

Canadian witness to cathedral shooting recalls Archbishop Oscar Romero's courage amid bullets



Ani Beltran

Ani Beltran will never forget that day when the sound of heavy gunfire broke out as Archbishop Oscar Romero celebrated Mass in San Salvador, and the pandemonium as hundreds of people fled in panic.

“People became crazy – screaming, crying, running everywhere, fainting,” recalled Beltran, who lives in Edmonton after fleeing war-torn El Salvador in 1989. “Everybody was scared and in an open area, and all the priests were down to the floor and only Archbishop Romero was standing.”

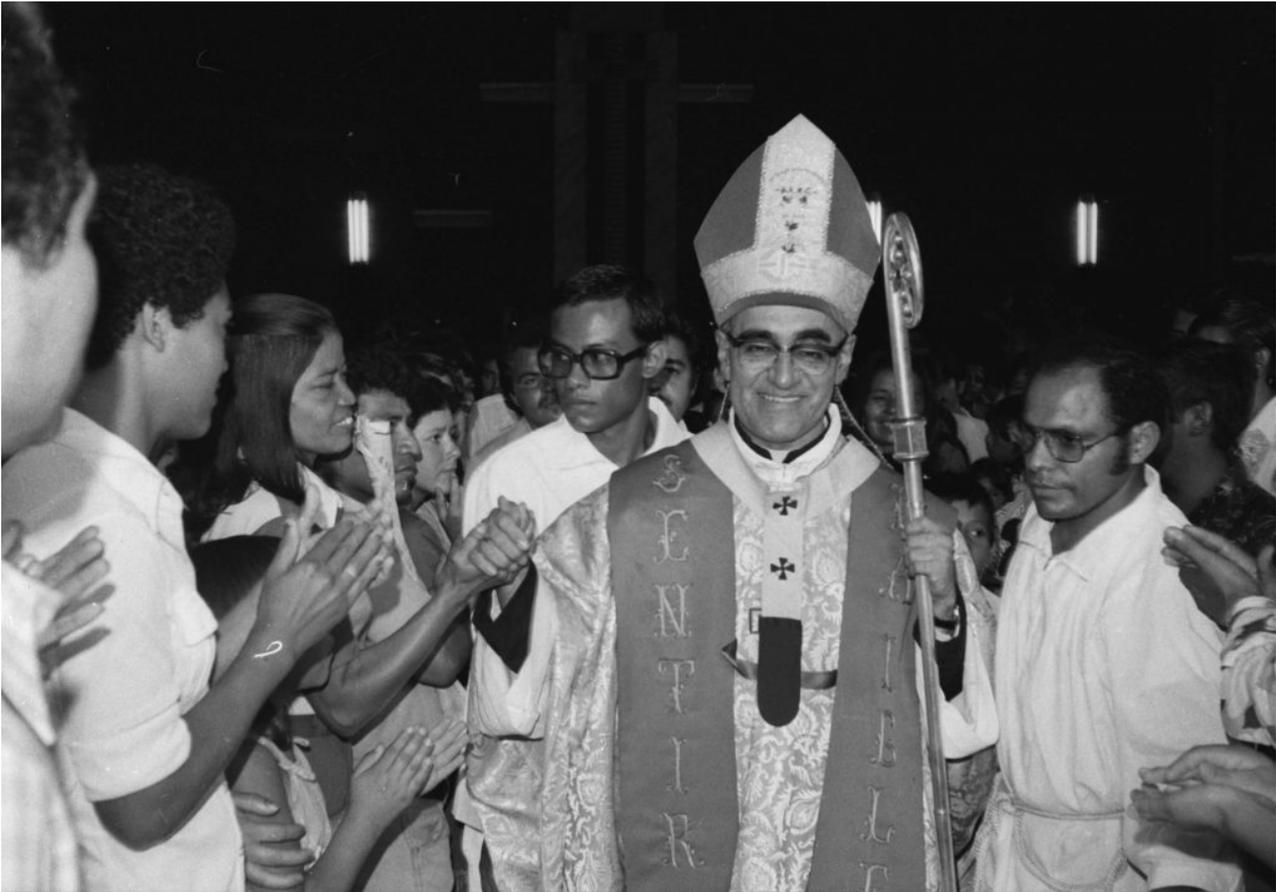
Romero survived that day, and the service carried on. The fact that he stood his ground is an apt metaphor for the archbishop who was a leader against government repression. Romero's liberating messages were a source of respite from the heightened fear gripping El Salvador. Tens of thousands of people would eventually disappear or be killed during the protracted Salvadoran Civil War from 1979 to 1992.

Beltran recalled her father saying of Archbishop Romero: “He is made with special material because he was not scared to be killed.”

Months later, after Beltran's traumatic experience, Archbishop Romero was shot and killed while celebrating Mass on March 24, 1980. Now, nearly 40 years later, the martyred Salvadoran Archbishop will be canonized as a saint of the Roman Catholic Church on Oct. 14.

