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Oscar Romero

Love Must Win Out

Kevin Clarke



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For my parents, Andrew and Maureen Clarke, with all my love and gratitude. And for my own “Romero,” Eoin Romero Clarke, with all my hope. My beloved son: keep the faith, build the kingdom.

“Let us not tire of preaching love; it is the force that will overcome the world. Let us not tire of preaching love. Though we see the waves of violence succeed in drowning the fire of Christian love, love must win out; it is the only thing that can.” —September 25, 1977

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Introduction

During one of his trips to Rome after his elevation to archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero marveled at how the men in the Curia, indeed it seemed throughout Rome, did not quite understand the nature of the crucifixion being experienced by the church in Latin America, even after his repeated efforts to make these mortal difficulties plain to them. After a humiliating effort to wade through a curial bureaucracy that seemed intent on thwarting him, Romero finally had the chance to meet privately with Pope John Paul II in 1979. He detailed the extreme conditions of his ministry and the human rights violations being inflicted on average Salvadorans, especially church workers. Romero was treated to a few expressions of support but mostly to a good scolding on the importance of maintaining episcopal unity before the eyes of the public.¹ Several of his subordinate bishops in El Salvador at that time were more or less in open revolt against his leadership.

In his diary account of the meeting, Romero writes, “He acknowledged that pastoral work is very difficult in a political climate like the one in which I have to work. He recommended great balance and prudence . . . He reminded me of his situation in Poland, where he was faced with a government that was not Catholic and where he had to

2 Oscar Romero

develop the church in spite of the difficulties. He said the unity of the bishops is very important. . . . Again I clarified, telling him that this is also something that I want very much, but that I was aware that unity cannot be pretended. Rather, it must be based on the gospel and on the truth.”

Pope John Paul II had been receiving numerous reports from within the Salvadoran bishops’ conference full of accusations against the archbishop. Now closing out the meeting, Pope John Paul II suggested to Romero that “to resolve the deficiencies in the pastoral work and the lack of harmony among the bishops” an apostolic administrator *sede plena* be appointed, meaning that Romero would remain archbishop of San Salvador but that the actual responsibilities of the position would be moved to the administrator.

Romero apparently accepted the suggestion without protest and “left, pleased by the meeting, but worried to see how much the negative reports of my pastoral work had influenced [the pope]. . . . I think that the audience and our conversation were very useful because he was very frank. I have learned that one cannot expect always to get complete approval, and that it is more useful to hear criticism that can be used to improve our work.” A remarkably cool accounting of the meeting, perhaps for posterity’s sake, considering Pope John Paul II was essentially proposing to cut the episcopal legs out from under Romero and throw everything he had accomplished into turmoil.²

But how could people in Rome and Washington or even in San Vicente understand what Romero understood as the leader of the Salvadoran church? They did not have the spiritual guidance from the Salvadorans that Romero had been receiving for years. He had by then come to believe that the poor were the prophets of the era, not the bishops of El Salvador or the clerical bureaucrats in San Salvador

or within the Curia. He was learning from the poor and the oppressed how to be a good Christian in the contemporary milieu of El Salvador and struggling to impart his learning to the elite and powerful in El Salvador and North America and among his superiors in the old world.

This was not mere rhetoric to Romero. He had sat on the ground for impromptu Bible study among El Salvador's campesinos. He had visited with them in parish meeting halls, listening to their interpretation of Scripture and marveling at what he, the esteemed bishop, was learning about the nature of God and faith from the ignored and the oppressed. Yes, he heard the desperate cry of the poor for justice in El Salvador, but more than that he heard wisdom from the poor—unexpected prophets—that many simply refused to hear.

That unwillingness to hear persisted far longer than Romero could have imagined. Perhaps it awaited clarity from one whose experience more closely mirrored his own, someone who brought not only a fresh perspective but a personal familiarity with the contradictions and cruelties of life in some of the far-flung corners of Christendom. Perhaps it awaited the right ears for the hearing.

