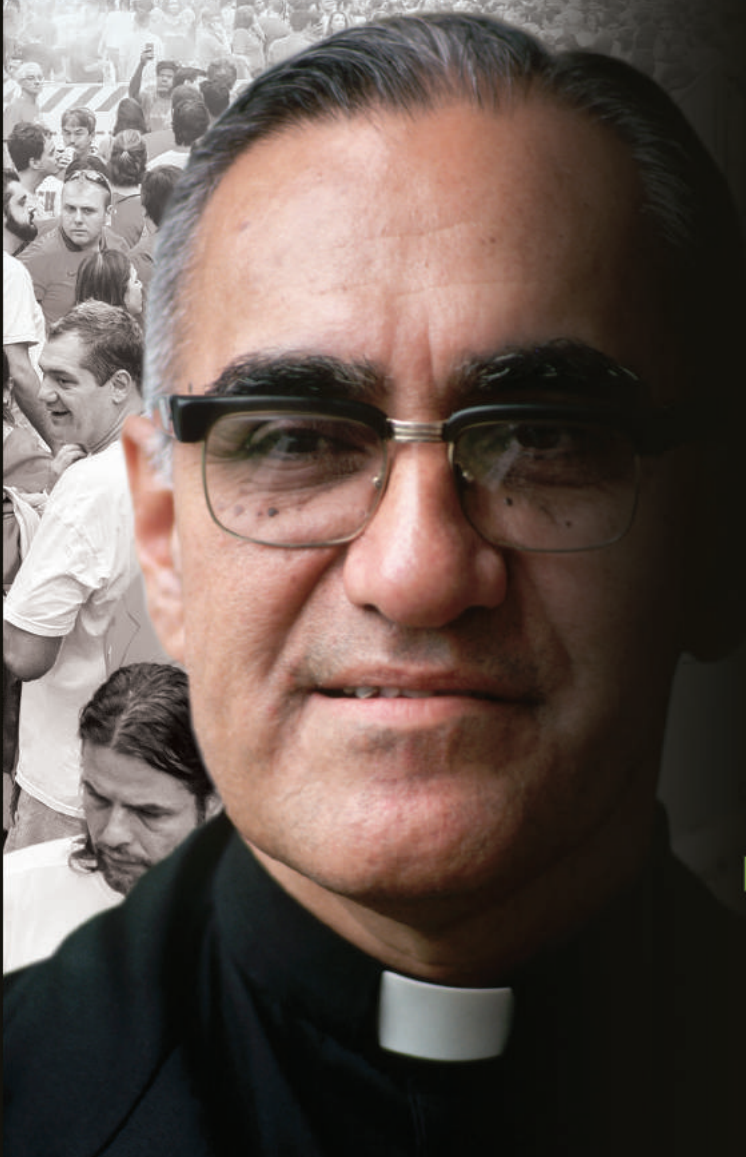


OSCAR

PROPHET OF HOPE

ROMERO

Roberto
Morozzo
della
Rocca



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PROPHET OF HOPE

Roberto Morozzo della Rocca

Foreword by Hosffman Ospino, PhD

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Foreword

The Witness of Archbishop Oscar Romero



The beauty of the Christian experience is that God's Holy Spirit constantly moves the hearts of those called to be followers of Jesus Christ to witness the truth of the Gospel in the here and now of our lives. It is exactly where we are, in the continuum of history, sharing the joys and hopes of those who live with us while accompanying them in their grief and anxieties, that Christian life unfolds. Although every Christian is to live this same experience to the fullest, there are those whom the Church remembers with special love because through their lives we learn something special about the unending depths of God's divine mystery. We remember them as disciples, witnesses, saints.

On May 23, 2015 the Church celebrated the witness of Archbishop Oscar Romero from El Salvador in the ceremony of his beatification. That very same day I intentionally finished reading the present biography, written by Professor Roberto Morozzo della Rocca, and wrote this foreword. Doing so on this particular day afforded me the opportunity to participate in the experience of *being, feeling, and thinking* with the Church in a very unique way. These verbs, as Professor Morozzo della Rocca shares throughout his book, were defining for Archbishop Romero during his life as a man who deeply loved the Church.

