as organizers and financiers of the death squad who killed Archbishop Romero. The National Guard carried out a massacre at the Sumpul River on May 14th, in which an estimated 600 civilians were killed, mostly women and children.

1980 June

Fr Cosme Spessotto, an Italian Franciscan missionary was shot through the head whilst at prayer in the parish church of San Juan Nonualco on June 14th.

1980 December

Four US women religious, Maura Clarke, Ita Ford, Dorothy Kazel and Jean Donovan, were raped and murdered by soldiers of the National Guard on December 2nd.

From the end of 1980 civil war engulfed El Salvador and ended only in 1992.

1981 December

On December 11th the Salvadoran Army killed more than 800 civilians in a massacre that took place in and around the village of El Mozote, in Morazán department. Many lesser-known massacres occurred at this time.

1983 March

On March 6th Pope John Paul II made a pastoral visit to El Salvador and, although it had not been included in the prepared schedule, he demanded to be taken to pray at Romero's tomb in the Cathedral.

1989 August

The film "Romero," starring Raul Julia as Archbishop Romero, was released. It made Romero familiar to many in the English-speaking world.

1989 November

On November 16th at their residence on the campus of the Catholic University (UCA), six Jesuit priests - Ignacio Ellacuria, Segundo Montes, Ignacio Martin-Baro, Joaquín López y López, Juan Ramón Moreno, and Amando López - plus their housekeeper, Elba Ramos, and her daughter, Celina, were taken from their beds and summarily executed by a uniformed patrol of the Atlacatl Battalion.

1990 March

At a massive celebration of the 10th anniversary of Romero's martyrdom on March 24th, Archbishop Rivera Damas announced that he would open the process for Romero's canonisation. To mark the occasion the archdiocese published the full texts of all Romero's homilies and the transcription of his tape-recorded diary.

1992 January

The Chapultepec Peace Accords were signed and brought a close to the Salvadoran civil war.

1993 March

On March 5th the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador, established under the auspices of the United Nations, issued its report on the human rights abuses that had taken place during the war. Whilst unable to identify the marksman, it named Roberto D'Aubuisson as ordering the killing of Archbishop Romero which a death squad that he led carried out. Soon after the report's release, the Salvadoran government passed an Amnesty Law foreclosing the prosecution of war crimes in El Salvador.

1994 May

With the necessary authorisations secured and the preparatory work completed, the diocesan process for Romero's beatification was formally launched on May 12th.

1994 November

Archbishop Rivera Damas died

1996 February

Pope John Paul made a second visit to El Salvador, where he once again visited Romero's tomb. He told catechists there that he was pleased that Romero's memory was still alive among the people.

1996 November

The diocesan process was formally closed and, with the blessing of the new archbishop, Fernando Sáenz Lacalle, the documentation was sent to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints in Rome with the positive recommendation that Romero be considered for beatification – Mgr Vincenzo Paglia being designated as Postulator of the Cause.

1998 July

The statues of ten modern martyrs, including Archbishop Romero, were unveiled over the West Door of Westminster Abbey, London, in a religious ceremony with Queen Elizabeth and many leaders of the Anglican Communion present.

2000 May

One of the highlights of the millennium jubilee year celebrations was a solemn ceremony at Rome's ancient Colosseum where Pope John Paul II paid tribute to the Christian martyrs of the 20th century, singling out for particular mention Archbishop Romero. Soon afterwards the Cause for Romero's Beatification was brought to a halt and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in the Vatican set up a panel to investigate Romero's orthodoxy as evidenced in his homilies and pastoral statements.

2005 April

John Paul II died; and Joseph Ratzinger was elected to succeed him, becoming Pope Benedict XVI.

2007 May

On May 9th in a press conference aboard the flight to Brazil to attend the CELAM Meeting in Aparecida, Pope Benedict responded to a journalist's question about Romero as follows: "That Romero as a person merits beatification, I have no doubt." These words were removed from the Vatican website's transcription of the remarks.

2012 December

Pope Benedict told Mgr Paglia, the Postulator of Romero's Cause, and Archbishop Müller, the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, that Romero's Cause could move forward.

2013

Pope Benedict XVI resigned in February and Jorge Bergoglio, taking the name Francis, was elected in March as the first Latin American-born Pope.