To many in Edmonton and around the world, the social justice hero was already a saint in their eyes.

“In El Salvador, people often say that God came and was seen in El Salvador, through Blessed Romero,” said Johanna Loyola, a spokesperson for CEBES, an Edmonton-based non-governmental organization that promotes community development in El Salvador.



Blessed Oscar Romero will be canonized as a Saint of the Catholic Church on October 14, 2018. Catholic News Service, Octavio Duran

“Years after the martyrdom of Blessed Romero, his spirit continues to live on, in all of those who knew him and those who have come to know him. Not only in Canada, El Salvador but all over the world. He truly is a saint.”

CEBES will be hosting a commemoration of Romero in Edmonton, on the day of his canonization. The Oct. 14 event begins at 3 p.m. in the Providence Renewal Centre’s chapel, and is open to the public.

And Father Marc Cramer, the priest assigned to Blessed Romero high school in west Edmonton, is accompanying a local group that’s en route to the Vatican to

witness the Canonization Mass.

“A part of what wanting to be a Christian – more pronounced when you want to be a priest – is the desire to be like Christ,” said Cramer, the pastor of Good Shepherd Parish. “When you hear about what happened to him and what he was trying to do, he was being very much like Christ. He was going against the grain, he was speaking out – and it’s always difficult, but that kind of stuff inspires me.

“God always produces saints that are needed and Oscar Romero was a saint for the time,” Cramer said.

Archbishop Romero’s canonization is long overdue for many Catholics from El Salvador – and other Latin American countries that have experienced political turmoil.

“To have someone who is so close to our own history politically, economically, is a blessing for us in our community,” said Father Augusto Garcia of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Edmonton’s Spanish-language parish.

“The Salvadoran community, their life is very founded in Christian faith. Bishop Romero helps them to be engaged in the Church, to love the Church, in the middle of their sufferings.”

Oscar Arnulfo Romero was born into a poor family in Ciudad Barrios, El Salvador, on Aug. 15, 1917. As a priest, and later as bishop of a rural diocese, he was profoundly affected by the treatment of peasant farmers.



Bob McKeon

“He tried to, in a way, have the rich work with the poor. He tried to be a bridge in a way,” said Bob McKeon, an emeritus professor at Newman Theological College. However, “it became more and more difficult to take that sort of bridge position because the situation simply became too polarized.”

Archbishop Romero was a champion of social justice through the preferential option for the poor – the idea that Christians have an obligation first and foremost to care for the poor and vulnerable – and liberation theology, a call to free people from social, political and economic oppression.

“He took that very much to heart. He really became a very powerful voice for social justice,” McKeon said.

Romero was targeted for speaking out against poverty, political assassinations and government repression during his homilies at the Metropolitan Cathedral of the Holy Saviour in the capital San Salvador, which were broadcast across the country. He even reached out to soldiers responsible for much of the violence.

Romero said “the country people, the poor people, they are your brothers, too,” Beltran recalled.

“And people, especially the poor people, loved him so much. Of course, the rich people didn’t like him because he was telling the truth. He was trying to touch the heart of the soldiers.”

Archbishop Romero’s canonization is a time for some Edmonton students to reflect on their school’s namesake.

In his martyrdom, Krystal Farinas sees a man who stood up for his faith even if it cost him his life.

“He has a quote which says, ‘It is not God’s will for some to have everything and others to have nothing,’” said Farinas, 17. “He voiced that very well as an archbishop, and now that he’s going to be a saint I think the message will spread out more, that we should give more to those that are poor. And that’s not just poor financially, but those who are also poor in spirit, poor emotionally, to bring people closer to God.”

In spite of his grand stature, it’s Archbishop Romero’s humility that inspires 15-year-old Ara Zarasate.



Blessed Oscar Romero High School Principal Joe Gulli, student Ara Zarasate, Chaplain Angie Venne, student Krystal Farinas. Thandi Konguavi, Grandin Media

“I really look up to Oscar Romero because he’s about to be a saint and as humans, we’re all called to be saints,” she said.

Four decades later, Ani Beltran still remembers Archbishop Romero’s reaction at that Mass interrupted by gunfire.

“The cathedral was full of people,” Beltran recalled. “And when he was giving his homily, people were clapping and clapping and he had to stop because they wouldn’t let him talk.”

When the shooting began, Beltran recalled that Archbishop Romero stood with his eyes closed with the cup of wine in his hands before the consecration. After several minutes, the gunfire stopped and everybody was still lying on the floor.

As calm slowly returned, Romero paraphrased Matthew 10:28, perhaps foreshadowing his own fate:

“‘You, my lovely people, have lack of faith,’” he said. “We don’t have to be

scared of those who kill the body. We must be scared of the one who can destroy the soul.”