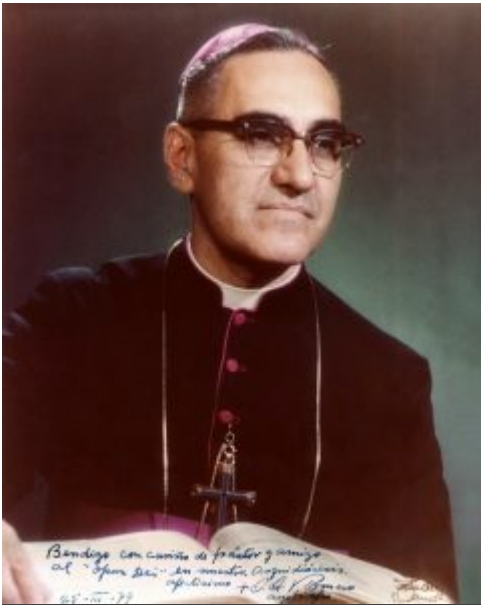


Blessed Oscar Romero, destined to be 'the saint of silence'?

For Francisco Rico-Martinez, Archbishop Oscar Romero may well be the saint of silence.



Archbishop Oscar Romero in 1979

As a young law student at the University of El Salvador, Rico met twice with Romero to talk with him about people who were disappearing as the right-wing, military government cracked down on unions, peasants and students in 1979.

“For me at that particular moment, Romero was too conservative for me. Romero was not a revolutionary,” recalled Rico, who came to Toronto from El Salvador as a refugee.

But for the radical young students, even a conservative Romero was useful because he could challenge the government. The archbishop had turned parts of the San Salvador cathedral complex over to campesinos – poor farmers – who were flooding the city looking for refuge from a rampaging army as the country descended into what would be a 12-year civil war that killed more than 75,000 people. His sermons on Sunday mornings were broadcast live, nationally on the radio. It was the one media outlet the army could not censor or intimidate.

What went into those Sunday sermons was long days spent listening to delegations and individuals who came to their archbishop looking for help finding their missing family members or hoping to bury their dead.

“What impressed me was his silence,” Rico said. “So he was listening. The whole tone of the meeting changed because you saw a person listening. It was not another guy saying, ‘Yeah, sure, whatever, next.’ You see it. You feel it. You perceive it... He would not only listen. You would perceive that he was listening.”

A miracle attributed to Romero was approved by Pope Francis last month to pave the way for Romero’s canonization. It is widely expected to happen during the Synod of Bishops in October along with Pope Paul VI. The Salvadoran martyr’s cause for sainthood was stalled for years at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith until Pope Francis was elected in 2013.

Vatican theologians declared Romero was a martyr killed “in odium fidei” (in hatred of the faith) in 2015. For such a martyr, only one verified miracle is required, instead of the usual two. The miracle attributed to the intercession of Romero has not officially been made public, but last year Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia said that a “healing of a pregnant woman that at first glance seems inexplicable” had been reported.

It would be wrong to lock Romero’s legacy into El Salvador during its civil war, as if he were only a saint for one country and one episode in a long history of violence in Latin America. Even in El Salvador, where 46 per cent of the population is under the age of 25, that history is fading but Romero lives on.

“I don’t know if the young people know the history, but what they know is that he is one of us,” said Rico.

Edmonton has a school named after Blessed Oscar Romero. So does Toronto – at Blessed Archbishop Romero Catholic Secondary School in a heavily Hispanic and Portuguese immigrant neighbourhood of Toronto’s west end, the kids get it.

“He focused on the poor rather than the rich,” said Grade 10 student Angela Martinez. “How he died – he died as a martyr – I think it’s about time he gets canonized.”

Grade 11 student Julia Soares believes Romero is a saint for Canada, too. “We aren’t in a dictatorship or anything like that, but he was an activist,” she said. “And we still do need activism today for various reasons.”

On March 24, 1980, a death squad with connections to El Salvador’s military government shot Romero through the open door of a hospital chapel while the archbishop was celebrating Mass for the religious sisters who worked there. The Sunday before he was killed, Romero used his broadcast sermon to appeal directly to rank and file soldiers.

“In the name of God and this suffering population, whose cries reach to the heavens more tumultuous each day, I beg you, I beseech you, I order you in the name of God, cease the repression,” Romero said.

Telling poor, young, conscripted soldiers in El Salvador at that time they could follow their conscience and disobey their officers was revolutionary, Rico said.

“His homily that last Sunday, what he said was so powerful but also so threatening to the system. In El Salvador it was something so radical to say to someone, ‘Don’t obey the voice of authority, because there is a higher authority telling you not to do it.’ ”

A call to conscience and conscientious objection resonates with students at Blessed Archbishop Romero.

“God gives us choices. We do have the freedom to make our own choices,” said Soares.

“To be making the right choice rather than the wrong one is something that all Christians, all Catholics, should follow... Whether it was then or now, it all goes back to the same thing – making the right decision, even if an authority figure wants to go against it.”

That claim to freedom and responsibility embedded in Romero’s call to conscience is his legacy, said Rico.

“That’s why I totally believe, as many people said, he is resurrected in the people of El Salvador,” he said. “He’s a symbol of the struggle for freedom.”

As the civil war spiralled after Romero’s assassination, Rico and his wife Loly became targets. They wound up in Canada as refugees and were soon active in helping other refugees. Today they direct the FCJ Refugee Centre in Toronto which, with the support of the Faithful Companions of Jesus, welcomes and houses dozens of refugee families from around the world every year.

The Ricos understand their work with refugees as a permanent mandate they received from Archbishop Romero.

“What that means, it’s a permanent struggle,” Rico said. “These people are looking for freedom and they recognize the symbols of freedom, like Romero was. It’s every single day. It’s not a fight once on the 24th of March. It’s a fight for the people who follow Romero every day.”