

MEMENDICANT

Imperial Religion

St. Óscar Romero

RICHARD ROHR, OFM

We can say without any exaggeration, that the life and death of Monseñor Romero divides the recent history of the Latin American Church into a before and after. —Gustavo Gutiérrez

On October 14, Óscar Romero, the Archbishop of El Salvador (1977–1980), one of the more obvious martyrs of recent Christianity, was finally officially canonized a saint by the Roman Catholic Church. My visit to his highly frequented and decorated tomb in 1985, five years after his assassination by a US-supported government hit squad, showed me that he had already been canonized by the faithful of El Salvador.

It took the church system, with considerable foot-dragging by the two previous popes, a long time to recognize what the people saw naturally and immediately: Óscar Romero is a classic martyr saint in the tradition of Thomas Becket, Joan of Arc, Thomas More, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mohandas Gandhi. He spoke truth to a totally empowered system of evil and, like all prophets, paid the ultimate price for it.



“I implore you, I beg you,
I order you in the
name of God:
stop the repression.”

A bit of history might be helpful here, in part to help you know that the epigraph above, from theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, might not be an exaggeration at all! It was a unique version of imperial Christianity, aligned with the Spanish Empire and the Portuguese Fleet, that brought the Christian faith to Central and Latin America. The golden statues filling the plazas outside of almost every South American cathedral and shrine tell us where our loyalties and fascinations were located, and it was not with the underclass, which was almost everybody. We brought lots of “church” to the New World, but considerably less Gospel, even less liberation, and almost no strong sense of social justice. From Mexico to the tip of Patagonia, organized church was almost always aligned with the ruling class.

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Except for some heroes like the early Dominicans in Santo Domingo, Bartolomé de las Casas (1484–1566) in Mexico, Francisco Solano (1549–1610) in Paraguay, and Peter Claver (1580–1654) in the Cartagena slave auctions, we pretty much tolerated both the enslavement of Native peoples and the importation of black people from Africa as slaves to do the work of empire building, while we tended our baroque shrines to an individual notion of salvation. Sin was also individualized, so we were hardly the hope of, or for, a New World, as the Gospel promised!

With this background you can appreciate the persecution, opposition, and suffering that Óscar Romero endured in his three short years as Archbishop, because of his advocacy for the poor. Only one fellow bishop supported him. The rest called him “irresponsible, imprudent, and inconsistent.”



Vista General de Los Asistentes, April 19, 2015, Beatificación Monseñor Romero.

Rome also kept their distance because of their fear of this new “liberation theology” from the Southern Hemisphere. Romero, initially quite conservative and a fear-based Six on the Enneagram, took the side of the poor with what he called a *spirituality of accompaniment*. In El Salvador, 65 percent of the arable land was owned by fourteen aristocratic families. During the twelve years of civil war (1980–1992), the US Congress appropriated approximately one million dollars a day to maintain the corrupt right-wing government. (During that period, all you had to do was yell “Communist!” and the money would start flowing from Washington.) In 1980, the year in which Romero was shot at the altar, approximately 1,000 people a month were being murdered.

Romero was a rare public voice for all the voiceless and anonymous poor of El Salvador, and all of Latin America. When he preached in the cathedral on Sunday mornings, they told me the streets were empty and all radios were on full volume, so the people could hear the one voice of truth and sanity in an insane and corrupt world.

On March 23, 1980, one day before he was murdered, he directly addressed the Salvadoran military on the radio:

Brothers, you come from your own people. You are killing your own brother peasants. . . . No soldier is obliged to obey an order contrary to the law of God. . . . It is high time you recovered your consciences and obeyed your consciences rather than a sinful order. . . . In the name of God, in the name of this suffering people whose cries rise to heaven more loudly each day, I implore you, I beg you, I order you in the name of God: stop the repression.¹

The whole world now has a new saint and martyr, fully worthy of the name.

The next day, following his sermon, he was shot through his heart at the altar.

Only a few weeks earlier, almost mirroring Martin Luther King, Jr.’s prescience about his own impending assassination, Óscar Romero had said,

I have often been threatened with death. I have to say, as a Christian, that I don’t believe in death without resurrection: If they kill me, I will rise again in the Salvadoran people.²

The whole world now has a new saint and martyr, fully worthy of the name. We at the CAC put him right up there with Francis, Clare, and Dorothy Day!

¹ As translated by and cited in Michael Campbell-Johnston, “Romero: ‘The Voice of Those Who Had No Voice,’” *Thinking Faith*, March 23, 2011, https://www.thinking-faith.org/articles/20110323_1.htm#_ednref3.

² *Ibid.*

A Reflection on Monseñor Óscar Romero, by Living School Student Donna Bruzzese

If they kill me, I will rise again in the Salvadoran people. —Óscar Romero

Fresh from Cincinnati, Father Richard Rohr arrived in Albuquerque's South Valley in 1986 and organized the Center for Action and Contemplation. He taught liberation theology, quoted Gustavo Gutiérrez and Leonardo Boff, and described the life and shocking death of Archbishop Óscar Romero.

The preferential option for the poor took on a meaning that changed the course of my life as the Gospels came alive in a new way. When the Salvadoran peace accords were signed in January 1992, ending the bloody twelve-year civil war, my future husband and I accepted an invitation to go to El Salvador. Fr. Richard and other friends at CAC blessed and sent forward our four-person delegation to the land of Monseñor Romero—as the *gente humilde* (humble people) called him.