For Romero, being, feeling, and thinking with the Church meant faithfulness to his vocation to being an authentic Christian disciple and to the ecclesial community within which he actively lived his witness. Such fidelity was expressed consistently through a special love for the Scriptures and the Church's Tradition. This is more than evident in the many homilies, pastoral letters, and other documents he wrote throughout his life. Without a doubt, Romero was a man of the Church. His fidelity was further realized through a sincere love for the people of El Salvador who during his time experienced the hardships of political corruption and extreme violence. Romero stood up firmly to affirm the values of the Gospel in a context where life, truth, and justice were blatantly dismissed by several sectors of the Salvadoran society. He walked as a man of faith and an advocate alongside the people of El Salvador, particularly the poor and the most vulnerable. Without a doubt, Romero was a man of the Church.

Romero's faithfulness ultimately led him to his martyrdom. As a contemporary martyr he speaks not only to the people of El Salvador or the Latin American communities, but also to the entire Church. The archbishop speaks loudly about the pastors that God's people longs for, pastors who are in intimate communion with the

Lord Jesus, who love the Church, and who understand the people they serve; pastors who inspire, pastors who, in the words of Pope Francis, “take on the smell of the sheep” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 24). Romero’s voice resounds in the hearts of the Christian community with an invitation to denounce the cultures of death in our midst and announce the truth of the Gospel with prophetic voice. In Romero, the words of Pope Paul VI find fulfillment: our world is more willing to listen to witnesses than to teachers, and if it listens to teachers, it is because they are witnesses (see *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 14). During his life many listened to Romero; many more continue to listen to him after his death.

It is fascinating to observe how Romero’s actions and words have inspired numerous interpretations about the life of this Latin American archbishop, his convictions, commitments, and even his influences. Some of those interpretations, in fact, seem to have gotten in the way of officially advancing Romero’s canonization process for several years. Yet we seem to be beyond that impasse. This is where the work of historians and researchers helping us to understand Romero as a man in his time, living in a particular context, is more than welcomed. Comprehensive biographies of Romero, like this one written by Professor Morozzo della Rocca, and current efforts to organize and disseminate Romero’s writings are gifts to the ecclesial community.

Of course, there will be many more interpretations of who Romero was and what he said. This is the power of the witness of those Christian disciples whose lives taught us more about the unending depths of God’s divine mystery. Romero was a man of his time, and from a historical perspective it is good to have clarity about the conditions in which he lived as well as the reasons he made specific decisions inspired by his faith. Yet Romero is also a man of our time because he belongs to the same people for whom he

cared so much as a pastor: the people of God. As Pope John Paul II repeated: “Romero is ours.” He belongs to the poor and the afflicted because he loved them with a sincere heart. He belongs to the Church because every time the Christian community searches for inspiration to live out its faith, Romero stands tall in the cloud of witnesses reminding us that it is possible—in fact essential—to feel, to think with the Church (*Sentire Cum Ecclesia*), as the archbishop martyr’s episcopal motto read.

May the reading of this biography of Archbishop Romero be an invitation to learn more about his life and thought. May it also inspire us to be ever more mindful about the millions of people in the world today who live in circumstances similar to the people of El Salvador during the time of Romero. Finally, may our hearts be moved to remember and support the many pastoral leaders—bishops, priests, deacons, sisters, catechists, missionaries, and countless lay evangelizers—whose hearts, like Romero’s, are moved by the Holy Spirit to witness the truth of the Gospel as they stand for life, truth, and justice.

