

TUESDAY 15 AUGUST WAS THE 100TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BIRTH OF BLESSED OSCAR ROMERO, THE MARTYRED ARCHBISHOP OF EL SALVADOR

Priest who took bullet for El Salvador was no Marxist dupe



Credo Roderick Strange

A woman was phoning her friends. "Did you hear they finally killed that son of a bitch?" she asked. "We're going to have a party." It was March, 1980. The man whose death delighted her was Oscar Romero, the Archbishop of San Salvador. The guest of honour at her party was Roberto D'Aubuisson, who had organised the assassination. Romero was born on August 15, 1917, 100 years ago next Tuesday. Why was he hated? As a young priest he was a tireless pastor of those in his care. While he cared for the poor, he was befriended

by the wealthy. In 1970 he became an auxiliary bishop of San Salvador. He was not particularly popular. "He was an insignificant being, a shadow that went by clinging to the walls," one priest has written.

In those troubled times in El Salvador, Romero was judged to be too close to the rich, too insensitive to the needs of the poor. He feared radicalism as a cover for communism. Then in 1974 he was made Bishop of Santiago de Maria.

He began piously, encouraging prayer, but when six catechists, members of the same family, were tortured and murdered, allegedly belonging to an underground political-military organisation, he began to listen to what people were telling him. The pastoral instinct that had been evident in the early years of his ministry began to be stirred. However, three years later, to the dismay of many, he was sent back to San Salvador as the new archbishop.

He was seen as the pawn of the prosperous. Matters changed.

Four days after Romero was installed as archbishop in February 1977, a demonstration, protesting against what people were convinced was a fraudulent presidential election, took place in the Plaza Libertad. There were up to 60,000 people present and Mass was celebrated. Romero was asked to attend — his presence might have checked the threat of violence — but, while he promised prayers, he was too timid to be present. In the event the square was cleared by gunfire, and up to 300 people were killed or wounded. Romero had failed his people.

Then, less than two weeks after that, on March 12, Father Rutilio Grande was murdered. Grande was Romero's friend and a champion of those in most need. His assassination devastated the country. It was decided that the next Sunday, March

20, there would be only a single Mass in the archdiocese. The papal nuncio was outraged, but Romero held his nerve. This time he did not fail. More than 100,000 people filled the square and about 150 priests concelebrated.

Thereafter, although always seeking moderation, Romero recognised the plight of peasants and became a voice for them, denouncing the injustice and repression they had to endure. His homilies, often more than an hour long, were eagerly anticipated, not only for their gospel message, but because they relayed the news of the past week, atrocities never mentioned by doctored government sources. And so the hatred of the wealthy minority grew. He was a threat to them. What stands out during the three years between Grande's assassination and his own is how frightened Romero often was. He did not waver.

Preaching on Sunday, March 23,

1980, he appealed to the army, the national guard and the police not to kill the peasants who were their brothers and sisters. "I ask you, I beg you, I order you in the name of God," he declared, "Stop the repression."

The next evening, while he was celebrating Mass, a single gunshot killed him. The privileged rejoiced. Martyred in the service of the people, the formal recognition of his holiness came slowly. Perhaps those with influence were still able to present him as naive and misguided, duped by Marxist radicals. However, his beatification on May 23, 2015 declared his significance for San Salvador. As Pope Francis observed, he had "constructed peace out of love". His canonisation may follow soon, a declaration of his significance for us all.

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A good compromise is one where everybody makes a contribution.

Angela Merkel

Your problem isn't the problem. Your reaction is the problem.

Most of the important things in the world have been accomplished by people who have kept on trying when there seemed to be no help at all.

Dale Carnegie

Everyone shines, given the right lighting.

Susan Cain

Dreams are extremely important. You can't do it unless you can imagine it.

George Lucas