



Oscar Romero, Saint of the Poor

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One of the Church's significant contemporary saints is Oscar Romero, the martyred Archbishop of San Salvador in Central America. He was assassinated on March 24, 1980 as he was celebrating Mass in the chapel of the Divine Providence cancer hospital where he lived. On February 3, 2015 Pope Francis officially declared Romero a martyr of the Catholic faith; he was beatified on May 23, 2015 and canonized on October 14, 2018. Romero was known, respected, and loved as a defender of the poor during one of the most difficult periods in El Salvador (1970s-1980s), during which five priests, numerous catechists, and countless Catholic laity were assassinated.

“We know that every effort to improve society, especially when society is so full of injustice and sin, is an effort that God blesses; that God wants; that God demands of us” [homily during Mass on March 24, 1980]; minutes later as he raised the chalice after the consecration, he was shot and killed by a hired assassin.

Romero's Vision. “It is inconceivable that someone is called ‘Christian’ and does not give preference to the poor as Christ did. It is a scandal when today's Christians criticize the Church because she is concerned with the poor. This is not Christianity” (homily: September 9, 1979). Romero's words are always prophetic, always relevant, always a challenge to live our faith. He was a strong voice for the voiceless poor.

Oscar Romero was once asked to explain the phrase “option for the poor” [serving God's “little people” in our society]. He replied: “I offer you this by way of example. A building is on fire and you're watching it burn, standing and wondering if everyone is safe. Then someone tells you that your mother and your sister are inside that building. Your attitude changes completely. You're frantic; your mother and your sister are burning and you'd do anything to rescue them, even at the cost of getting charred.” “That's what it means to be truly committed. If we



look at poverty from the outside, as if we're looking at a fire, that's not to opt for the poor, no matter how concerned we may be. We should get inside as if our own mother and sister were burning. Indeed, it's Christ who is there, hungry and suffering."

Romero also explained the meaning of the "social message" that he in the name of the Church was preaching to the poor: "The hope we preach to the poor is in order that dignity be restored to them, and to give them courage to be themselves, the authors of their destiny. In a word, the Church has not only turned toward poor persons, but makes them the privileged recipients of her mission.... The Church has not only embodied herself in the world of the poor, giving them hope, but she is firmly committed to their defense."

Pope Francis' Perspective. As manifested in his 2015 Philippine visit, Francis resonates deeply with Romero's vision. Francis bluntly states: "I want a Church which is poor and for the poor. They have much to teach us; ... in their difficulties they know the suffering Christ. We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them.... We are called to find Christ in them, to lend our voice to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them, and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them" (*Evangelii Gaudium* 198).

Reflection. What should "remembering Saint Oscar Romero" mean for us today in our current context? It means to become active, to continue his work, to witness to the faith, to promote social justice. As a Eucharistic martyr and a martyr of the Church's option for the poor, Archbishop Oscar Romero is truly an inspiring "contemporary icon" for the servant-Church.

"There is no dichotomy between man and God's image. Whoever tortures a human being, whoever abuses a human being, whoever outrages a human being, abuses God's image."

Oscar Romero