Our ten days in El Salvador, surrounded by generosity amidst violence and poverty, also changed our lives. We returned home and organized annual Prayer and Action delegations to help others walk in the footsteps of Óscar Romero. I learned Spanish, organized yearly commemorations of Romero's life and death, and, with Franciscan Fr. Louis Canino, led a delegation to El Salvador from North Carolina.

This November 2018, our nonprofit organization, Friends of the Children of El Salvador (FOCES), is sponsoring a

delegation of ten Salvadoran scholarship students and their director, Nuria Monico, to New Mexico and North Carolina. On behalf of the students, Monico writes:



Tomb of Oscar Romero, San Salvador, El Salvador.

[Romero's] spiritual greatness has marked our lives and those of many. His example obliges us to be better, to be in solidarity with those who suffer because they are
[continued on page 5]



Mary Magdalene, by Robert Lentz, OFM. Used with permission of the artist.

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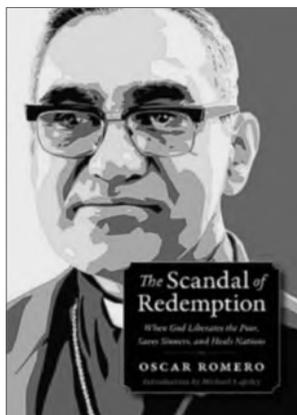
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Recommended Reading

A BOOK REVIEW BY LEE STAMAN

*The Scandal of Redemption:
When God Liberates the Poor, Saves Sinners,
and Heals Nations*
By Óscar Romero
Edited by Carolyn Kurtz
Plough Publishing House, 2018



The Scandal of Redemption is a small, powerful book: a thematic collection of Óscar Romero's radio homilies that are interspersed with excerpts from his diary. These breaks between discourses are one of my favorite things about this book. The entries bring Romero's daily life into tight focus. His honesty about common pastoral occurrences is refreshing:

I felt a special affection in that church, which was very full; the crowd continued to swell as the Mass progressed. The homily went on for almost two hours. I think I may be going on too long.¹

Romero's language comes through beautifully in each of his brief homilies, which could easily be daily readings. The depth within each of the topics ranges widely. He preaches on the need for a theology of creation:

Agrarian reform is a theological necessity. A country's land cannot remain in the hands of just a few; it must be given to all so that all can share in the blessings God gives through the land.²

The purpose of prayer:

Prayer also does not mean that you expect God to do what you can do. Do all that you can do. Put your technology to work; devise irrigation systems for your fields; fertilize your soil; feed your cattle as best you can. And after you have done all this, then pray.³

Even in the face of violence and terror, Romero's clarity about the role of the church is unwavering:

That is what the church wants: to disturb people's consciences and to provoke a crisis in their lives. A church that does not provoke a crisis, a gospel that does not disturb, a word of God that does not rankle, a word of God that does not touch the concrete sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed—what kind of gospel is that?⁴

The Scandal of Redemption allowed me to gain a little more understanding into the man who gave his life for what he believed. He allowed space for both present pain and future hope when he said,

The redemption and the liberation that the church preaches and longs for is not a liberation that disappoints even when things turn out badly, even when people die on a cross, even when people are tortured and killed because of the cruelty of those who do not want to hear cries of true liberation. . . . Let us not forget, sisters and brothers, that redemption is still taking place.⁵

¹ Óscar Romero, *The Scandal of Redemption: When God Liberates the Poor, Saves Sinners, and Heals Nations*, ed. Carolyn Kurtz (Walden, NY: Plough, 2018), 76.

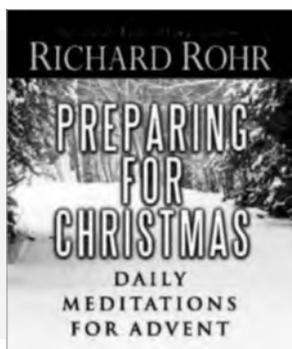
² *Ibid.*, 21.

³ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 132.

LEE STAMAN is the Systems Librarian at the Center for Action and Contemplation. Currently his work is focused on cataloging everything Richard Rohr has said and written. He has degrees in philosophy and theology and resides in Seattle, Washington with his wife and two children.



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of every “thing” in the universe?*

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—Richard Rohr

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*Silence in the face of evil is
itself evil. Not to speak is to
speak. Not to act is to act.*

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer

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A Reflection on Monseñor Óscar Romero [continued from page 3]

the marginalized poor. . . . We stand with those whose families are separated and for the discrimination and the migration because of the violence they experience every day.

Participating in the Sunday *Misa Popular*, in the windowless basement of the Metropolitan Cathedral, where Monseñor Romero preached—while the well-dressed Salvadorans attended Mass upstairs, in the main Cathedral, surrounded by incense and elegance—is the highlight of every Prayer and Action delegation. People come from faraway villages, carrying banners and gifts from their

communities. Before, after, and during Mass they kneel and stand at Romero’s tomb, whispering prayers, stroking and kissing the bronze sarcophagus.

Óscar Romero has shaped my life. As the scholarship students say, “He is no longer St. Romero of the Americas. He is St. Romero of the world.”

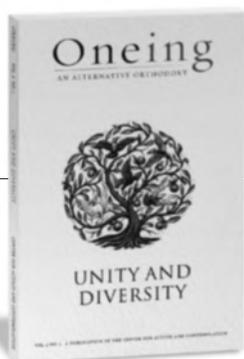
DONNA BRUZZESE, MA, LMFT, LPCC, is Director of the Board of FOCES. Donna, a psychotherapist and the mother of four grown children, is married to New Mexico State Senator Jerry Ortiz y Pino. She is a student in CAC’s 2018–2020 cohort of the Living School for Action and Contemplation.



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