

# **What Does Archbishop Romero's Beatification Mean for Central America?**

*Keynote lecture delivered by*

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## **What does Archbishop Romero's beatification mean for Central America?**

I cannot deny that my first statement may be hard for you and me: Oscar Arnulfo Romero has been politically manipulated for many years, and the hardest part is that he has even been rejected by others, even within the Catholic Church.

But his beatification has made all manipulation and rejection fade away. Romero belongs to all and is for all, exactly as he himself desired in his life as a priest and bishop.

I want to start at the end. The Church's recognition of Romero is a new sign of the end of an epoch that the Catholic Church has been living in Central America. His valiant commitment in favor of the poor and against violence had long ago spread beyond official channels of approval. Many people already saw Romero as a man of God, who had become an example and the subject of song; for others, he was a political symbol. It's over now! Romero is Romero.

The Church's gesture of beatifying him leads us to overcome old debates and encourages us, the people of Central America, to find an answer to this new epoch, armed with renewed confidence and commitment to the marginalized, or—as Pope Francis says—to people who are treated as disposable, and the victims of violence today.

There have been all kinds of reactions to the announcement of the cause of beatification for martyrdom *in odium fidei*. His beatification has a profound religious significance and powerful meaning for the Church in Central America.

Nonetheless, we have sadly heard statements such as: "This beatification is like a moment of rejoicing. Oscar Romero is the only figure capable of uniting society in our country," but this probably will not happen. His passion will continue to prove that we continue living in an unjust world.

It is of no less importance that we hear that many people believe Archbishop Romero's case—the collective memory of which has been carefully preserved by his people—has become the social memory of an entire region. The most underprivileged people in

Central America, those who are impoverished because they have been denied the opportunities to which they have a right, those who are martyred every day, are now surrounded by a halo of holiness. Therefore, it is undeniable that his beatification defends the need that we all have, in Central America (and in the world), like Romero, to lift up our voice to defend those who are excluded and those who keep suffering exploitation, persecution, criticism, being cast aside...

The society of his homeland has come to affirm that Archbishop Romero's becoming a Saint in the Catholic Church has exceptional consequences for the country: it will consolidate the figure of the Archbishop as the only Salvadoran present in World History; he will become the principle component of their national identity; he will enter the religious imagination of our poor with great force; he will be the patron who will unite our community of emigrants in the United States; his homilies will become texts taught in schools and universities; and he will be venerated by millions of people beyond the borders of the land that already recognizes him as "Saint Romero of America." An inevitable connection will be forged between the Archbishop and the democratization of Latin America, as the Saint who confronted one of the most brutal dictatorships. For the first time in history, Salvadorans will be universally recognized in the figure of a personage who is honorable, brave, heroic, and endowed with great human virtues.

It is impressive how, in only three years as archbishop, he changed the history of his country. With his humility, his humanity, his extraordinary strength, and his martyrdom, he became immortalized in history and in eternity.

In the last three years of the 1970s, in the greatest confrontation in the history of El Salvador and Central America, and its greatest expression in the conflicts in the politics of the United States and of the Vatican—in that exact moment and in all those places at once—Archbishop Romero was the great point of convergence and conflict, and its principal victim.

He, who did the most to defend justice and who was the most correct in his views, was—like Jesus—the most misunderstood and attacked by so many people. Many, then, contributed to his death,

although the intellectual and material authors of his assassination may have been few.

Exactly one century after the emergence, development and decline of Central American capitalism and its political system of domination, during the last stretch of its downfall, in the last minutes of the last attempt to reform it in order to avoid open war and the deaths of thousands, the Vatican named Oscar Romero as the archbishop of San Salvador.

The Archbishop was carrying out his ministry at the time when the systemic crisis had finally reached Central America and the historical hegemony of powerful countries outside the region of Central America was threatened at the very intersection of the Americas, during the intensification and the last stretch of the Cold War. And he was doing it a decade after profound transformations in the interpretation of the Gospel within the Catholic Church with the Second Vatican Council, the Medellín Conference, and the birth of liberation theology.