2013 May

Pope Francis gave fresh momentum to the paralysed beatification Cause with the announcement that the Cause which had been blocked (in Pope Francis' words, "for prudential reasons") was now definitively 'unblocked'.

2013 July

The Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Archbishop Müller, confirmed that there was no longer any doctrinal reservation standing against Archbishop Romero. The CDF had given their '*nihil obstat*' or approval of his cause for beatification.

2014 August

Pope Francis told reporters during an airborne papal press conference that, "For me, Romero is a man of God." He noted that "The postulators must move now because there are no impediments."

2015 January

On January 8th a panel of nine theologians advising the Vatican's Congregation for Causes of the Saints voted unanimously to recognize Oscar Romero as a martyr *in odium fidei* (out of hatred of the faith). This confirmed that no miracle was necessary prior to beatification.

2015 February

The Congregation for the Causes of the Saints at its plenary meeting on February 3rd accepted the advice of its theologians and recommended Romero's beatification. The same day Pope Francis issued the Decree for the Beatification.

2015 May

Romero's beatification took place in the Plaza Salvador del Mundo in San Salvador on Pentecost Saturday, May 23rd, with 100 cardinals and bishops, 1400 priests, and around half a million lay people in attendance. A solar halo appeared round the sun at the moment that the decree of beatification was formally declaimed.

Blessed Oscar Romero – pray for us!

2016 January

In moving towards his canonisation, for which a verified miracle is required, details of three extraordinary cures attributed to the intercession of Blessed Oscar Romero were sent to Rome for examination by the medical and theological panels which advise the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints.

2016 February

The San Salvador diocesan process of the Cause for Beatification of Fr Rutilio Grande, begun in 2015, reached its final stages, having encountered no significant obstacles. Given Pope Francis' unmistakable support for the Cause, Fr Anton Witwer, the appointed Postulator in Rome, stood ready to move the Cause forward as speedily as possible.

2016 November

A potential miracle was identified which seemed likely to meet the criteria for a canonisation miracle. Mrs Cecilia Maribel Flores de Rivas from San Salvador, diagnosed as fatally ill during pregnancy, made a rapid and complete recovery after seeking the intercession of Blessed Oscar Romero. A diocesan tribunal was set up to investigate the case, and it reported positively early in 2017.

2017 March

The potential miracle was submitted to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints in Rome with all the corresponding medical records and documentation. There was an understanding that the Cause would be dealt with by the Congregation as a matter of urgency.

2017 June

San Salvador's auxiliary bishop, Gregorio Rosa Chavez, was appointed a cardinal by Pope Francis in an extraordinary affirmation of Archbishop Romero and his legacy. Bishop Rosa Chavez had worked closely with Archbishop Romero and for thirty five years had doggedly kept the cause for Romero's beatification alive. Many interpreted the appointment as the equivalent of making Romero himself a cardinal.

2017 August

The centenary of Blessed Oscar Romero's birth was an occasion for joyful celebrations worldwide. Cardinal Rosa Chavez led a huge pilgrimage on foot from Romero's tomb in San Salvador to his birthplace in Ciudad Barrios, a walk of 157 kilometres. Cardinal Ricardo Ezzati, the Archbishop of Santiago in Chile, went to El Salvador as the special envoy of Pope Francis for the celebratory masses on 15 August, Romero's 100th birthday.

2017 September

Westminster Abbey hosted a special Romero Evensong on Saturday, 23 September, attended by bishops and archbishops of the Catholic, Anglican and Orthodox churches, and leaders of other churches, with a congregation of some 1300. Emeritus Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, preached. The service was the occasion for the first performance of a specially commissioned work by James MacMillan, entitled 'A Special Appeal'. This anthem brought together words from Psalm 31 with extracts from Romero's penultimate homily. You can listen to a recording of the service by visiting: goo.gl/ozTe3F.

2018 March

On 6 March, Pope Francis authorised the Congregation for the Causes of Saints to promulgate the decree recognising the miracle attributed to the intercession of Blessed Oscar Romero. This is the final stage before Romero is officially proclaimed as a saint.

2018 May

On 19 May, at an ordinary public consistory called by Pope Francis, Romero's canonization was confirmed and formalised. Sunday 14 October 2018 was announced as the date for the ceremony to take place in Rome. Blessed Oscar Romero was to be canonised along with Blessed Pope Paul VI and five others.