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The FURROW

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Martyr for Social
Justice

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On 14th October 2018 Pope Francis in Rome canonised Oscar Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador in El Salvador. In other words, the Pope declared, formally and officially, that the Archbishop is in heaven; he is with God in the fullness of eternal life, he is a saint. As such the new saint will have an official feast-day in the Liturgical Calendar that will be celebrated in the Catholic Church worldwide. The date of this feast-day will be 24 March each year as that was the day on which St Oscar died in 1980. He is now placed among the Martyrs for the Faith, not because he died in the defence of a particular article of the Faith in the Creed, but rather because he gave his life in defending and promoting social justice and the rights of the poor and oppressed people in his country; in other words, in living out the Option for the Poor. Thus St Oscar is the Church's first Martyr for Social Justice.

This canonisation is important for the universal Church and presents us with a new model for our Christian living. As such the new saint is for us an example to imitate but also he provides a challenge to commit ourselves to the promotion of social justice and dedicate ourselves heart and soul to the pursuit of the option for the poor.

OSCAR ROMERO'S LIFE

Oscar Arnulfo Romero was born on 15 August 1917 in a village in eastern El Salvador in a mountainous area. El Salvador is a small central American country, which is bordered by and in part surrounded by Guatemala and Honduras and on the west by the ocean. After some time in school and during some private tuition Oscar's father gave him some training in carpentry. But when the young man reached 13 years of age, he indicated that he wished to study for the priesthood. He then entered a minor seminary in his own region and moved on in 1937 to the national major seminary

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in San Salvador, the capital of the country. He completed his studies in the Gregorian University in Rome, winning a Licentiate in Theology in 1941 and then undertaking doctoral studies. He was ordained in Rome on 4 April 1942 but before he was able to gain his doctorate, he was recalled by his Bishop to the home diocese. Back home he served as a Parish Priest for over 20 years, promoting several apostolic groups including Alcoholics Anonymous. In the early 1960s he was appointed rector of the inter-diocesan minor seminary in San Salvador. He became editor of the diocesan paper and a radio preacher of note as well as being the Bishop's secretary for many years. Then in 1967 he was elected secretary of the National Bishops' Conference and in 1968 he was chosen to be the Executive Secretary of the Central American Bishops' Secretariat. He was then well placed to become a candidate for a bishopric. So in 1970 he got the mitre as auxiliary bishop to the Archbishop of San Salvador.¹

BISHOP ROMERO

Oscar Romero remained in this pastoral role for four years until in 1974 he became the bishop of the rural diocese of Santiago de Maria. Here he busied himself in the pastoral aspects of his episcopal ministry as indeed he had done as auxiliary. In visiting the various parishes of his diocese he gradually became aware of the hardship and injustice that the poor had to endure and was moved to protest to the local authorities, and even to the president of the country, when some peasants were massacred by the police in one of the parishes in his diocese. While Bishop Oscar took the decrees of Vatican II seriously and also the teaching of Medellin (1968) and Puebla (1979), he found some of the new pastoral methods difficult and had his doubts about the direction the church was taking. In this regard he would now be spoken of as quite conservative, politically cautious and strong in defence of the church's Magisterium and its official teaching. He even wrote to the Vatican complaining about the politicisation of the priests. Not surprisingly then, when he was appointed Archbishop of San Salvador on 22 February 1977, the right wing government and many leaders and wealthy people in the diocese and the country generally were quite pleased, because they saw him as a safe pair of hands. However, many of the priests of the diocese were disappointed, fearing that Romero's conservative theology and spirituality would impact negatively on their work for the poor, for human rights and social justice. Also those who were promoting

1 James Brockman, S.J., 'Romero, Oscar Arnulfo (1917-1980)' in *The Modern Catholic Encyclopedia*. Edited by Michael Glazier and Monika K. Hellwig, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, USA, 1994, pp 754-6.

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liberation theology and setting up what were being called basic Christian communities were dismayed and expected little support from the new archbishop.

‘THE BISHOP WHO WALKS WITH THE POOR’

Romero wasn’t three weeks in his new role as archbishop when a dramatic and shocking event brought about a profound change in his theological and spiritual outlook. A friend of his, Fr Rutilio Grande, a Jesuit, who was very progressive and was deeply committed to social justice, human rights and the welfare of the poor, was murdered by a death squad of the security forces on 12 March 1977. Romero was deeply upset and saddened. When the Government refused to investigate the murder and the state-controlled press was silent, the archbishop was forced to the conclusion, as he later stated, “If they have killed him for doing what he did, I too have to walk the same path.” Romero was a changed man and his ministry took a decisive turn as he began to follow in the footsteps of his assassinated friend. He became a radical promoter of social justice and the rights of the poor in his diocese and country. He spoke out against social injustice, poverty, torture and the violence and assassinations carried out by the death squads, which were agents of the Government. He condemned what he called the ‘structure of sin’ that produced economic, social and political oppression.²