It had been a fantastic hope of the Catholic faithful of Latin America that one day one of their own should become Bishop of Rome and represent the perspective and experience of this largest population of Catholics in the world before the rest of their Catholic brothers and sisters. That hope was finally realized in the humble form of Argentina's Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, who has become fondly known to the world as Pope Francis.

Soon after his election in April 2013, Pope Francis stepped into one of those occasional—and inexplicable to outsiders—disagreements that trouble somber Vatican corridors in

what would become typical of his direct and empathetic style. Pope Francis “unblocked” the canonization process for Servant of God—declared so in 1997 by Pope John Paul II—and servant of the people of El Salvador, Oscar Romero.

Given the complex of concerns that collide over the notion of the canonization of this martyred archbishop, perhaps this definitive moment had to wait for a man like Cardinal Bergoglio to fully appreciate the life, wisdom, and sacrifice of Oscar Romero, to understand the nature of his sainthood and of his world. As a young man rushed into a position of authority during a period of grave national crisis, one for which he later acknowledged he did not believe himself ready, then Father Bergoglio vividly experienced the historical, spiritual, and psychological torrents that pulled apart the people of Latin America during the waning decades of the twentieth century.

Archbishop Romero and Pope Francis seem to follow parallel spiritual and practical tracks. Although not a member of the Society of Jesus as Cardinal Bergoglio had been before he became pontiff, Romero had been taught by Jesuits and was a graduate of the Jesuits’ Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. He had deep experience with and profound respect for Ignatian spirituality and had undertaken the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises himself as a young man.

Both men, perhaps owing to their Jesuit spiritual training, shared an understanding of the practical implications of “seeking God in all things,” a sense of openness to the work of God in history and the world, including in struggle and discord. After his elevation to archbishop, surveying the crying needs of his community, Romero could not conceive of closing off the Salvadoran church behind a wall of showy ritual and pious observations while forces of economic and political oppression swirled around it. He sought to engage

the church in its times and its concerns. As Pope Francis has said, what good is a closed-off church? He exhorts a church that embraces the messiness of life, its joys and sorrows, and speaks of a church as a social triage, a hospital where the spiritually wounded find succor. There were times in Romero's life when that image of church was no metaphor, but an everyday reality.

In good Jesuit fashion, Romero was a believer in discussion and discernment, though he surely had his moments of authoritarian decision-making. Some of his most dramatic gestures and decisions as archbishop, for example, the pivotal decision to conduct only one Mass across the nation on the Sunday following the assassination of Rutilio Grande, came after lengthy consultation with other priests and carefully weighing many opinions. Perhaps most tellingly, Romero did not give his own sensibilities and concerns any particular extra weight in balance against the opinions of others. Through such discernment and consultation, he was able to overcome the limits his own conservative instincts and inclinations might have placed on his perspective and field of operation.

Romero warned repeatedly of idolatries, whether of social privilege, an inherited and presumptive economic order, or Marxist contradictions of it. He frequently sought wisdom about such matters in the lives of the poor whom he loved. "The poor person is the one who has been converted to God and puts all his faith in him," he said, "and the rich person is one who has not been converted to God and puts his confidence in idols: money, power, material things. . . . All of our work should be directed toward converting ourselves and all people to this authentic meaning of poverty. For Christ said that the secret is this: You cannot serve two masters, God and mammon."³

Cardinal Jorge chose to name himself after Francis of Assisi because the twelfth-century saint was a man of peace, a man who “loves and protects creation,” but perhaps most of all a man of poverty, a person who knew its depravities and ingenuities, its oppression and its joys. “How I would like a church that is poor and for the poor,” Pope Francis said just days after his election.

Oscar Romero, a defender of the poor, a voice for the voiceless, was someone who intimately understood the joy and liberation of a church that is poor, that is of the poor and that is for the poor. After he began his lonely course of resistance to the Salvadoran status quo, Romero was abandoned by just about all of his brother bishops in El Salvador. He became a pariah to the social caste in Salvador he challenged, an irritant to Salvador’s political sponsors in Washington whose geopolitical strategies he threatened to overturn. In the end the poor were all he had left, and they knew it and loved him more for it.

