Who was Óscar Romero?

Óscar Romero was born in Ciudad Barrios, a town in the mountainous east of El Salvador, on August 15, 1917. He was the second of seven children. When he was thirteen he declared a vocation to the priesthood.

He went to a seminary in San Miguel, then to the capital San Salvador, and from there to Rome. He was ordained in 1942. In January 1944, he was recalled to San Miguel by his bishop and was soon secretary of the diocese, a position he held for 23 years. In San Miguel his work flourished and his reputation grew. He established a succession of new organizations and inspired many with his sermons, broadcast by five local radio stations and heard across the city.

Romero was impressed, though not always uncritical, of the new Catholicism that was affirmed with such confidence in Vatican II. In 1970 he became auxiliary bishop of San Salvador, and there he busied himself with administration. Many found him a conservative in views and by temperament. In 1974 he became bishop of a rural diocese, Santiago de Maria. Three years later, in February 1977, Oscar Romero became archbishop of San Salvador.

In that month a crowd of protesters were attacked by soldiers in the town square of the capital. Then, on March 12, 1977, a priest working with the poor, Rutilio Grande, was murdered in Aguilares. Romero had known him. Now he observed that there was no official enquiry. He recognized that power lay in the hands of violent men, and that they murdered with impunity. The wealthy sanctioned the violence that maintained them. Death squads committed murder in the cities while soldiers killed as they wished in the countryside. When a new government that represented a coalition of powerful interests was elected, it was seen to be by fraud. There was talk of revolution.

More and more Romero committed himself to the poor and the persecuted, and he became the catalyst for radical moral prophecy in the church and outside it. Meanwhile, his church began to document the abuse of human rights, and to establish the truth in a country governed by lies, where men and women simply disappeared without account. The press attacked him vehemently. Romero, it was said, allied the church with revolutionaries. This he repudiated: the church was not a political movement. But when a succession of priests were murdered, Romero found in their deaths testimony of a church incarnated in the problems of its people.

In May 1979, he visited the Pope in Rome and presented him with seven dossiers filled with reports and documents describing the injustices of El Salvador. But his friends sensed his isolation in the church, while the threats and dangers against him mounted outside it. On March 24, 1980, he was shot dead while celebrating mass in the chapel of the hospital where he lived.

Today the memory of Oscar Romero is cherished by the people of El Salvador, and by countless Christians across the world.

“... when we struggle for human rights, for freedom, for dignity, when we feel that it is a ministry of the church to concern itself for those who are hungry, for those who have no schools, for those who are deprived, we are not departing from God’s promise. He comes to free us from sin, and the church knows that sin’s consequences are all such injustices and abuses. The church knows it is saving the world when it undertakes to speak also of such things.”

—Saint Óscar Romero of El Salvador

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