



CINE LATINO

A 2010 San Salvador procession marked the 30th anniversary of Romero's murder.

(Photo by José Cabezas/AFP/Getty Images.)

Remembering Romero

by Anthony Fontes

On March 23, 1980, in what was to be the last of his Sunday homilies heard throughout El Salvador, Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero made a final attempt to halt the rising tide of violence that would soon consume his country. The Salvadoran Army, effectively transformed into roving death squads through counterinsurgency efforts supported by the U.S. government, had already disappeared, tortured and slaughtered tens of thousands of Salvadorans. Among them were dozens of clergy from the Catholic Church who had been involved in organizing and educating their mostly rural congregations about their rights in the face of centuries of repression by rich landlords. Knowing full well that the military would consider it an act of treason, Romero made a last — and in retrospect, doomed —

attempt to make his voice heard amidst the cacophony of violence:

I want to make a special request to the men in the armed forces: brothers, we are from the same country, yet you continually kill your peasant brothers. Before any order given by a man, the law of God must prevail: "You shall not kill!"...In the name of God I pray you, I beseech you, I order you! Let this repression cease!"

According to his legal counsel, human rights lawyer Roberto Cuellar, this desperate plea was probably his death sentence. The next day, while Romero said mass at the chapel of La Divina Providencia Hospital, a red Volkswagen Passat stopped outside the open doors of

the chapel. A tall, thin man sitting in the backseat raised an assault rifle and fired an exploding .22 bullet into the monsignor's heart. While nuns screamed and fell to their knees around his body and blood mixed with the spilled wine from the sacramental chalice, the assassins, in no particular hurry, drove away. Twelve years of bloody civil war between the U.S.-backed Salvadoran military and leftist guerrillas would follow.

The three years leading to this moment — the crescendo of violence aimed primarily against El Salvador's rural poor and Romero's effort to expose the mounting atrocities and preach peace to all sides — is the subject of the recently released documentary "Monseñor: The Last Journey of Óscar Romero," a film directed by Ana Carrigan and Juliet Weber and produced by Latin American/North American Church Concerns. It is an astonishing compilation of gritty film footage and photographs from the pre-civil war era. The monsignor himself enters as a spectral narrator through the recorded diary entries he made during his three years as archbishop of El Salvador (1977-80). Most striking, however, are the voices and memories of rural people recounting the terror and bloodshed that consumed their communities and the hope that Romero provided through his steadfast support for the government's victims. The civil war survivors sit before the camera and attempt to bring back what it meant for someone to recognize the profound and brutal atrocities that occurred in their midst, day in and day out. In this sense, while the film certainly can be understood as a hagiography for a modern martyr, it also forces us to see violent repression and war through the eyes