On February 18, 1979, the first Sunday after Romero returned from the Puebla conference in Mexico during which the Latin American bishops had accepted the church’s “option for the poor,” he said in his homily, “In our preaching to rich and poor, it is not that we pander to the sins of the poor and ignore the virtues of the rich. Both have sins and both need conversion. But the poor, in their condition of need, are disposed to conversion. They are more conscious of their need of God.

“Therefore, if we really want to learn the meaning of conversion and faith, if we want to learn what it means to trust other people, then it is necessary to become poor or, at the very least, it is necessary to make the cause of the poor our own. That is when one begins to experience faith and conversion: when one has the heart of the poor, when one knows

that financial capital, political influence, and power are worthless, and that without God we are nothing.”⁴

Pope Francis and Archbishop Romero share a striking and sincere simplicity, humility, and modesty that encouraged them to renounce many of the symbolic and practical privileges of their ecclesial positions, right down to the clothing they wore and the means of transportation they employed. Surely they both possess a taste for modest living and a sense that their vocations demanded a life in community, not one that could be endured in practical and psychological isolation. No mean feat for either man.

Pope Francis renounced many of the creature comforts and structural confinements of his position, rejecting the regal papal apartments—breaking a tradition that has continued since 1903—to accept a suite in the Santa Marta Residence, the Vatican’s modern guesthouse for priests and bishops who work in the Roman Curia or are visiting the Vatican for meetings and conferences. This choice was a practical reflection of his desire to adopt a simple living arrangement allowing him to live in community with other priests and bishops. In a similar way, instead of accepting the offer of an extravagant manse upon his elevation to archbishop, Romero elected to live in the sacristy of the Divine Providence Hospital and later accepted a small domicile on the cancer center’s grounds. He celebrated his last eucharistic sacrifice at its modest chapel. Such simplicity was liberating for both men, allowing them to speak their hearts and minds with legitimacy and authority because that legitimacy and that authority has been earned by the lives they led and the joyful and loving example they set.

Both men delight in the people; they feel a deep and sincere need to be among the people. “The people are my prophet,” Romero said, and “with a people like this, it’s not hard to be

a good shepherd.” At his elevation to the papacy, Pope Francis’s first act was not to offer the traditional blessing to those gathered to see the new pontiff in St. Peter’s Square. Instead, with fear and trepidation appropriate to the great responsibility before him, Pope Francis asked for their blessing upon him. The startled crowd responded with a prayer and a roar of approval. Likewise on the night of Rutilio Grande’s death, Oscar Romero turned to the assembled faithful during an impromptu 4:00 a.m. Mass, feeling the sudden realization of the awful burden he was about to accept, the threshold he was about to cross as a mournful dawn approached. “I want to . . . ask for your prayers,” he said, “that I be faithful to this promise, that I will not abandon my people. Rather, I will run with them all the risks that my ministry demands.”⁵

Romero used the acclaim and attention he provoked among the people at Mass in the Metropolitan Cathedral as a job performance gauge. He drew sustenance and courage from their affection, offered and reciprocated. Today Pope Francis has succeeded in nearly doubling the television viewership of his daily angelus homilies. To the consternation of his Swiss Guards, he has restored baby-kissing as a political and ecclesial art form, blithely rejecting the thick glass of the Popemobile, which may offer personal safety but contributes to a distance he recognizes as spiritually isolating. Romero rejected the offer of military bodyguards both as a political gesture of resistance to the government—fully appreciating the cynicism of the government’s offer of “help”—but also as an expression of solidarity with the Salvadoran people. “I don’t want protection as long as my people are not given protection,” he said. “With them, I want to run all the risks that my vocation demands of me.”

Both men had been considered conservative, bookish, withdrawn. But now Francis proclaims he was never the

“rightist” that some took him to be, though in his too-youthful appointment to provincial, his authoritarianism, driven by insecurity, may have suggested it to some people. Romero, considered a “safe” appointment during a time of class and social uproar in El Salvador, proved that age had not calcified his vision or reduced his consciousness into a hard, lifeless thing. Both men have demonstrated the powerful works that liberation and joy and courage can achieve.