At this time El Salvador was in a state of virtual civil war as the right wing government sought to defeat and eliminate left wing guerrilla groups, some of whom were under Marxist influence. At this time too what came to be called liberation theology was becoming influential in Latin America. While Romero was not explicitly committed to it or overtly interested in it, he nevertheless now embraced church teaching on liberation and in practice dedicated himself to implementing the option for the poor as he became a vigorous social activist and a wholehearted worker for social justice and the rights of the poor. It comes as a surprise, then, to learn that he had been and continued to be a strong supporter of the Opus Dei movement and its spiritual teaching to the end of his life. In his new social ministry, however, he got little support from the other five bishops and the papal nuncio in his country. In fact most of them were of the view that he was leading the church in the wrong direction.

THE STRUGGLE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

The first steps Romero took in this struggle were to call on the government to investigate Fr Grande’s death. He also cancelled all Masses in the diocese on the Sunday following his friend’s

2 Michael D Higgins, ‘Blessed Oscar Romero’, *The Messenger*, October 2018, p 8.

assassination, except for one he celebrated in the square in front of the cathedral in which about 100,000 participated.

He continued his weekly sermons on the diocesan radio. These broadcasts were the most widely listened to programme in the country and in them he listed the most notable acts of oppression, torture and murder carried out in the previous weeks. The diocesan newspaper reported similar atrocities each week. The archbishop also criticised the United States for giving military support to the Salvadoran government and he wrote to the US President, Jimmy Carter, to this effect. No reply was forthcoming, however. The archbishop also spoke up for and supported church members who defended and helped the poor and he condemned the persecution of those who were engaged in the work of social justice and the struggle for freedom from repression and violence. Not surprisingly, he received many death threats. In fact, he spent every day knowing that he was potentially at risk of being killed.³ In a speech in Louvain, Belgium in February 1980 he outlined what the church and its members were being subjected to and were suffering in the years in which he was archbishop: “In the last three years more than fifty priests have been attacked, threatened, calumniated. Six are already martyrs and they were murdered. Some have been tortured and others expelled [from the country]. Nuns have also been persecuted. The archdiocesan radio station and educational institutions that are Catholic or of a Christian inspiration have been attacked, threatened, intimidated, even bombed. Several parish communities have been raided ... There have been threats, arrests, tortures, murders numbering in the hundreds and thousands. ... That part of the church has been attacked and persecuted that put itself on the side of the people and went to the people’s defence. Here again we find the same key to understanding the persecution of the church: the poor.”⁴

Despite the government’s negative reaction to Romero’s dedicated social ministry, he got great support from the poor, the priests and most church members. He became the country’s most respected and popular figure.⁵ But the praise and respect were also international as his reputation grew during his three years as archbishop. As a result he was given honorary degrees and was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

ASSASSINATION AND ITS AFTERMATH

Archbishop Romero made many references to the violence, torture, violation of human rights and murders carried out in his country by

3 *Irish Catholic*, 18 October 2018, p 8.

4 *Wikipedia*, 16/10/2018, p 5.

5 Brockman, op.cit., pp 755-6; See also *Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, Richard P. McBrien, General Editor. Harper Collins Publishers, New York, 1995, p 1137.

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the right wing death squads and the appalling suffering resulting from these activities. His last such condemnation was his plea to the soldiers of the army on the day before he was murdered. He appealed to them to disobey their officers and to bring an end to violence. “Brothers,” he said, “you are from the same people, you kill your fellow peasants ... No soldier is obliged to obey an order that is contrary to the will of God”.⁶

The next day, 24 March 1980, towards evening he was celebrating Mass in the Chapel of the Hospital of Divine Providence where he lived. After his sermon a gunman appeared and fired at the archbishop hitting him in the heart and killing him. Thus ended Oscar Romero’s three-year episcopate in San Salvador, the episcopate of a reformed and reforming bishop who died a Martyr for Social Justice.

The funeral was celebrated on 30 March 1980 in the Metropolitan Cathedral of San Salvador in the presence of a quarter of a million mourners from many countries. The slain archbishop was then laid to rest in a crypt within the walls of the Cathedral in which he had served for just over three years. The Cardinal Chief Celebrant of the Funeral Mass was a personal delegate of Pope John Paul II and he praised Romero as a ‘beloved, peacemaking man of God’, whose ‘blood will give fruit to brotherhood, love and peace.’ In this context it may be noted that the archbishop had visited the Vatican on several occasions in his short episcopate in San Salvador in an effort to explain his commitment to social justice and human rights and to try to win papal understanding and even approval.

