

Peace is generosity.
It is a right and it is a duty

St. Óscar Romero



A PROPHET OF THE PEOPLE

No one is above the law, unless of course you are millionaire parents bribing your children's way into elite colleges so that they can continue to be part of the elite. But more of that another time. I wanted to write about the people who go the other way, from the elite class to the community of ordinary people.

Sunday is the United Nations *"International Day For the Rights Of the Truth Concerning Gross Human Rights Violations And for the Dignity of Victims."* That is a typical UN tongue twister! Nonetheless it is a day worth remembering, the day when Óscar Romero (1917–1980) was murdered. The idea for my writing this Reflection came when I heard about a rather shy teenager, the grandson of close friends of Starcross, attending a soup supper for the homeless at a Jewish temple. The teenager attended a bilingual school nearby. He noticed an old man speaking Spanish and crying. The young man left his group of friends and went over to talk to the man who was crying. The man explained that he had not seen his family in six years. I remembered something that Óscar Romero had once written,
There are many things that can only be seen through eyes that have cried.

So I want to write about Óscar Romero, whose life and death is the reason for the United Nations celebration with a long title. He did the same thing as my friends' grandson. He left the comfortable elite circle and joined the community of the ordinary people. Romero was finally made a saint but it's Lent so we can talk about saints. Right?



Óscar Romero was born into a privileged family in El Salvador. He got an advanced degree in Rome and was ordained a priest there as well. Politically he would be considered a conservative but he always had an interest in the social welfare of all people. When he returned from Rome, on a flight that went through Havana, he was detained by Cuban police and spent some time in an internment camp. He was finally released and able to return to El Salvador. He wore himself out as a parish priest and was diagnosed by a psychiatrist as having obsessive – compulsive personality disorder. A fellow priest described him as a person with “scrupulosity.”



Both of these conditions were seen by his superiors as being positives in the clerical life.



In 1977 Romero was appointed Archbishop of San Salvador. The government felt that he was a safe appointment. However the priests and others interested in liberation theology were very disappointed and felt that his conservative reputation would negatively impact their commitments to the poor. In 1979 a revolutionary government Junta came to power and there was a wave of human rights abuses by paramilitary right-wing groups. The result was an escalation of fighting that eventually became a Civil War. Romero wrote to President Jimmy Carter warning that if the United States gave military aid to the Junta, political repression would increase. The United States ignored his warnings. Romero began to publicly accuse the government of legalizing terror and assassinations. Priests and nuns were

being murdered and tortured. And as he once wrote, "You can guess what has happened to ordinary Christians". He began broadcasting radio sermons.

The conservative Archbishop had become radicalized!



On March 23, 1980 Archbishop Romero delivered a sermon in which he called on the soldiers, as Christians, to obey God's higher order and to stop carrying out the government's repression and violations of basic human rights.

The next day Romero presided at a Mass in the small chapel of a hospital which cared for the terminally ill. As he was lifting the chalice at the Mass, he was shot twice and killed. The United Nations, together with other international bodies, established that the assassins were members of a death squad under the direction of Major Roberto D'Aubuisson who was deeply involved with the government. He was never prosecuted.



Who gave the order for Óscar Romero's assassination? On March 24, 2010 Mauricio Funes, the new president of El Salvador, issued an official apology and said that those involved in the assassination "unfortunately acted with the protection, collaboration, and participation of state agents."



Another story unfolded at the funeral for Óscar Romero at the cathedral in San Salvador on March 30, 1980. 250,000 people from all over the world came to the funeral. Among them was a friend of Starcross.

Just before the ceremony, smoke bombs exploded in the streets in front of the cathedral and rifle shots came from surrounding buildings including the National

Palace. Between 30 and 50 people were killed. As quickly as possible people, were ushered into the cathedral until it could hold no more. Our friend was in the street caring for the wounded until people forced him to get into a safer place.

As the gunfire continued so did the ceremony in the cathedral. It was a never to be forgotten scene, not only for those who were there but for the millions who watched on television. Archbishop Romero was finally buried in a crypt beneath the cathedral.

Óscar Romero is honored in many spiritual traditions including Catholic, Anglican, some Protestant, Buddhist and others. Many refer to him as “The Prophet Of The People.”

His own path to being canonized as a saint in the Catholic Church was a bit bumpy. It started out all right but then slowed, as one Vatican official put it, “to a prudent halt.” I always interpreted that as meaning that there was a fear of alienating conservative governments in Latin America. However with the election of the present Pope Francis, things got rolling again. At last Óscar Romero was officially canonized as a saint of the church in St. Peter's Square on October 14, 2018. But he had already been canonized in the hearts of people all over the world. In his own words,

I am the friend of the people who know of their suffering, of their anxieties. In their name I raise my voice in order to say to the rich, not to idolize your riches, not to let others die of hunger. ... The cry of the people for liberation has reached the ears of the Almighty. Nothing can stop it now. ... Just wait, all you beloved, oppressed, marginalized hungry and sick. The dawn is just beginning to break upon us now.



An ecumenical service to remember Óscar Romero by the Religious Task Force On Central America ended with the final words of a sermon the Archbishop delivered minutes before he was murdered by the elite of his nation,

Those who surrender to the service of the people through love of God will live like the grain of wheat that dies. It all may apparently die. If it were not to die, it would remain a solitary grain. The harvest comes because the grain of wheat dies. ... Only by undoing itself does it produce the harvest and encourage human beings to give their body and



their blood to the suffering and pain. ... Not for yourself, but to bring justice and peace to our people.

Archbishop Óscar Romero was such a grain of wheat. May we have the courage to follow his example.

Brother Toby