Given the many parallels they embody as pastors and as men drawn from Latin America’s peculiar and sometimes cruel intersection of history, race, and faith, perhaps it is not so surprising that one of Pope Francis’s first acts of ecclesial daring was to push for the unblocking of the canonization of a fellow prelate from the New World, known to him to be beloved of his people.

Why was such unblocking necessary? It wasn’t until 1993 that Romero’s cause was first opened in El Salvador, but Romero’s orthodoxy and loyalty to the church were not “confirmed” until July 2005, after a review by the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith that had continued for years.⁶ More than thirty years after his assassination, those devoted to “San Romero” still await his formal canonization.

The church traditionally has limited the status of martyrdom to those who are killed after refusing to renounce their faith or those murdered explicitly because they are Catholic. Romero’s martyrdom was clearly of a different sort. Was Romero a political or a spiritual martyr? Did his faith or his politics propel him to this death before the altar?

Powerful people in El Salvador and in Rome have quietly campaigned against his sainthood, arguing that Romero did not die for his faith or for the poor, but as a “combatant” in a political struggle, worse, a social antagonist who contributed to public disorder. During his lifetime, Romero endured

scoldings at home and in Rome for seeming to choose sides in El Salvador. Powerful bishops within his own conference condemned the archbishop, and after his death opposed the cause for his sainthood, seeing in it an indictment of their role and the side they elected to defend during El Salvador's years of torment. Romero's cause for sainthood wasn't helped when in death he became the unofficial symbol of those on the left in El Salvador who had taken up the armed resistance.

The anniversaries of his martyrdom have come and gone, and each March as it approaches, advocates for Romero's sainthood have waited in hope for official word that this man would become a saint. Up to now they have waited in vain. In 2007 Pope Benedict XVI said that the archbishop was "certainly a great witness of the faith" who "merits beatification, I do not doubt." (Words that were later absurdly stricken from the official transcript though they were spoken before a planeload of journalists.) He explained that obstacles had been thrown before Romero's cause, however, when some groups unjustly tried to co-opt Romero as a political figure.

During the final years of his life, Archbishop Romero became a touchstone of hope for the oppressed of El Salvador and a lightning rod of resentment among its ruling elite. In speaking the truth of Christian faith to the military and economic elite of El Salvador—and not coincidentally the United States—Romero could not help but stir up controversy and outrage among those whose privileges he challenged. Romero was among one of the better-cataloged clerics of his time. Just about every one of his public appearances as archbishop was captured by international and local television and radio news. He chronicled his own thoughts as a weekly contributor to his diocesan paper; his homilies

were broadcast live and quickly transcribed; his weekly radio addresses captivated the nation. Is it possible for someone sifting through such a collection of one individual's words, from newspaper columns to impulsive comments on the street, to find comments that can be construed as political or inflammatory? Did Romero not speak of "revolution" at times as if urging it on?

The truth is he did, and at certain impassioned moments, the archbishop probably said things he might have wished he had phrased differently, in a manner more attuned to the political nuances at home and curial intrigues in Rome. Romero's more passionate comments were enough for some to use to denigrate—and imperil—him during his life. They were enough later for some to use to stand in the way of the cause for the sainthood of Oscar Romero.

But in those few instances when Romero used political terms such as *revolution* or *struggle*, in his own heart Romero was thinking of a different kind of struggle, a different kind of revolution surely than the ones imagined by the emerging armed resistance within El Salvador. Ultimately the revolution that Romero spoke of is the kind that can be experienced by all—not one that is manifest in class struggle, but one manifest in the heart and the head, a revolution of spirit that overcomes both the oppressor and the oppressed and makes such terms meaningless.

Was Romero political? Yes, he certainly was. He came to understand the social struggle in El Salvador as a political conflict, and in that struggle he sided with the poor and insisted that the church do the same. But in his eyes this was never a Marxist class struggle, but merely a struggle of people attempting to protect themselves from social and actual violence and establish for themselves a more just and equitable society, free of official impunity and political repression. That

meant among the affluent some share of privilege that they were murderously resistant to offering. His job was to attempt to convert them, to persuade them to offer up that privilege as a sacrifice that would restore the community.