HOSFFEMAN OSPINO, PHD

Boston, May 23, 2015

Archbishop Oscar Romero’s Beatification

Preface



This book by Roberto Morozzo della Rocca is important because of its subject matter: the life of *Monseñor* Oscar Arnulfo Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador in Central America. While he was celebrating Mass on March 24, 1980, he was killed by death squads connected with the right-wing Salvadoran regime. He was sixty-two years old. The book is also important because its author is a historian recognized as an authority for his great insight and seriousness. Roberto Morozzo della Rocca's historical research on Archbishop Romero (in this and other writings) allowed him to reconstruct the true image of the assassinated prelate. This image had either been covered by many layers of polemics and ideologies, or it had been turned into a partisan banner. We must remember the decisive contribution that the author's research has made toward the reconstruction of the historical truth about Romero and toward the slow, laborious clarification of his process of beatification, which reached a positive conclusion

only with the pontificate of Pope Francis. Morozzo della Rocca's study was important for Romero's cause of beatification, in which it was essential to elucidate the richness and complexity of his character as a Latin American Christian and a Catholic bishop.

The failure to recognize Romero's "martyrdom," evident in the lack of progress in his beatification process, was a serious problem for the Church in Central America and all of Latin America. She was a mother who did not acknowledge the blood shed by one of her sons who had lived for her. Romero's episcopal motto reveals the meaning of his life: "*Sentir con la Iglesia.*" "To think with the Church." But why was the martyrdom of this bishop not acknowledged? It was because of the tenacious opposition of some Latin American Catholics and bishops who considered him an ideological, mindlessly-progressive figure who had been manipulated by groups of liberation theologians. This interpretation was reinforced by the fact that Romero's name had become a symbol of the Latin American left, who held him up as a "revolutionary" icon. Morozzo della Rocca has demonstrated that Romero was a figure with great spiritual depth, not a politician but a pastor. History and historical research have their value, especially when they reconstruct the features of such a significant person.

Romero was a martyr. The Brazilian cardinal Lucas Moreira Neves, a prelate who worked in the Roman Curia, told me many years ago that he had met Romero at the Vatican on January 30, 1980. Romero was worried and said: "I will go back, but I will be killed; I do not know whether by the left or by the right." For the rest of Neves' life he carried a secret sorrow because of that interview, so much so that he attended the ceremonies in memory of the deceased archbishop. Romero knew that he would be killed in El Salvador but decided against staying in Rome for a while, as he had been invited to do. He returned to be a pastor among his people,

even unto death. The failure to recognize his martyrdom had created, over the years, a kind of block in the depths of the Latin American ecclesial world. Although it was noticed only by more sensitive souls, it had an immense spiritual cost. With the beatification of Romero, not only has justice been done, but the splendor of the Church's motherhood of one of her best sons now shines forth.

Romero's story is a major episode in a country that went through terrible years. It shows how a bishop and a Church can be a haven of peace while everything is collapsing under the blows of senseless violence. In that difficult situation, Romero was a bishop and a friend of the poor. Indeed, the poor were his central concern, because he recognized in each poor person the mysterious presence of the Lord. Closeness to the poor was the compass of his life. As he preached on February 5, 1978: "There is one criterion for knowing whether God is close to us or far away: anyone who cares for the hungry, for the naked, for the poor, for those who have disappeared or been tortured, for the prisoner, for all suffering humanity, has God close to him."

Reading this book puts us in contact with one of the compelling sagas of the Church of the twentieth century. This story shows how a marvelous Christian achievement could come about in a small country, El Salvador, which was then unknown to most people. The story also reveals the secret but real face of a popular Catholicism of the "poor people" that is strong and resilient, and makes the reader more able to understand the national situation in which many political forces fought each other and dominated the life of El Salvador.

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CHAPTER ONE

The First Fifty Years (1917–1967)

From Ciudad Barrios to Rome



Oscar Romero was killed by a death squad on March 24, 1980, while he was celebrating Mass. For three years he had been Archbishop of San Salvador, the capital of El Salvador. For a long time he was a controversial figure.

Romero was transformed by one political interest group into a revolutionary symbol, whereas the opposing party saw him as a Communist agitator. Only a day after his death a political myth sprang up about Romero, who was compared in messianic terms to

individuals such as Camilo Torres [Restrepo], “Che” Guevara, or Salvador Allende. This led to a negative reaction in those who did not agree with those political figures.