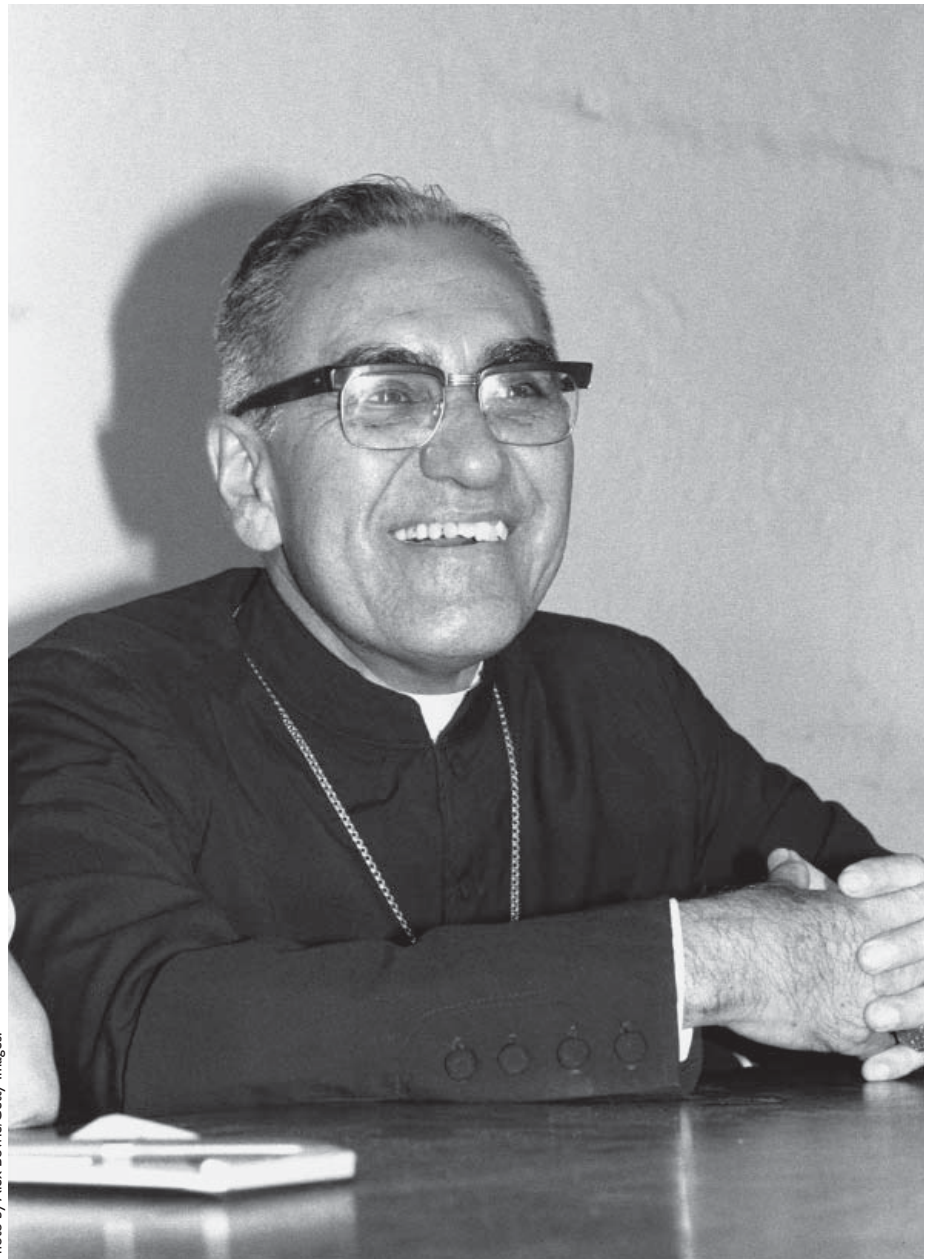


Photo by Alex Bowie/Getty Images.

Archbishop Romero at home in San Salvador, four months before his death.

of its primary victims, the peasants who attempted to stand up against hundreds of years of exploitation or who simply found themselves caught between warring factions they could not escape.

By all accounts, Romero was an unlikely candidate to speak truth to power. He received his religious training in Rome and was known for his traditionalist, markedly neutral stance towards politics of any kind. His 1977 appointment as archbishop of El Salvador was met with general consternation by the more activist

priests preaching liberation theology — a leftist ideology of social justice for the poor — to their downtrodden congregations. How did this “self-effacing, not particularly articulate, stubborn man,” as journalist Alma Guillermoprieto described him, become the icon of resistance and social justice for an entire generation of his countrymen, and, indeed, a hero for the repressed around the world? Like so many unwilling revolutionaries, he was catalyzed into action when the government's wanton violence struck so close to home

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that he could not turn away. A few weeks after Romero became archbishop of El Salvador, Bishop Rutilio Grande, a close friend and colleague who had been organizing and educating his rural congregation, was found shot to death on the side of the road. We cannot know what internal transformation took place inside the once reticent and conservative archbishop, but later he would recall that, as he looked upon his friend's body, he thought to himself, "if they have killed him for doing what he did, then I too have to walk the same path." As Cuellar remembers, the archbishop was forced to ask himself "Whose pastor am I?" He decided he was the pastor of the oppressed. "And he went for it, until they killed him, too."

Once Romero's eyes were opened to the terror and bloodshed claiming his countrymen, he worked tirelessly to expose the horror to the rest of the nation and to the world. He created a legal aid office — Socorro Juridico — under the auspices of the Catholic Church. Its main task was to meticulously record the daily disappearance, death and torture carried out by government death squads. Every day, peasants would queue up outside the church to report the death or disappearance of a loved one. His weekly Sunday homilies became an account of death and terror and an indictment of those responsible. Transmitted on the Catholic Church radio station across the country, families would gather around their radios to listen to "the newscast of the poor." With the country's only opposition newspapers effectively gagged, Romero's sermons became the only beacon of light shining in the terrifying darkness surrounding the targets of government repression.

In the film, a peasant activist who lived through those dark times recalls how each family would make sure to have new batteries for the radio so as not to miss a minute of the sermon. It didn't matter if you had to leave your home before the sermon was over, he added, because you could hear Romero's voice echoing from each of your neighbor's houses as you walked through the village.

Thirty years later, "Monseñor" gives us a window into this past. Grainy footage captures a mother listing the names of her five dead or disappeared sons, while another woman describes the acid burns on her husband's mutilated body. With an unstinting attention to the carnality of death that has become rare in this age of sterilized and censored media accounts of war, we see bodies fished out of ditches, throats cut, more bodies, limbs horribly akimbo, strewn across a bloodstained village square. Onlookers — friends, relatives, neighbors, paid government informers — stare into the camera and then look nervously away. Shirtless and bruised men on

their knees with their thumbs tied with cord behind their backs keep their eyes down as young soldiers brandish machetes behind them.

What does it mean, on the 30th anniversary of Romero's murder, to revisit these horrors and to meditate upon his resolve in the face of overwhelming physical force and cruelty? As Professor Harley Shaiken told the audience for the Center for Latin American Studies' presentation of "Monseñor," "the legacy of Oscar Romero is not simply a thing of the past, but one that ought to inform the future."



Photo by Andrea Schäfer.

Romero was a person who eschewed violence of all kinds and for whatever purpose. When he was alive, his weekly sermons denounced the brutalities committed by all sides in the burgeoning conflict. Thirty years later, his message of peace still bears listening to. El Salvador, like much of Central America, continues to be consumed by poverty and violence. While the organized massacres of suspected guerrilla supporters are a thing of the past, they have been replaced by internecine criminal violence; today, yearly death-by-homicide rates surpass the mortality

levels of some of the worst years of civil war. In this world, Romero's words, and the sincere conviction behind them, still resonate: "I believe in peaceful solutions, and I believe our people are capable of achieving them."

CLAS screened the film "Monseñor: The Last Journey of Óscar Romero" on October 27, 2010.

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Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. and Archbishop Romero are among those depicted in Westminster Abbey's memorial to 20th-century martyrs.