Romero came to see many Salvadoran revolutionaries not as ideological warriors carrying out a “classic” Marxist struggle but as campesinos and the educated children of campesinos defending their people against sometimes incomprehensible violence and the life-crushing force of economic and social oppression that was specific to the time, geography, and history of Central America. Their *lucha* was not rooted in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Europe ideological conflicts, but the historical reality of contemporary Central America. He knew many of them were aroused to resist social injustice not by Marxist dogma but by the teaching of the church itself. Did he support the revolutionaries? Even as he criticized some of the violence of the revolutionary forces within El Salvador and worried over their tactics, he did in general support them in the same way he supported the right of a vulnerable person to self-defense and of a hungry man to steal food to feed his family. But these last beliefs were based not on Marxist dialectics, but Catholic catechism. Romero was able to discern the difference; many of his detractors, mired in Europe and the Cold War, were not. Their imaginations were too frozen by the church’s long struggle with communism to understand that not all revolutions and revolutionaries are created equal.

In 2010 on the thirtieth anniversary of Romero’s death, when many thought Romero’s beatification would surely be announced, San Salvador Archbishop José Luis Escobar explained the stalled process as the result of efforts by some to “manipulate, politicize or use Romero’s image.”⁷ The cause of Romero’s sainthood had been held up because of

concerns among some powerful bishops that Romero's canonization would signal the church's approval of liberation theology, a controversial convergence of Scripture interpretation and Marxist social critique that has long made some clerics, those perhaps most comfortable with the status quo in Latin America, uneasy.

It is no doubt a concern that would have amused the late archbishop. Romero himself had once been one of those cautious clerics and sought to temper the stridency of the some proponents of liberation theology. He understood the need, and the difficulty, in maintaining a balance between advocacy for the vulnerable and the oppressed and outright political partisanship. As a result, for every Catholic "rightist" in El Salvador who grew furious at the bishop for his defense of the defenseless, a Catholic "leftist" could be found ready to denounce the bishop's timidity. It says more about the politics of the Curia over the last three decades than it does about Archbishop Romero's actual beliefs and spiritual focus that his sainthood should have been stymied for so long over this concern.

But there are other ways for sainthood to be confirmed. Few among the people who knew and loved him personally have needed Rome's seal of approval to embrace Romero as a saint. Three days after his assassination, an attorney for the archdiocese was preparing the Monseñor's death certificate with employees of the San Salvador municipal bureaucracy. "Could it be we are about to bury a saint?" they asked the attorney.⁸

Few among the poor and oppressed of El Salvador have had to wonder about Romero's sainthood. And over the years as thousands of Catholics all over the world learn about Romero and his legacy of conviction and courage, no official word has been necessary to confirm his saintliness.

The people of El Salvador have already declared their saint; he has never been “blocked” on the streets of San Salvador and in the deepest precincts of the heart where true sainthood resides.

The people’s proclamation of Romero’s sainthood may not pass a formal review in Rome, but it is not dissimilar to the manner that saints were elevated during the church’s first thousand years when it was the people, not the prelates, who discerned the sainthood of the beloved departed. During Romero’s funeral, which turned into a bloodbath itself as security elements attacked those who had come to mourn the martyred archbishop, the devotion and affection that the people of El Salvador maintained for their archbishop was already evident. Now each year thousands march on the anniversary of his death, at times they have done so at great peril, in a statement of resistance that is also a defiant gesture of devotion and a declaration of a popular embrace of Romero’s sainthood. That elevation, a canonization by the people, would undoubtedly be all that Romero could have wished for.

CHAPTER ONE

Death Comes for the Archbishop

No one may have noticed the red Volkswagen Passat as it glided slowly to a stop near the modest chapel of the Divine Providence Hospital. Two other cars haunted the streets outside the small church: one filled with armed men working as “security” for the assassin and, in the other car, two men who loosely supervised the operation waited to assess its outcome.