The debates over Romero’s reputation have been intense, especially during the civil war in El Salvador, which lasted from 1980 to 1992. A total of 80,000 people died out of a population of four million. Although as a public figure his actions were decisive for the fate of his country, today it is recognized that Romero was a man of the Church rather than a politician. His views and friendships far transcended the divisions between conservatives and progressives. As long as Romero was alive, El Salvador did not plunge into civil war. It began precisely in the wake of his death, for want of his efforts as a non-partisan peacemaker.

The beatification of Romero in the Catholic Church, following the acknowledgment of his martyrdom *in odium fidei* [hatred of the faith] comes at a time when many minds have been calmed. Now the tensions of the Salvadoran civil war and the bloody clash between military regimes and guerillas in Latin America have become things of the past. The sensational exploitation of the martyred bishop has dwindled. Throughout the world Romero receives honors that are impartially bestowed. Monuments, public squares, universities, airports, and hospitals have been named after him. He is the subject of books, films, and theatrical works.

But who was Romero, really?

Oscar Arnulfo Romero y Galdámez was born on August 15, 1917, in Ciudad Barrios. This town in eastern El Salvador is located at an altitude of 900 meters [3,000 feet], not far from the border with Honduras. His father, Santos Romero, was the local telegraph operator. Santos did not have a good disposition and was quick to anger. His small farm, the dowry of his mother Guadalupe de Jesús Galdámez, together with his house on the town square, helped the

family to make a decent living. Two hired hands worked on the farm. Considering their surroundings, the Romeros could not be called poor. Like everyone in Ciudad Barrios, they had no electricity. The children slept together in common beds. The photos of the Romero family show faces with *mestizo* features, like the vast majority of Salvadorans.

At the age of four, Oscar was struck with polio. For a long time the disease affected his ability to move and to speak. The illness had long-range consequences on his character, accentuating his intelligence and thoughtfulness. An avid learner, Oscar was intrigued by words and their meanings. Being physically weak, he rarely played with boys his age. At school he showed no interest in mathematics, but he excelled in the Spanish language. Apart from suffering from polio, he had a happy childhood with his five brothers and two sisters (one of whom died in infancy).

Oscar's mother was very religious, but the same cannot be said of his father. Santos taught his children their prayers and the catechism, but his fellow townspeople remember him as not very fervent and somewhat insolent. Every evening, however, the Romero family recited the Rosary. Little Oscar liked to withdraw in prayer to the small village church and to get up at night to pray, according to the testimony of his younger brother Mamerto, who shared a bed with him. Mamerto, for his part, preferred to sleep.

At the age of thirteen, Oscar entered the minor seminary in San Miguel. From the town of one thousand with a cool climate in the middle of the mountains, Oscar went to the county seat, with twenty thousand inhabitants, on the hot plain. This decision was made because the mayor of the town, Alfonso Leiva, pointed Oscar out to Father Benito Calvo. He was the priest from San Miguel who regularly came up to Ciudad Barrios to perform the duties of pastor. Santos Romero had thought that Oscar might take up the

carpenter's trade and had already sent him for an apprenticeship in a workshop. He agreed to let his son take another path, but then he had second thoughts and told the bishop of San Miguel that he no longer intended to support Oscar at the seminary. The bishop did not want to lose the boy and assumed part of the expense. Oscar also worked to pay his way at seminary. Among other things he spent one summer in a mine.

The boy liked the seminary. It was run in a paternal and humane spirit by the Claretian Fathers. The setting was provincial in the good sense, with attention to details, simple learning, and well-ordered discipline without excesses. Oscar liked living with his fellow students. He loved the idea of priesthood, preaching, music, and chant. He soon proved to be an outstanding speaker. Despite the modest setting, the seminarians were exhorted to give their best. The young Romero drew up and revised resolutions and plans for prayer, penance, and daily discipline—for personal sanctification, as eager seminarians everywhere used to do. The favorite devotions at the seminary were to the Virgin of Peace of San Miguel and to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Romero would remain faithful to them for the rest of his life.