As the funeral was taking place smoke bombs exploded on the streets near the cathedral. The mourners were fired on from surrounding buildings including the National Palace. Over 30 people were killed and many more wounded. It was widely claimed that the assailants were government security forces. International condemnation of Archbishop Romero’s killing and the violence at the funeral was widespread and that included strong shock and revulsion expressed by the Irish Government.⁷

THE JOURNEY TO CANONISATION

The canonisation of Archbishop Romero took place on 14 October 2018 in Rome, that is, 38 years after his death. This was a long time, certainly compared to some recent saints like Pope John Paul II and Mother Teresa of Calcutta. A brief account of the delaying factors in the case of the archbishop will suffice here.

- a) Some were of the opinion that the killing of Romero was political rather than against the faith and so he would not be a candidate for beatification or canonisation.

6 Higgins, p 9; Wikipedia, 16/10/2018, p 9.

7 Wikipedia, 16/10/2018, p 8.

- b) The opposition to Romero's social ministry within the church was another factor that contributed to the delay in his beatification process. This involved the concern of some in the Vatican about liberation theology and the extent to which Romero was involved in or committed to it.⁸
- c) There were problems too about the miracles that were put forward to fulfil the criteria for beatification. However, it emerged later that under Pope Francis, since Romero had been declared a martyr, no miracle was then required for beatification. So it was that on 23 May 2015 he was beatified in San Salvador in the presence of 250,000 people. A miracle – the fourth presented – was recognised by the Vatican in 2017 and approved by the Pope on 6 March 2018. Hence, the way to canonisation was opened and it took place, as already stated, on 14 October 2018 in St Peter's Square in Rome with the archbishop being declared a Martyr for Social Justice before a gathering of 70,000 people, including 8,000 from El Salvador itself.⁹

A SAINT FOR TODAY

According to James Brockman, a biographer of Romero, two of the saint's characteristics were: love for the Church of Rome, shown by his episcopal motto 'to be of one mind with the Church' [taken from Ignatius Loyola], and also by his being one with the Church incarnated in a people which stood in need of liberation. He states also that, while Romero continued his quest for holiness all his life of 62 years, he also matured in that quest.¹⁰ That is abundantly clear from what has been said earlier.

In this context we may note the main lessons from this saint's life, ministry and death that are relevant to us in the Church and society today.

- i. It seems clear that archbishop Romero did his best to make the teaching of Vatican II and of the Latin American bishops at Medellin (1968) and Puebla (1979) his own and to conduct his ministry according to them, even if he tended to give them a rather conservative interpretation.
- ii. In the years before 1977 and especially as bishop in San Salvador his eyes were opened to what Pope John Paul II had called structural sin, that is, immoral and sinful attitudes and practices built into the laws and structures of the society in which he was living. This became quite clear to the future saint as he experienced the violence, torture and murders that

8 *The Tablet*, London, 13 October 2018, p 6.

9 Wikipedia, 16/10/2018, p 12; *The Tablet*, 20 October 2018, p 20.

10 Wikipedia, 16/10/2018, p 6-7.

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were perpetrated so frequently by the government sponsored death squads. From these experiences arose his commitment to social justice and his ministry to the poor and disadvantaged.

- iii. It was this deep commitment that enabled him to cope well with the opposition he experienced from inside the church and from government agents and other social forces.
- iv. In the end he gave his life in the pursuit of social justice and the liberation of the poor and oppressed from the repression and violence imposed on them. Thus he became a martyr for social justice, the Church's first such martyr and saint.
- v. As a Martyr for Social Justice St Oscar provides Catholics and other Christians today with an example and a challenge to walk the same path as he did. His canonisation re-enforces this.¹¹

11 It may be mentioned too that in the Anglican Church Oscar Romero is also honoured as a saint and a statue of him has been placed on the Great West Door of Westminster Abbey in London. Eleven Anglican bishops, including the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Rowan Williams, were present at the canonisation ceremony in Rome. The Lutheran Church also honours Romero as a saint. Wikipedia, 16/10/2018, p 1; *The Tablet*, 20 October 2018, p 20.

Chinks and Buttonholes. Perhaps it is Kavanagh's personal woundedness which becomes one of his most valuable artistic assets. 'God sometimes enters the heart through a wound' is his lived spirituality. Was this a spirituality derived from the belief that 'art is life squeezed through a repression'? Was it his own brokenness that led him to the conviction that suffering squeezed through chinks, cracks and buttonholes could be transformed into something beautiful? – even radiant? Whatever his repression, Kavanagh's art flourished in adversity. Whatever hidden hurt gripped his soul, he used it as ballast for his soaring imagination.

– UNA AGNEW, *The Mystical Imagination of Patrick Kavanagh*, (Dublin: Veritas) p. 285.