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Martyred Archbishop Óscar Romero Beatified In El Salvador

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Category/Department: El Salvador
Published: 2015-06-04

A sea of faithful onlookers, scores of journalists, a handful of foreign dignitaries, and leaders from both sides of El Salvador’s deep political divide squeezed into the center of San Salvador in late May to witness the beatification of Archbishop Óscar Romero, a national icon whose global stature as a human rights crusader and champion of the poor continues to grow 35 years after his assassination.

The ceremony, led by Cardinal Angelo Amato, a special Vatican envoy, was the penultimate step in Romero’s path to sainthood, a process that has been years in the making and was long stalled by conservative detractors in the Catholic Church. "Romero’s spirit remains alive and gives comfort to the marginalized people of the world," Cardinal Amato said during the May 23 event. "His preference for the poor was not ideological, but evangelical. His charity extended to his persecutors."

The quest to canonize Romero gained new momentum with the election in 2013 of Pope Francis, an Argentine native and the first Latin American to lead the Vatican (NotiSur, May 3, 2013, and July 5, 2013). The pope fast-tracked the long-delayed process in early February by declaring Romero a martyr who was killed "in hatred of the faith" rather than for political reasons.

The declaration ended a long church debate regarding Romero’s action in the lead-up to El Salvador’s dozen-year civil war (1980-1992). After taking over as archbishop in 1977, Romero became increasingly and openly critical of the military junta in power at the time. His activism on behalf of the poor and against the ruling regime eventually cost him his life. Conservative critics faulted Romero for being too political. Pope Francis, in classifying Romero a martyr, determined essentially that the murdered archbishop’s actions were driven by faith, as opposed to political partisanship.

In a note read aloud during the ceremony in San Salvador, Pope Francis described Romero as "one of the best sons of the Church. … [He] constructed peace with the force of love, bore witness to the faith in the extreme by offering his life." The pope went on to say that Archbishop Romero "guided, defended, and protected his flock, remaining loyal to the Gospel, in communion with the Church."

Francis also made a plea for national reconciliation in El Salvador, which continues to be politically polarized and wracked by violence more than two decades after the 1980s-era war officially ended (NotiCen, Jan. 29, 2015). "The Pope participates in this hope, is united in prayer, so the seed of martyrdom is entrenched in the true paths of the sons and daughters of this nation, which prides itself on carrying the name of the divine savior of the world," he wrote.

US President Barack Obama, who visited Romero’s tomb during a state visit to El Salvador in 2011 (NotiCen, March 31, 2011), issued a statement as well. "Archbishop Romero was an inspiration for people in El Salvador and across the Americas," he said. "He was a wise pastor and a courageous man who persevered in the face of opposition from extremes on both sides. He fearlessly confronted the evils he saw, guided by the needs of his beloved pueblo, the poor and oppressed people of El Salvador."
"It’s a Catholic Church thing”

Some analysts described last week’s beatification ceremony as an official endorsement of Romero’s legacy not only by the Catholic Church but by the country’s political powers, on both the right and left, and by the Salvadoran people as a whole. The festive atmosphere, outpouring of praise, huge turnout (nearly 300,000 people showed up for the event), and cross-party participation seemed to bear that assessment out, suggesting that Salvadorans may finally have reached something of a consensus on Romero.

The event was even attended by members of the hard-right Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA), El Salvador’s leading opposition party, which was co-founded by deceased Army major and death-squad leader Roberto d’Aubuisson, the man widely presumed to have ordered the archbishop’s assassination. D’Aubuisson’s son, who shares the same name and political affiliation as his notorious father (NotiCen, March 12, 2015), attended the beatification event wearing a hat emblazoned with Romero’s image. D’Aubuisson Jr., elected mayor earlier this year of Santa Tecla, a populous San Salvador satellite community (NotiCen, March 12, 2015), told Diario 1 that he came to the ceremony "precisely to seek reconciliation with the Salvadorans. … I don’t need to be ashamed of anything that [my father] did."

Whether the feel-good event really does settle decades-old differences of opinion regarding the famous archbishop remains to be seen. Just two years ago, in what many critics saw as an attack on Romero’s legacy, Salvadoran Archbishop José Luis Escobar Alas shut down Tutela Legal del Arzobispado, a key human rights institution that Romero helped found. The legal-aid office had operated for more than 35 years and collected a huge cache of documents regarding rights violations committed before, during, and after the war (NotiCen, Oct. 24, 2013). Much of the opposition to Romero’s canonization, furthermore, is thought to have come from within the Salvadoran Catholic Church.

The political right, its presence in the beatification ceremony notwithstanding, may not be completely ready to embrace Romero either. "It’s a Catholic Church thing, and if they want to make him a saint, they’re in their right to do so," ARENA Deputy Mario Valiente recently told reporters. "If they believe he is a saint, then we have to include him among the saints of the Catholic Church." For some conservative hard-liners, it would seem, honoring the archbishop may be more a political necessity than a matter of conviction.

Getting away with murder

The other big question regarding Archbishop Romero is whether Salvadoran authorities, now that they have gone to such lengths to publicly celebrate his life and legacy, will also turn their attention to his death and finally demand some accountability for the 35-year-old crime.

Romero was something of a quiet conservative when he was first took charge of San Salvador’s archdiocese. Human rights abuses being committed at the time by state security forces and death squads compelled him to start speaking out. He delivered weekly homilies detailing the various killings and abuses being committed, and at one point wrote a letter to then US President Jimmy Carter advising him to halt military aid to El Salvador. Not long afterward, in a radio message, he called on Salvadoran soldiers to stop committing human rights abuses, urging them to disobey orders if they had to.
"The law of God that says thou shalt not kill must come before any human order to kill. It is high time you recovered your conscience," Romero said. "I implore you, I beg you, I order you in the name of God: Stop the repression."

The next day, on March 24, 1980, Romero was shot in the heart while saying mass in a San Salvador hospital chapel. He was the first Catholic bishop killed in a church since 1170, when Thomas Becket was murdered in Canterbury, England. The killing marked an unofficial start to the war, which raged for more than a decade between US-backed state forces and the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN), a coalition of leftist guerrillas that transformed itself later into a political party. The conflict claimed some 75,000 lives. President Salvador Sánchez Cerén was a guerilla commander during the war. He is El Salvador’s second FMLN president following two decades of ARENA rule (NotiCen, March 20, 2014).

Salvadoran authorities made no real effort to investigate Romero’s murder and apprehend either the sniper who fired the fateful shot, the person or people who gave the order, or a number of other people thought to have participated in the attack. A truth commission convened as part of the UN-brokered peace process concluded, in its final report in 1993, that Roberto d’Aubuisson was the intellectual author of the crime. D’Aubuisson, just 47 at the time, died of tongue cancer the year before the report was released. Even if he hadn’t died, the notorious death-squad leader would have been protected by an amnesty law that the Salvadoran government rushed into place just days after the truth commission findings went public. The amnesty law continues to shield people implicated in a number of other high-profile civil war crimes, including the El Mozote and Jesuits massacres of 1981 and 1989, respectively (NotiCen Jan. 17, 2013, and May 21, 2015).

In a recent interview with the independent Salvadoran news site El Faro, Douglas Cassel, an advisor in the truth commission, said he stands by the team’s findings. "If it had been possible to bring [d’Aubuisson] before a court, I think it would have ended with a conviction," said Cassel, an international law professor at the University of Notre Dame in the US state of Indiana. "None of the commissioners and none of the three advisors had any doubt about it, because we interviewed key witnesses, people who knew what happened."

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