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## **Beatification Of Archbishop Romero On Hold; He Remains Divisive In El Salvador And Rome**

by LADB Staff

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March 24 is the anniversary of the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero, shot down by right-wing gunmen as he celebrated mass in 1980. He used the pulpit to denounce injustices against the people of El Salvador during a time of massive repression, widespread suffering, and rampant death squads. This year's commemoration in San Salvador marks the 28th year since, as Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff phrased it, "Oscar Romero died because of his love for the poor. He initiated a kind of martyrdom for the sake of justice, arising from a deeply committed faith. Basically, he imitated the deeds of Christ." That is one view.

All these years after the fact, Romero remains a highly politicized figure. Inter Press Service (IPS), which provided the Boff quote, summarized the situation. In 1993, the UN Truth Commission concluded that Roberto d'Aubuisson, founder of the Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA), ordered the killing of Romero. Yet, the ARENA party has governed El Salvador since the signing of peace accords in January 1991 put an end to the US-sponsored proxy war that provided context for the assassination.

In 2000, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) faulted the state for violating Romero's right to life and for failing to investigate his murder. In October 2007, the government denied responsibility and rejected IACHR recommendations. Boff was in El Salvador for the commemoration events, arriving on Easter Sunday. As one of the founders of liberation theology, he represents one side of the divide regarding Romero's legacy. On the other side are Archbishop of San Salvador Fernando Saenz Lacalle and the pope. The two sides are pitted on the issue of criteria for beatification. The process has been initiated for Romero, but long stalled by the Vatican. There is no love lost between Boff and Pope Benedict XVI, who, as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, imposed disciplinary measures against him that included enforced silence. Boff then left the priesthood and later married. The very conservative Saenz presents a nuanced opposition, based on the rules for what constitutes grounds for sainthood. What makes a saint?

In an interview Boff gave IPS while in El Salvador, the theologian explained, "Oscar Romero is a unique martyr. He died for justice and for his love of the poor. He is a kind of saint that is uncommon in the history of the church. He initiated a kind of martyrdom for the sake of justice, arising from a deeply committed faith....That is why I understand that the religious powers that be have difficulty reading this new sign; they don't know how to interpret it." Saenz, meanwhile, reads the signs differently. It is all very well that Romero sought justice for the downtrodden, but sainthood is basically about miracles. "I have to lament that not much correspondence has been received [testifying to miracles], and perhaps it is thought that just doing campaigns and organizing things achieves beatification and, after that, canonization," he said. Saenz told reporters that, despite "the devotion, the love, and the affection we have for him," what is needed is prayer, making

requests for interventions, and sending them to the sainthood office in Rome "because that is the best way to move forward the process that is being raised in Rome."

Saenz called upon people to subject themselves to the church rules that establish the requirement to send notice of favors received through the intercession of Romero so they can be used as evidence for sainthood. Whether it is what Romero did in life or what he does on some other plane that really counts in the campaign for his elevation, it is important to note that the argument goes on in a context of sainthood inflation, which the Vatican seems committed to reducing.

In February, the church announced new criteria for sainthood and called for more "rigor" and "sobriety" in the process. Cardinal Jose Saraiva Martins, head of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, said that the Vatican was overwhelmed by the number of nominations left over from the reign of Pope John Paul II. That pope reportedly elevated more people to sainthood than all his predecessors combined, and Martins said there are more than 2,200 cases pending. John Paul II beatified 1,338 people during his 27-year tenure and canonized 482. But starting now, it will be a little tougher to become a saint. Martins said his office wants to see "a true reputation for holiness," and "rigorous historical research" will be intrinsic to the investigations. In Romero's case, Martins said the cause is at a standstill while a determination is made on whether his death made him a martyr for the faith. The archbishop's candidacy hinges on whether he was killed for religious reasons or for other motives. A mere political assassination will not do.

That could mean that demonstrations and popular outpourings commemorating Romero's positions and acts are counterproductive, if sainthood is the goal. It could mean that investigation leading to the prosecution of his murderers would define the act as political, not religious. This is a time when the church is losing authority in Latin America generally. It is also losing members at a rapid rate, and it is not absolutely clear that Salvadoran supporters and followers of Romero's example much care what the church decides regarding Romero's sainthood. At the commemorative ceremonies, there was ample indication of that attitude. Among the placards and banners on display, some read, "Romero, the people have already made you a saint." A woman in the crowd, Edith Ramirez, told a reporter, "For us, Archbishop Romero is already a saint. The process of canonization lingers in the Vatican; for us, he is already a saint because he offered up his life for the poor." There were also the words of Romero emblazoned on a huge banner outside the cathedral of San Salvador, "If they kill me, I will live again in the Salvadoran people."

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