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Remembering Oscar Romero

by June Carolyn Erlick



Oscar Arnulfo Romero in 1979 (Photos by June Carolyn Erlick)

ESSAY

About six months before Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero was killed on March 24, 1980, I spent three days with him, traveling to rural towns and the urban slum of La Chacra. As Latin American correspondent for the *National Catholic Reporter* at the time, I had frequently interviewed Romero and listened to his Sunday homilies. However, these three days marked the first time I had seen the archbishop outside of a formal setting.

Romero took no bodyguard with us, despite the fact that his life had already been threatened several times. La Chacra was -- and still is -- an abysmally poor neighborhood snuggled between the river and the railroad. Many houses in La Chacra are thrown together from cardboard, tin and other castoff building materials. "How do you feel when you see a community like this?" I asked the archbishop, who looked brown and frail among the swarm of children who greeted him.

"I just think of what I have already preached," replied the archbishop. "There shouldn't be first-class

people and second-class people.?

He wasn't preaching that afternoon though. He was learning and offering his presence in solidarity with the community. We talked for a long time with Alicia Campos, who was active in base communities. She told the archbishop that a catechist had been accused of being a guerrilla; small Bible groups had gone underground because they were afraid of being labeled revolutionaries.

Romero sat in his flowing white robe on a rickety chair, sipping an infusion of coffee and sugar. I had always understood Romero as a prophet in terms of the bold denunciations he made from the pulpit. Now I saw him empowering this woman to have a voice.

Romero had a gentle demeanor; he seemed almost shy, self-effacing, something that I had not been expecting in this man who was slowly becoming a symbol of strength for the Salvadoran people. He seemed a shepherd in a true sense, a tender guide, a steady but quiet leader. Used to Latin American politicians and populist priests who thundered out their messages with hand-waving gestures, I was moved by his soft voice with its Salvadoran lilt and equally gentle motions.



In the San Salvador cathedral on Sundays, his voice boomed and

echoed. It was the same soft voice amplified, firm and declaring the message of the church. Fr. Ricardo Urioste, Romero's vicar general and the person who interacted most with the press, told me that for Romero, to feel with the church, *sentir con la iglesia*, meant to defend the poor, to be rooted in God and to accept those conflicts that might arise from fidelity to God. That was what I would always hear in the vast, unfinished cathedral of San Salvador, filled with peasants, workers, intellectuals and, of course, the press. Now I got to see Romero on the ground, walking among the rural and urban poor, a pastor.

The day after our trip to the urban slum, I went with Romero to Ateos, a rural town an hour from El Salvador. A photographer snapped our photo at lunch. Over our simple meal, Romero mused, 'I often stop to think the first cause of deaths in El Salvador is diarrhea from parasites and poor nutrition. And the second cause is violence.'

After lunch, Romero asked the local priest when he was going to start a school for catechists, promoters of the divine word. Romero listened to the problems of this small rural community, which had no potable water. He asked what could be done to solve this problem.

'The church has the obligation to encourage our people to work and not just hope that everything will fall from the sky,' he told me. 'But where communities have been organized, and Christian leaders and consciousness-raisers have been formed, conflict [with the government] has always arisen. People learn not to be a passive and amorphous mass. ... The church must announce the kingdom of God and his justice and call to conversion all the unjust, all the oppressors.'

Romero had come to Ateos for a confirmation Mass. Hundreds of people stood in the backyard of the small church to watch. Many had walked three hours down a roadless mountain.

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Some 50 people were to be confirmed that day. Small girls in white dresses sat giggling in the front row. Young women and men with work-worn hands, withered old men in outsized sombreros, pregnant women with their bellies stretching against homemade cotton dresses had all come to be confirmed.

‘There used to be a time when only little children would be confirmed, little children too young to understand the immense responsibility of committing oneself to Christ and his teachings,’ declared the archbishop. ‘I see you are a community that has studied and understands the enormous commitment you are about to undertake.’

Romero explained every detail, the origin of the cross he would make on the forehead of those to be confirmed, how the oil was blessed and the nature of the commitment. In Ateos, I glimpsed the integration of his political person and his spiritual person: There was no division.

