News

Salvadoran Cardinal Gregorio Rosa Chávez holds of copy of a book that addresses part of half

Salvadoran Cardinal Gregorio Rosa Chávez holds of copy of a book that addresses part of half a century of his life serving the Catholic Church in El Salvador Dec. 16, 2022, at St. Francis of Assisi parish in San Salvador. The cardinal said he wanted to set the record straight about a number of historical matters concerning the church in the troubled country, and he does so in a long-form interview with Rome-based Fr. Ariel Beramendi, in the recently published "Conversations with Cardinal Rosa Chávez." (CNS/Rhina Guidos)



Rhina Guidos

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San Salvador, El Salvador — December 27, 2022

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In a candid account of his five decades in the Salvadoran church, the country's first cardinal tells of calumnies against El Salvador's St. Oscar Romero, but also of slights against him by other prelates, including one bishop who said, in notes to a Vatican ambassador, to not even "think of giving me a diocese."

Salvadoran Cardinal Gregorio Rosa Chavez has had one reason after another to despair in his 52 years as part of the Catholic clergy, but if there's one thing he said he has learned in that time, it's that "God writes straight in crooked lines," as an old Spanish saying goes. That could easily have been the title of a long-form interview turned into a book by Rome-based Fr. Ariel Beramendi, a Bolivian priest who works on Spanish-language communications at the Vatican. He turned a series of questions and the cardinal's recorded answers into the Spanish-language "Conversations with Cardinal Rosa Chávez" published in El Salvador in late November, available via Kindle in the U.S.

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In it, a broad, nonchronological landscape appears in the life of the Salvadoran cardinal, now 80 and recently retired after 40 years as the auxiliary bishop of San Salvador, and his brushes with the country's martyrs: St. Oscar Romero, with whom he worked, as well as the recently beatified Jesuit Fr. Rutilio Grande. It was a time of brewing violence and persecution against members of the Catholic Church who stood up for the poor and against injustice.

He describes his front-row seat to the evening of the "red martyrdom," the March 24, 1980, assassination of St. Romero, his archbishop, and the saint's "white martyrdom," a campaign of calumny against the future saint from inside the church.

"I saw Archbishop Romero on a stretcher with his purple priestly vestments, lifeless, a serene face ... when I went out into the streets, I heard celebratory fireworks in the affluent parts of the city, and I later heard that someone had said 'Finally, they killed the communist,'" he recounts.

Against that drama, the cardinal almost hides his own rough seas in church waters, including with a Spaniard who ascended in 1995 to the Salvadoran archbishop's post that St. Romero had occupied.

Salvadoran Cardinal Gregorio Rosa Chavez gives a blessing May 14, 2022, at the burial place

Salvadoran Cardinal Gregorio Rosa Chavez gives a blessing May 14, 2022, at the burial place that holds some of the remains of hundreds of peasants massacred in 1980 near the Sumpul River near Las Aradas, El Salvador. In a candid account of his five decades in the Salvadoran church, the country's cardinal tells of calumnies

against El Salvador's St. Oscar Romero, but also of slights against him by other prelates. (CNS/courtesy Father Manuel Acosta)

"You're adults. You have your own judgment. Don't be disabled. Get out from under the skirts of the church," the cardinal describes Archbishop Fernando Sáenz Lacalle as saying in one of his first interactions with the press after his 1995 installation as archbishop of San Salvador.

The cardinal's answers, direct but with serenity, point to never losing hope, nor harboring resentment no matter what surrounded him: war, ideological attacks, calumny. He said he was grateful that St. Romero died with "grace," since he was taking part in the Eucharist when killed, and that has given him peace.

When Archbishop Lacalle, who died earlier this year, told him to leave his residency, a room at the archbishop's house, and assigned him to become the pastor of a church on the outskirts of the capital of San Salvador — even though he was San Salvador's auxiliary bishop — the cardinal sees the moment as a blessing. It allowed him to grow closer to the poor, he said, but also mentions that other brother bishops saw the move as a punishment and "exile."

Salvadoran Cardinal Gregorio Rosa Chávez celebrates the beatification Mass for Jesuit Fr. Rut

Salvadoran Cardinal Gregorio Rosa Chávez celebrates the beatification Mass for Jesuit Fr. Rutilio Grande, Franciscan Fr. Cosme Spessotto, Nelson Rutilio Lemus and Manuel Solórzano in San Salvador Jan. 22, 2022. (CNS/Octavio Duran)

From that parish, where he still lives, he told Catholic News Service in a Dec. 16 interview that he decided to collaborate with Fr. Beramendi because of "great worry that I haven't written anything on my experience as a bishop." He said he believed his account should be on the record because there is confusion and even attempts at erasing or offering a different version of what happened during an important time in the life of the Catholic Church in El Salvador.

"I wanted it to be out there for the record," said Cardinal Rosa Chavez, who studied communications at the University of Louvain in Belgium and, for decades, directed church communications at the archdiocese. He said he wanted a clear record about what happened when it came to St. Romero's conversion, his assassination and that of Fr. Grande, the role of the Catholic Church in El Salvador's peace accords, whose

meetings he attended, as well as his close relationship with St. Romero's immediate successor, Archbishop Arturo Rivera Damas.

Cardinal Gregorio Rosa Chávez of San Salvador, El Salvador, is pictured in Rome in a July 2, 2

Cardinal Gregorio Rosa Chávez of San Salvador, El Salvador, is pictured in Rome in a July 2, 2017, photo. (CNS/Paul Haring)

The book relives the turmoil in the church, which reflected Salvadoran society, and the political polarization, which entered the institution. He also presents his humble upbringings as the son of a merchant, whose dream of being a priest he fulfilled via his son.

He also tells of finding a note, while reviewing documents ahead of a visit by St. John Paul II to El Salvador, in which a Spanish bishop, now dead, tells the nuncio not to assign him as the head of a diocese.

"He always greeted me amiably," when they ran into one another in Rome, he said, "never having imagined that I read his note. I supposed he did it with honesty because he saw me as a dangerous bishop, a rebel, not apt to direct a diocese."

But the book roots itself into the insight the cardinal has into St. Romero, those who influenced him and remained loyal to him and his figure as a prophet and those inside the church who dismissed the saint as a communist.

"For 20 years, Rome was misinformed on the matter of Romero," including by some in the Salvadoran government who never had anything good to say about him, the cardinal said.

He said he is happy with the book, because it puts on paper matters that need clarity, but hopes to work on something more in-depth.

"This is kind of an appetizer," he said.