

“Oscar Romero: a Living Stone”
by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)
Fifth in a series about Modern Martyrs

Hebrews 11.1-2, 32-40; 12.1-2

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Please read the Scripture by clicking [here](#).

He was at the front, behind the altar. He could have been elsewhere.

He could have been a carpenter, like his father. But God called him to be a priest.

He could have been serving his beloved parish as he did for 20 years. But they made him a bishop.

He could have still been bishop of his small, poor diocese. But they made him Archbishop of all El Salvador.

He could have done what they expected: kept the church quiet, stayed conservative, steered clear of politics, focussed minds on the hope of heaven away from the plight of their poverty.

He could have been elsewhere. But he was facing the people, sharing the body and blood of our Lord. He stood alone, the crucifix of Jesus hanging behind him.

A shot. Maybe two. He slumped to the floor. Some rushed to help. Sped him to the hospital.

But he was dead.

He could have been elsewhere. But Monsignor Oscar Romero chose to be where God led him.

II

This summer we've been hearing about modern martyrs. Statues of 10 of them rise on the outside of Westminster Abbey in London, England. "Martyr" means "witness." These were killed for their witness to Jesus. They stand for hundreds of thousands of Jesus' people murdered for their faith during that bloody 20th century.

They are just some of the "great cloud of witnesses" surrounding us. That's the image we hear in the Letter to Hebrews. It lists many witnesses who came before Jesus. They lived with hope in God's promise, though in their lifetimes they would not receive it. God's Promise is Jesus. Their faithful, hopeful lives pointed to Jesus. They trusted God.

Since Jesus, many more have been added to that "cloud of witnesses." More continue to

be. They show us what it is to live, alive to God's Promise. They could not see what lay ahead. They did not know whether their lives (or their deaths) would mean anything. But they trusted Jesus, God's Promise. So they entrusted themselves to God.

III

As I said, no one expected much of Oscar Romero when he became Archbishop. That was the point. He would be unremarkable, quiet, uninspiring and, most important, he would support the status quo in El Salvador.

El Salvador is a small country, in Romero's day about 4 million people. A small elite owned almost all its land and wealth. The vast majority were poor. They were exploited, deprived and malnourished while the land grew coffee and sugar for North Americans. Elections were rigged, opposition repressed. Dissenters were tortured, murdered, or simply "disappeared."

This was during the Cold War. The Salvadoran government was reliably anticommunist. So western governments, especially the United States, pretty much looked away from the regime's corruption and violence. They were on our side. That's what mattered.

In 1979, a civil war began. It would last for 12 years, kill more than 75,000, and see terrible human rights violations. Most were committed by the regime and its unofficial "death squads."¹

Romero was supposed to keep quiet.

IV

Then a priest was brutally murdered, Rutilio Grande, Romero's friend. Father Grande had been organizing poor farmers. "*When I looked at Rutilio lying there dead,*" Romero said, "*I thought, 'If they have killed him for doing what he did, then I too have to walk the same path.'*"²

A "new" Romero emerged. He began speaking against poverty, injustice, murder and torture.

He wrote U. S. president Jimmy Carter, urging him to stop American military aid to the regime. Carter ignored him.³

Media attacked Romero. "*He's supporting terrorists,*" they said.

¹ Many soldiers and paramilitary members received training at the US Army's School of the Americas. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_Hemisphere_Institute_for_Security_Cooperation#Criticism_of_WHINSEC

² Quoted in Michael A. Hayes and David Tombs (eds) *Truth and Memory: The Church and Human Rights in El Salvador and Guatemala* (Leominster UK: Gracewing Publishing, 2001), p. 48.

³ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1998/12/dirty-hands/377364/>

But Romero was better at media. He used the Church's own radio station to deliver sermons and speeches weekly. He broadcast the names of those disappeared, tortured, murdered and more. The army ordered people to not listen. Instead, Romero's were the most popular programs in the country.

Signs and leaflets began appearing: "Be a Patriot. Kill a Priest."

