

Church bells rang out in San Salvador this week to celebrate the formal declaration by Pope Francis that Archbishop Oscar Romero died as a martyr. The move paves the way for his beatification this year and his declaration as a saint soon after / By JULIAN FILOCHOWSKI

# Martyr and future icon

**I**T IS now 35 years since Oscar Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador, was assassinated by a marksman's bullet as he celebrated a Requiem Mass in the chapel of the cancer hospital where he lived.

Throughout his three years as archbishop his country was in turmoil; a tiny group of land-owning families and the military government were blocking land reform and social change in the central American nation of El Salvador through massive electoral fraud and violent repression of any protest.

Romero was a passionate exponent of the Second Vatican Council and could quote from the whole corpus of Catholic Social Teaching and the Latin American Church's commitments made at Medellín and Puebla. He saw the plight of the poor and put himself alongside them and applied that church teaching to the desperate plight of the grass-roots Christian communities made up of landless peasants in the countryside and poverty-stricken urban dwellers in the capital city. Romero offered pastoral care and social assistance, but above all he defended them and advocated for their basic human rights as they were abused, tortured, imprisoned and killed.

The country was sliding towards civil war and Romero did everything in his power to prevent it, opposing the violence perpetrated by both the Left and the Right.

Romero's ministry was completely consistent with liberation theology, but Romero could not be described as "a leading proponent", as is often suggested. His teaching was radical yet completely orthodox, as Vatican authorities have now agreed.

From Britain, Cardinal Basil Hume wrote letters of comfort and support to Romero. British parliamentarians nominated Romero for the 1978 Nobel Peace Prize and I accompanied an all-party delegation to El Salvador to report on the human-rights situation and to demonstrate support for him. The simple truth is Romero was loved by his people and hated by the oligarchy and the military. They financed and authorised his assassination, which was carried out by one of their death squads on that fateful day – 24 March 1980.

The Latin American people quickly "canonised" Romero in their hearts, and the decision to seek Romero's official canonisation was announced in 1990 by his successor, Archbishop Rivera. By 1994, the formalities were completed and the diocesan process was opened.



**A BANNER** of Archbishop Oscar Romero is carried through the streets of San Salvador

The report was finalised and the cause was sent, with his blessing, to Rome by Rivera's successor, Archbishop Sáenz, a member of Opus Dei. Pope John Paul II, initially dubious about Romero, came round to seeing him as a courageous martyr of the Church and in his later years reportedly asked when he could beatify him.

The opposition came rather from a group of Latin American curial cardinals. Self-appointed devil's advocates, headed by Alfonso López Trujillo from Colombia, they asserted, despite testimony and evidence to the contrary, that Romero was naive, manipulated by a group of Jesuits and other suspect clergy, and sympathetic to Marxism. Deep down, they feared that his canonisation would be the canonisation of liberation theology, which they had spent their whole episcopal lives trying to stamp out.

They secured a meticulous, line-by-line examination of Romero's homilies and writings carried out by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) to search for doctrinal defects. This brought a delay of seven years, which saw out John Paul's pontificate. Additionally, the cause has been constantly plagued by bureaucratic obstructionism from sympathisers of this anti-Romero stance among lower-ranking curial officials, and the "block" stayed in place.

Pope Benedict seemed ready to release the cause in 2007, saying in a press interview that Romero "merits beatification". But the cause languished for six more years in the CDF amid

assertions that Romero's beatification as a martyr would be "manipulated" for political ends by the party of the Left in El Salvador.

Just before his resignation, Pope Benedict told Cardinal Gerhard Müller at the CDF that the time had come to release the cause. But the action came in May 2013 with the announcement that Pope Francis had formally "unblocked" the cause and ordered all Vatican dicasteries to offer full cooperation to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. In September 2013, the *nihil obstat* – "nothing hinders" – came from Cardinal Müller, who was always sympathetic to Romero and less worried about the perceived risks of liberation theology.

In August 2014, Pope Francis exhorted the promoter of the cause and the congregation to make haste and specifically to sort out the argument surrounding whether he was killed "in hatred of the faith", allowing him to be considered a martyr. Romero's opponents frequently expressed their readiness to see Romero beatified as a confessor, but not a martyr. Their contention is that Romero was killed not for hatred of his faith-filled preaching but for what they classify as his ancillary "political statements".

In January, the theological advisers to the congregation voted unanimously (9-0) that Romero had indeed been killed in *odium fidei*. The last step was the meeting this week when the cardinals of the congregation endorsed their theologians' view and passed this directly to Pope Francis. Within the hour, he authorised the promulgation of a decree of martyrdom!

Everyone wants to see canonisation completed by August 2017, the centenary of Romero's birth. But it is likely to come more speedily, with widespread speculation that Pope Francis will dispense with further canonical requirements and go ahead with an equipollent canonisation in Rome. Pope Francis clearly admires Romero, and reading his *Evangelii Gaudium* document constantly brings Romero to mind.

My view is that St Oscar Romero could well become an icon for this pontificate alongside Francis of Assisi, exemplifying a faith that does justice, and that courageous love of the poor that Pope Francis encourages and tries to model.

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