In all of these events, the preferential option for the poor began to renew the Church and gain greater legitimacy and strength, challenging traditional powers and some whitened sepulchers in society and in a part of the Church itself that, in the practice, had turned its back on Jesus of Nazareth.

To Blessed Romero fell the task of making real on Earth what he saw be born and grow in the smallest, most intense and contradictory country in the Americas, which goes by the name El Salvador—a country whose key powers and whose role in international geopolitics aligned it to head inevitably towards war.

At that place and time, Archbishop Romero arrived as Archbishop of the Church in San Salvador. A simple man, who until then had gone unnoticed, who was considered to be submissive to the traditional order of the political system and of the Church itself.

Archbishop Romero was a marvelous human being and a religious man who, in just three years, changed the history of El Salvador. With his witness and martyrdom during the celebration of the Holy Mass, at the moment of the consecration, he brought Jesus back to the world, making all worldly powers, and the Church itself, tremble.

This is the man who was outraged by and denounced injustice, the denial of human conditions and of life; who stood against every kind of violence—by the army, security forces and death squads, the kidnapping of citizens and foreigners, and the armed uprising of guerrilla groups—advocating respect for life and for truth, reconciliation, and a political solution that would avoid war and its inhuman and unbounded consequences.

Archbishop Romero was a small but great man who put the poor, and human dignity, at the center of attention of Latin America and of the world. He went down in history and into eternity with his word, his humility, his testimony, his great strength, and his martyrdom.

Archbishop Romero, the most human, Christian, and universal brother, and our father. Our Blessed, our inspiration, the best son and father in the history of El Salvador, the most universal figure of Central America.

All of us kneel before him, with profound humility and respect, to ask his forgiveness for his sacrifice.

And to ask him for wisdom, strength, humility and inspiration in order to reunite, re-establish, dignify, make viable, humanize, and sustainably develop, his little country and all of Central America, which must now save itself in order to bear its name with coherence, pride and dignity: El Salvador, ["The Savior"].

Romero could be proposed as an example for all Christians today, but very especially, we bishops must look to him as a model to be followed, thanks to his closeness to his people, his profound life of piety, his constant availability for all, his spirit of service, and above all, for the great way he managed to unify the prophet and the message, the word and its spokesman.

Because, foreseeing what could happen to him if he took on that dramatic role of prophet, he allowed himself to be possessed by that divine message of judgment and condemnation of the powerful and the oppressors of the world, who ended up knocking him down and crushing him, just as happened to other prophets, and most notably to Jesus of Nazareth. He was the Word of Life offered to men; his enemies turned him into a word of condemnation and death, but

God transformed him into a new and definitive Life for the prophet and for the people.

During those three brief years, Romero denounced all dichotomies between people and hierarchy, between liturgy and life, between Gospel and history, between politics and contemplation.

But not even the greatest martyrs can be born, live, and die as such without the Christian community, without the People of God, without the Church.

The last three years Romero's life were also exemplary in this respect. He was very insistent about this: he was converted by the people, by the Church, by his communities.

Remembering Saint Augustine, who stated and sealed his conversion with those words: "Late have I loved thee, beauty so ancient and so new," I cannot avoid imagining the "moment of the martyred bishop's profound conversion when he stated, "Then, my eyes were opened: when I was sixty years old, I started to understand the Gospel; and the death of Fr. Grande opened my eyes," he often repeated.

I must also mention here other great Bishops of Central America who followed Archbishop Romero in an unbloody martyrdom, misunderstood but faithful: Archbishop Marcos Gregorio McGrath, alumnus of this very University of Notre Dame, often misunderstood for implementing Vatican II; and Arturo Rivera y Damas, successor of Archbishop Romero, for continuing the policy of the option for the poor and carrying forward the peace dialogs that are now 20 years old. Respecting the evident differences, the similarity of his death with that of the deacon Stephen, whose martyrdom was witnessed by a certain Saul, to whom it seems that Stephen left his prophet's cloak and martyr's blood, as a worn-out athlete passes on his testimony to his running partner, who would later be the Apostle St. Paul; just so do we want to see and understand Romero today in the pilgrim Church in six small countries in Central America. Thank you very much.

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