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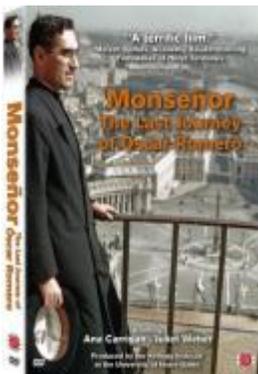
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Oscar Romero shines in documentary 'Monsenor'

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

Ana Carrigan and Juliet Weber have just released *Monseñor: The Last Journey of Oscar Romero*, an astonishing DVD documentary about martyred Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador. Thirty-two years after his assassination, one would presume that there was no footage and that no such film would ever appear. But here he is, gentle and humble -- and larger than life. We see Romero walking among the villagers, listening to the grieving poor and denouncing injustice from the pulpit. After all these years, what a gift!



I urge everyone to buy this inspiring new DVD documentary. It's perfect for the

classroom, church groups, peace and justice meetings; for anyone discouraged by recent church developments and ongoing global wars; and anyone who wonders what prophetic peacemaking might look like. I also recommend giving copies to priests, youth groups and libraries. I wish it could be shown in every church in the nation.

Here is the worst of the world -- the insane U.S.-backed violence of El Salvador -- versus the best of the church, the brave, prophetic Romero, meek and humble but towering in moral strength and truth-telling.

It's as if Gandhi were an archbishop.

Every evening, Oscar Romero recorded his daily activities into a tape recorder. Using these audio diaries and rare footage, Carrigan and Weber tell the story of his appointment as archbishop in 1977, the death of a friend, Romero's shocking decision to hold only one Mass in the archdiocese*, and his growing prophetic stance against the Salvadoran military until his fateful last homily and assassination. *Monseñor* includes interviews with church activists, human rights lawyers, former guerrilla fighters, priests, politicians, *campesinos* and friends.

The film begins with a tour of the small house where Romero lived, next to the modern church where he was eventually shot and killed while presiding at an evening liturgy. We hear him talking into his tape recorder, and then we see him walking into an impoverished village, welcomed by a cheering crowd.

" 'Whose pastor am I?' That was his question," a *campesino* tells us at the beginning. " 'Do I belong to the suffering oppressed people or to the oppressors? My mission is not to defend the powerful but to advocate for the oppressed.' That's what he said. He went for it and they killed him."

The story begins with the assassination of his friend Fr. Rutilio Grande. Rutilio, the radical Jesuit, was one of the few who reached out to the new, conservative archbishop. His brutal death shocked Romero. He then stunned everyone by publicly denouncing the murder and announcing that there would be only one Mass in the entire country that weekend. Such a thing had probably never happened before in church history and hasn't happened since. Here, we watch footage of that electrifying Mass, which invigorated the faithful and terrified the right-wing, U.S.-backed terrorist government.

Suddenly, priests, nuns and churchworkers began to speak out for justice, human rights and an end to the killings. Each Sunday in his lengthy homily, Romero explained the details of that week's killings. His sermons were broadcast around the country. It's hard to imagine an entire country hanging on every word of a Catholic archbishop's Sunday homily, but here we get a sense of it. One smiling woman says, "It was liked heaven opened and we were inspired to welcome heaven here on earth."

But it's heartbreaking to see the footage of the Salvadoran military, the weeping mothers and wives, and the insanity of violence that swept El Salvador. Still, in the midst of all this, there's Romero, speaking like Jeremiah to packed churches. It's like watching Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. preach. He's fearless, forceful and relentless in his attack on war and injustice. We have nothing like that today -- except, of course, Bishop Thomas Gumbleton. Thank you, Tom!

At one point, we hear Romero describing that day's meeting with a group of rebels.

"I tried to instill in them the ideal of Christian nonviolence," he says, "but they are convinced that the power of love will not fix the situation. Only violence will do that."

"I believe in peaceful solutions," he says later in a press conference.