The Bishop of San Miguel, Juan Antonio Dueñas, wanted his two most promising seminarians, Oscar Romero and Rafael Valladares, to study in Rome. Rafael had been sent to Rome in 1934, and Romero joined him in October 1937. The two young Salvadorans, who shared a common life and a close friendship that would end only with the death of Valladares in 1961, lived at the Pontifical Latin American College in Rome. Both were ordained to the priesthood in Rome: Valladares on March 23, 1940, since he was four years older, and Romero on April 4, 1942.

Valladares was a young man with a fine mind and a severe, restless character. Social class meant a lot in El Salvador. Rafael, Bishop

Dueñas' nephew, was the son of rich landowners, unlike the other seminarians. For Romero, he was a difficult model to imitate. Although Rafael was used to winning first place, he was humble enough to wish Oscar well. Rafael showed sensitivity to social issues, was interested in current events, and talked with Oscar about them. He was clever and imaginative, whereas Oscar had a more systematic way of thinking.

In Romero's biography, the Roman years (1937–1943) are fundamentally important. "*Romanità*," or doing as the Roman clergymen do, was a decisive element in Romero's formation and later in his identity as a priest and a bishop. Romero belonged to the generation of clergymen that tried to reform the unfortunate—even calamitous—state of the Latin American clergy in regard to discipline and spirituality. One sign of this reform was the firm intention of the central See of Catholicism to imprint a more Roman character on the Latin American Church. This meant the formation of Church personnel who would overcome a certain provincialism, have a more universal sense of the Church, practice steadfast moral discipline, distinguish the spheres of Church and State, and distance themselves from politics so as to give priority to ecclesial and spiritual concerns. In a way, it was a matter of founding the Latin American Church anew, given the decadence of its educational institutions and the loss of the proper sense of the Church in relation to the rest of society. Centuries of the Spanish system of *Patronato*¹ [royal patronage] had led to confusion of the sacred and the secular. Madrid had excluded Rome from Latin America, and the States born of the Bolivarian revolution [in the early nineteenth

1. Under this system the kings of Spain had great influence in Church affairs in Latin America, including the appointment of bishops. —*Ed.*

century] would try to do the same, in order to keep the Church subject to the civil authority.

Romero studied at the Gregorian University, which was run by the Jesuits, as was the Pontifical Latin American College. As he became acquainted with and absorbed the spirituality of the Society of Jesus, he began to make an Ignatian retreat periodically. Romero himself says what they meant to him in a diary entry from 1972: “The exercises of Saint Ignatius [of Loyola] are a personal effort to put Christianity into practice. They are not the great general principles of revelation or of the magisterium, but personal conversation with God. ‘I have seen God,’ Jacob said. This must be my yearning: ‘Speak to me, Lord.’”

Romero participated in the religious life of “Italian” Rome, as was usually the case with clerics who came to the city for their studies and formation. He served in parishes on the outskirts of Rome. A Mexican fellow student at the Latin American College would later remember Romero as follows:

He was of average height, light-brown complexion, and firm bearing, like someone who is in no hurry because he knows that he will reach his goals. In dealing with others he appeared peaceful and calm. . . . From what I remember, his intelligence was above average. I would say that his literary style was elegant, with word usage and metaphors that gave grace and ease to his prose. When he read what he had written, the way he expressed himself gave his words greater life. . . . He was respectful of norms, devout, and concerned about his priestly formation in all its aspects. He knew how to make friends and we, who were already his friends, held him in high esteem because of his simplicity and his desire to be helpful.

During his stay in Rome, Romero developed an affectionate devotion to the pope, which he maintained for the rest of his life. He