The months went by; I made one more trip to El Salvador in February and heard Romero at the cathedral; I talked to him briefly after the Mass, with promises to return after a brief trip back home to Colombia and then back to Central America to cover the Sandinista literacy campaign.

The news of Romero’s assassination came over the radio at 5 o’clock in the morning as I lay on a cold, uncomfortable cot in El Ular, Nicaragua, where I was accompanying schoolgirls from Matagalpa’s St. Teresa School. For many of them, the brigade to teach peasants to read and write was their first encounter with their country’s poor.



I found a ride down the mountain with a nun who had come from a neighborhood community in a truck and somehow made it to Managua and the first plane out to El Salvador.

In San Salvador, long lines of people waited patiently to see the body of the archbishop lying in state within the cathedral. I moved close to the casket to take pictures. Romero’s coffee-colored hands clutched the rosary, his face peaceful, without a hint of his violent death. There was a hint of a smile, a touch of God, a touch of love, the smile he carried in life.

I thought back on our history together, a chain of events that for me began in Colombia, where I lived for a decade. Fr. Mario Bernal, a Colombian priest who had been working in the community of Apopa in El Salvador, was suddenly deported, probably because of an inspirational and progressive radio program he broadcast every Friday to the rural population.

In turn, Bernal’s deportation enraged Fr. Rutilio Grande, who worked in the neighboring parish of Aguilares. On Feb. 13, 1977, he gave a strong and impassioned sermon, denouncing the deportation: ‘Foreigner? But this is not the question. It is the question of what it means to be a Christian today, to be a priest today, in our country and on our continent, which is suffering its hour of martyrdom. ... It is dangerous to be a Christian in our environment.’

A month later, on March 12, 1977, Grande became the first martyred priest in El Salvador. And most agree that it was Grande’s murder that began Romero’s evolution from conservative prelate to passionate

advocate against repression and injustice.

And now Romero himself was a martyr.



It seemed hard to believe. I remembered how when I first interviewed Bernal about Romero in his parish house in Puerto Tejada, he had handed me a letter from Romero. "Our poorer brothers need us," Romero wrote in Spanish to the deported priest.

"This is a change, a tremendous change," commented Bernal. He added, "Rutilio was his savior. There's no stopping him now. They're not going to kill an archbishop. Public opinion would be too strong?" (*NCR*, Aug. 11, 1978).

And now, here Romero was, lying in state in the cathedral, another Salvadoran martyr. The funeral brought dignitaries from the United States and the church throughout the world, as well as Romero's many followers. The cathedral was full.

A church photographer handed me a color photo taken in Ateos as a keepsake: Romero and I are sharing lunch of fried bananas and tamales at a simple wooden table outside a rural parish. He is wearing a white priest's cassock; I am wearing a short-sleeved black embroidered blouse I still use. He looks gentle and pastoral in the photo. A slight smile lights up his bespectacled face.

I took the photo up to the steeple, where I watched the crowds with a local priest.

It soon became the scariest experience of my life. Someone started shooting. The crowds started running. I watched them, shooting my camera blindly, hoping, praying, clutching the photo of Romero. I was up in the steeple with a radical priest with no place to go.

Outside, looking down, I could see that people had started looking for their relatives and their own shoes, hastily abandoned in flight. We made it down from the steeple. The injured -- estimated in the hundreds -- had been taken to hospitals. The dead -- we counted 39 -- were taken off to the morgue.

The cathedral emptied; the clergy left. Workers sealed the archbishop's crypt with bricks and mortar.

A huge banner in Spanish proclaimed, "Monsignor Romero, prophet."

And in the transept was another:

"*No mataras ... Thou shalt not kill.*"

I clutched my photo. I clutched the film I had taken from the steeple in fear that police might confiscate it.

The film became photos that were published in *NCR*. The photo of Romero and me became a fixture on my wall. When I went to examine the photo to write this story, I became curious as to how old Romero was at the time, toward the end of his three short years as archbishop. I did the calculation. He was 63, my exact age now. He is forever.

[June Carolyn Erlick is the editor-in-chief of *ReVista*, the Harvard Review of Latin America and the author of *Disappeared: A Journalist Silenced* (Seal Press, 2004) and *A Gringa in Bogotá: Living Colombia's Invisible War* (University of Texas Press, 2010).]

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