Romero said this:

*. . . it is important to note why [the Church] has been persecuted. Not any and every priest has been persecuted, not any and every institution has been attacked. That part of the church has been attacked and persecuted that put itself on the side of the people and went to the people's defense. Here again we find the same key to understanding the persecution of the church: the poor.*⁴

V

It was February 1980. Romero's season of Lent began.

A friend later compared it to Jesus' agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. "*Archbishop Romero foresaw his very probably and imminent death. He felt terror at is as Jesus did. . . But he did not leave his post and his duty, ready to drink the chalice that the Father might give him to drink.*"⁵

On March 23, he broadcast this to the army.

No soldier is obliged to obey an order counter to the law of God. No one has to comply with an immoral law. It is the time now that you recover your conscience and obey its dictates rather than the command of sin. . . .

*Therefore, in the name of God, and in the name of this long-suffering people, whose laments rise to heaven every day more tumultuous, I beseech you, I beg you, I command you! In the name of God: "Cease the repression!"*⁶

The next evening, they murdered Romero.

No one was prosecuted. The foreign minister spoke of "blame on both sides."⁷ But thirty

⁴ This was part of his acceptance speech at the Catholic University in Leuven, Belgium, from which he was receiving an honorary doctorate. Oscar Romero, Voice of the Voiceless: The Four Pastoral Letters and Other Statements (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), pp. 177-187.

⁵ Romero's confessor Secundo Azcue, quoted in James R. Brockman, Romero: A Life (Maryknoll, NY: 1989, Orbis Books) p. 233. Shortly after, Romero named additional canons to the cathedral's chapter (the body of priests that advises the bishop), so there would be a quorum in place in case they needed to choose an interim successor if Romero was killed. Brockman, 244.

⁶ Brockman, 241f.

⁷ "5,000 in San Salvador Take Part in a March for Murdered Prelate," New York Times (27 March 1980). José Duarte was later El Salvador's president, from 1984-89.

years later, El Salvador's president apologized for Romero's assassination.⁸

A quarter million came to his funeral. A bombing, shooting and panic scattered the congregation. Forty died.

Last October, Pope Francis canonized Oscar Romero a saint of the Catholic Church.

VI

Saint Romero is important to all who follow Jesus. He challenges us.

Each one of you has to be God's microphone. Each one of you has to be a messenger, a prophet. The church will always exist as long as there is someone who has been baptized. . . .

Where is your baptism? You are baptized in your professions, in the fields of workers, in the market. Wherever there is someone who has been baptized, that is where the church is. There is a prophet there. Let us not hide the talent that God gave us on the day of our baptism and let us truly live the beauty and responsibility of being a prophetic people.⁹

I'll finish this, and our look at these Living Stones, with this Romero said it two weeks before he gave his martyrdom:

I have been frequently threatened with death. I must say that, as a Christian, I do not believe in death but in resurrection. If they kill me, I will rise again in the people of El Salvador. I am not boasting; I say it with the greatest humility. . . .

If they manage to carry out their threats, I shall be offering my blood for the redemption and the resurrection of El Salvador. Martyrdom is a grace from God that I do not believe I have earned. But if God accepts the sacrifice of my life, then may my blood be the seed of liberty and a sign of the hope that will soon become a reality. May my death, if it is accepted by God, be for the liberation of my people and a witness of hope in what is to come!

You can tell them, if they succeed in killing me that I pardon them and I bless those who may carry out the killing. But I wish that they could realize they are wasting their time. A bishop will die, but the Church of God --- the people --- they will never die!¹⁰

The true Promise of Jesus Christ, witnessed by the great cloud of martyrs. Praise God!

⁸ "Official El Salvador apology for Oscar Romero's murder," BBC News (March 25, 2010). The president said Romero had been murdered by a death squad, supported by government agents.

⁹ Quoted in Krish Kandiah, "Oscar Romero 35 years on: Five quotes you need to read from a modern day Christian martyr" www.ChristianityToday.com (May 24, 2015).

¹⁰ Quoted in Brockman, 248.