had a special veneration for Pius XI. Romero noted and admired the steadfastness of the man whom he called “the Pontiff of imperial stature” (“*Pontifice de talla imperial*”) for confronting totalitarian ideologies and regimes. The twenty-year-old Romero admired and internalized the model of a strong bishop, embodied by Pius XI. In later years Romero would rate the living example of Pius XI, whom he watched closely, as more important for his formation than the entire curriculum of his studies in Rome. To quote his own words, “In Rome I had to live through the drama of the Church facing the totalitarianisms of Hitler and Mussolini. I learned from the imperial Pius XI the boldness to confront those in power fearlessly and to tell them: ‘As long as I am Pope, no one will laugh at the Church.’” In an article Romero wrote in 1963, he described the death of Pius XI, which occurred while the Pontiff was writing a “transcendental speech . . . meant to denounce the hypocritical attitude of the modern Neros who martyr the Church.” “This is the pope whom I admire the most,” Romero would say at the tomb of Pius XI in January 1980, during his last visit to Rome. He was well acquainted with that tomb. He had attended the burial of the deceased Pontiff on February 14, 1939: “We saw him close up: his pale face, the mouth already livid; we touched his right hand with an indescribable emotion.” Pope Pius XII did not impress young Romero as much; he simply saw in him a pope suited to his time. In his heart only Pius XI was “*imperial*.”

Rome confirmed and increased Romero’s deference to the magisterium of the Church. He was particularly impressed by the solemn ceremonies that he attended. His studies were not geared to scholarly research but to formation, which consisted essentially of being in Rome. This was an absolute value in itself, more important than any scholarly achievements in his studies. Twenty years later Romero would observe:

The privilege of studying in Rome was valuable not so much for the scholarly aspect as for the moral support of a priestly education completed in the Roman setting. Rome is the most beautiful symbol and synthesis of the Church. Eternal Rome, while continuing to be the same through the centuries, takes on the historical characteristics that correspond to the individual personalities of the popes. It is a miracle of Providence: each pope embodies in his way of being the aspect that is most needed at that time in the life of the Church.

According to Romero, Rome itself prepared him for priestly life, as though its educational institutions were secondary:

For a seminarian who is devotedly preparing for the demands of his vocation, what a splendid school it is to observe and experience a Rome that is displayed beneath the visible hand of God which is the Pope. . . . Roman spring has a mystery of ineffable sweetness; through the historic streets, by the light of dawn, the newly ordained priests go to celebrate their first Masses at the most famous altars in Christendom: the catacombs, the tomb of Saint Peter, of Saint Paul, [the Basilica of] Saint Mary Major, etc. And, all the fervor of the martyrs and pilgrims whose story is connected with those spiritual centers of attraction is revived in the soul that has just been consecrated.

The documentation on Romero's stay in Rome shows a young man fascinated by the city of the popes, who practiced self-denial, and is intent on his duties of study and religious piety. To put it simply, Romero wanted to be holy. He wrote to his mother once a month, continually emphasizing that he was journeying "toward perfection." Having no money to buy books, Romero copied by hand onto file cards the readings and thoughts that interested him. Most of these file cards, which he always kept, concerned spirituality, asceticism, and mysticism. It is not unusual for a seminarian to be interested in Christian perfection, but in Romero this interest was pronounced.

After he finished the usual studies in theology,² Romero wanted to specialize in the study of ascetical theology so as to earn a *laurea* degree. He did not have a chance to defend his thesis orally because of the wartime situation, which prompted him to return to his country. Romero later remembered those difficult days as follows:

Europe and almost the entire world were in flames during World War II. Fear, uncertainty, and news of bloodshed, created an atmosphere of terror. At the Pio Latino, rations were smaller every day. The rector would go out searching for food and come back with pumpkins, onions, chestnuts, or whatever he could find hidden under his cape. Hunger caused many Italian seminaries to close. The Pio Latino had to confront the situation since all its resident students were from other countries; those who could return home faced a perilous journey. Those who stayed suffered from homesickness more than ever. Almost every night sirens announced air raids from the enemy and we had to run to the cellars. Twice these were more than just warnings and the Roman suburbs were riddled by horrible bombardments.

In August 1943 Romero left Rome, which had been under bombardment for several months. He made the long and difficult journey back to his country with Valladares. As passengers arriving in Cuba from Italy (a country allied with Germany), Romero and Valladares were suspected of espionage and imprisoned in a concentration camp. There they ran the risk of dying of starvation, hardships, and sickness. When they were recognized as clerics by a Cuban priest, the two men were first admitted to a hospital and then set free. They arrived in El Salvador in December 1943.

2. Romero was ordained in April 1942. —*Trans.*