

16. Oscar A. Romero (1917-1980)

“Peace is the product of justice and love.”

Canonized as a Saint in the Roman Catholic tradition on October 14, 2018, he was serving as the Archbishop of San Salvador in El Salvador when he was martyred while conducting Mass on March 24, 1980 by a right-wing death squad. His last words were: "May God have mercy on the assassins." At his funeral, several bombs exploded and gunfire poured into the crowd outside the Cathedral that left 40 people dead and over 200 wounded.

He was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979, and the United Nations proclaimed March 24 as the “International Day for the Right to Truth Concerning Gross Human Rights Violations and for the Dignity of Victims.” Pope Francis may name him one of the “Doctors of the Church” (there are only thirty-six now).

His father was a carpenter, and he was trained in the craft as well. He entered seminary at the age of thirteen and ultimately completed his studies at the Gregorian University in Rome in 1941. He was ordained a priest in 1942 at the age of twenty-five. He was a priest in San Miguel for twenty years and became a bishop in 1970. He was appointed the Archbishop in 1977. His Jesuit priest friend, Rutilio Grande, was assassinated on March 12, 1977, and it had a profound effect on him. “If they have killed him for doing what he did, then I too have to walk the same path.” In 1979 a new Junta came to power, violence increased, and the US supported the new Junta. Romero wrote Jimmy Carter to dissuade him of assisting the new regime but to no avail.

Oscar Romero was assassinated in 1980 after presiding over a Eucharist at church-run hospital specializing in caring for the terminally ill; in the sermon the Archbishop of San Salvador, El Salvador had said this: “*Christ arisen has put in history’s womb the beginning of a new world. To come to [the Eucharist] on Sunday is to immerse oneself in that beginning, which again becomes present and is celebrated [at] the [table of the Eucharist].*”

We have never preached violence, except the violence of love, which left Christ nailed to a cross, the violence that we must each do to ourselves to overcome our selfishness and such cruel inequalities among us. The violence we preach is not the violence of the sword, the violence of hatred. It is the violence of love, of brotherhood, the violence that wills to beat weapons into sickles for work.

Christ would not be Redeemer if he had not concerned himself with giving food to the crowds that were hungry, if he had not given light to the eyes of the blind, if he had not felt sorrow for the forsaken crowds that had no one to love them, no one to help them. Christianity cares about human development, about the political and social aspects of life. Redemption would not be complete if it did not consider these aspects of the Christ who chose in fact to be an example of one oppressed under a powerful empire and under a ruling class of his people that savaged his reputation and honor and left him on a cross.

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The Kingdom [of God] is already mysteriously present in our land; when the Lord comes his perfection will be consummated. This is the hope that encourages Christians. We know that every effort to improve society, especially when injustice and sin are involved, is an effort that God blesses, that God desires, that God demands.

Those who do not understand transcendence are not able to understand us. When we speak of injustice here below and we denounce it, they think we are doing politics. It is in the name of that righteous kingdom of God that we denounce the injustices of the earth.

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Let us be today's Christians. Let us not take fright at the boldness of today's church. With Christ's light let us illuminate even the most hideous caverns of the human person: torture, jail, plunder, want, chronic illness. The oppressed must be saved, not with a revolutionary salvation, in mere human fashion, but with the holy revolution of the Son of Man, who dies on the cross to cleanse God's image, which is soiled in today's humanity, a humanity so enslaved, so selfish, so sinful.

A church that doesn't provoke any crises, a gospel that doesn't unsettle, a word of god that doesn't get under anyone's skin, a word of God that doesn't touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed—what gospel is that? . . . I will not tire of declaring that if we really want an effective end to violence we must remove the violence that lies at the root of all violence: structural violence, social injustice, exclusion of citizens from the management of the country, repression. All this is what constitutes the primal cause, from which the rest flows naturally.

Brothers, you come from our own people. You are killing your own brothers. Any human order to kill must be subordinate to the law of God. No one has to obey an immoral law. It is high time you obeyed your consciences rather than sinful orders. The church cannot remain silent before such an abomination . . . In the name of God, in the name of this suffering people whose cry rises to heaven more loudly each day, I implore you, I beg you, I order you: stop the repression.

If God accepts the sacrifice of my life, may my death before the freedom of my people. A bishop will die, but the Church of God, which is the people, will never perish. I do not believe in death without resurrection. If they kill me, I will rise again in the people of El Salvador. . . A church that suffers no persecution but enjoys the privileges and support of the things of the earth—beware!—is not the true church of Jesus Christ. A preaching that does not point out sin is not the preaching of the gospel. A preaching that makes sinners feel good, so that they are secured in their sinful state, betrays the gospel's call.

Those who have a voice must speak for those who are voiceless.

We must not seek the child Jesus in the pretty figures of our Christmas cribs. We must seek him among the undernourished children who have gone to bed at night with nothing to eat, among the poor newsboys who sleep covered with newspapers in doorways.