Advertisement

Perhaps *Monseñor* touched me so deeply because it reminds me of my time in El Salvador, where I lived in 1985 and returned to many times in the next 10 years. In 1985, I helped reopen a little church compound in the barrio of San Antonio Abad called *El Despertar* (The Awakening) before being sent to work in the Calle Real refugee camp. *El Despertar* became the new headquarters for Jesuit Refugee

Service in El Salvador. We rarely talked about it, but the compound had been closed for six years because that's where 29-year-old Fr. Octavio Ortiz and four youths were brutally assassinated by the death squads. We cleaned up the place, set up offices, moved in a few families to help with the operation and began ministering to displaced peoples around the country.

So I was shocked to see footage of Fr. Octavio. He had been leading a daylong retreat when the soldiers broke through the camp and shot and killed them. They put the dead bodies of the youths on the roofs of the tin shanty buildings and placed machine guns in their hands -- as if Fr. Octavio and the youths had shot at the death squads. During Fr. Octavio's huge funeral, Archbishop Romero bravely denounced the lies about the killings. It's amazing to watch someone stare down a terrifying military force and speak the truth with such clarity.

As the situation worsened, Romero spoke ever more strongly until the fateful Mass when he called upon all Salvadoran soldiers to disobey their orders to kill. The next night, he was assassinated while saying Mass. We see footage of that great homily, and then hear a recording of his killing the following night. Then we see the hundreds of thousands who gathered a few days later for his funeral Mass. Suddenly, the Salvadoran military opens fire on the crowd, killing dozens of people. His unfinished funeral set the stage for the nightmarish decade of war that followed.

The film ends with a touching testimony. A woman describes Romero's visit to their church and the social that followed. In typical Salvadoran fashion, food was produced, and the music began. The *campesinos* asked Romero to dance, and to their amazement, he joined in. Then he exclaimed, "How easy it is to be a pastor to you people."

"Oh my God," the woman says with a smile. "To be with someone like that? What more could you ask for in life?"

Thirty-two years later, El Salvador remains stuck in extreme poverty and violence, including gang violence from the Mexican drug cartels, which has brought unprecedented theft, crime and murder. In some ways, it's as dangerous as ever. El Salvador now averages 12 murders a day; this year, that number has approached 18 murders a day.

But Saturday, April 14, was the first day in three years when no one was killed in El Salvador. Last month, rival gangs called a truce, and there is hope that the gang violence will stop. One suspects that if Romero were alive, he would be working hard to end not only poverty and disease, but also the gang violence, the U.S. gun culture that sells guns to Salvadorans, and the desire for drugs in the United States, which is at the heart of the problem. I can imagine him working for the legalization of drugs as one way to stop the violence. Of course, he would denounce the ongoing U.S. war-making and support of unjust regimes.

"I have often been threatened with death," Romero told a reporter two weeks before his March 24, 1980, assassination. "If they kill me, I shall rise in the Salvadoran people. If the threats come to be fulfilled, from this moment I offer my blood to God for the redemption and resurrection of El Salvador. Let my blood be a seed of freedom and the sign that hope will soon be reality."

We North Americans still have much to learn from Archbishop Romero and the Salvadoran church. He shows us how to get beyond our fear and indifference, to stand up and speak out, to do what we can to end war, poverty and killing, to follow the nonviolent Jesus on the road to peace.

Monseñor and the beautiful study guide that is also available are a great new resource for our work for peace and justice. Through the documentary, Romero comes to life all over again. I hope it will inspire us

to heed his ideal of Christian nonviolence, carry on his prophetic truth-telling and become like him, people of resurrection.

Monseñor: The Last Journey of Oscar Romero *is produced by the Kellogg Institute at Notre Dame and available at amazon.com, firstrunfeatures.com and avemariapress.com.*

Editor's note: An earlier version of the column incorrectly stated Romero held only one Mass in the country.

John Dear will speak April 17 and 18 in Minneapolis. His new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!*, explores Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. To see John's 2012 speaking schedule, go to John Dear's website. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings*; *Put Down Your Sword* and *A Persistent Peace*, are available from Amazon.com.

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