A thin, bearded man, the Passat’s passenger and a stranger to its driver Amado Garay, told Garay to crouch down and pretend to repair something.¹

On another typically hot evening in San Salvador, the Carmelite sisters had kindly left the wing-shaped chapel doors open, hoping for a breath of air to cool the congregants inside. Through the open doors of the Divine Providence Chapel the assassin had a clear view of Archbishop Oscar Romero at the altar as he made his way through the homily he had prepared for this requiem Mass, one he agreed to celebrate for the mother of a friend. “My dear sisters and brothers,” the archbishop was saying, his homily gathering steam. “I think we should not only pray this

evening for the eternal rest of our dear Doña Sarita, but above all we should take to ourselves her message . . . that every Christian ought to want to live intensely. Many do not understand; they think Christianity should not be involved in such things,” Archbishop Romero said, referring to the “things” of the physical world, the problems of the times in which we live. “But, to the contrary,” he continued, “you have just heard in Christ’s gospel that one must not love oneself so much as to avoid getting involved in the risks of life that history demands of us and that those who try to fend off the danger will lose their lives, while those who out of love for Christ give themselves to the service of others, will live, live like the grain of wheat that dies, but only apparently. If it did not die, it would remain alone.” He was wrapping up yet another memorable homily for those gathered in the church and those who would listen to his words later on the radio. “The harvest comes about,” he said, “only because it dies, allowing itself to be sacrificed in the earth and destroyed. Only by undoing itself does it produce the harvest.”²

Soon he would elevate the host above the altar, and he would speak the words of transfiguration; his eyes, as so many hundreds of times before, would be on the host held high before him. If for a second then he had glanced through the open doors of the chapel, would he have seen the young man taking aim? Would he have been afraid? Would he have been tempted to flee? It hardly matters. We know Archbishop Romero was focused on prayer at the moment of his death, preparing for that prayer said during the Eucharist at Masses each day all over the world. We know also that as he spoke his last homily the archbishop knew that death was seeking him out; he knew his words were pulling death closer to him. He surely knew, too, that if he were only to

remain silent, to stop speaking out about the killing and the oppression and the poverty, death just might lose interest in him. There were so many others on death lists in El Salvador in those days on whom it could slake its thirst. But Romero would not be silent.

“Dear brothers and sisters,” he said in this final homily, his final moments, “let us all view these matters at this historic moment with [hope], that spirit of giving and of sacrifice. Let us all do what we can. . . . because all those longings for justice, peace, and well-being that we experience on earth become realized for us if we enlighten them with Christian hope. We know that no one can go on forever, but those who have put into their work a sense of very great faith, of love of God . . . find it all results in the splendors of a crown that is the sure reward of those who labor thus, cultivating truth, justice, love, and goodness on earth. Such labor does not remain here below but, purified by God’s Spirit, is harvested for our reward.”³

Outside in the red Passat, Garay heard a shot, turned around and saw his anonymous passenger “holding a gun with both hands pointing towards the right side of the rear right window of the vehicle.” Garay could smell gunpowder. The bearded man turned to him and calmly told him, “Drive slowly, take it easy.” He did as he was asked; no one interfered with the assassins as they departed. The two men drove in silence to meet with the supervisors of the operation. “Mission accomplished,” the thin, bearded man told them.

Everyone in El Salvador who could reach a radio or visit with the monseñor in person at Mass listened to Romero’s homilies. His words brought hope and courage to thousands. But to some who listened—just as intently—they only provoked a cold, seething hatred. Romero’s homily was “the little

morsel for the day all over,” as one of the conspirators in the archbishop’s murder would remember later. Everyone tuned in for them: the poor, the workers, the revolutionaries, surely, but also the leaders of the death squads and the members of the business and landowning class alarmed by the growing social consciousness of El Salvador’s peasants. “They used to say that Romero’s homily, that he was the one who was stirring people up,” one of the conspirators remembers.⁴

On the night he was murdered, there was much celebrating among the military and members of El Salvador’s patron class, those who had ordered the killing of the archbishop and those who were merely cheered to discover it had taken place. There was much contentment on a farm in Santa Tecla, where Salvadoran anticommunist leader Roberto D’Aubuisson had been waiting with a group of his followers to hear the outcome of the operation. But thirty years later, few of those directly responsible would feel like celebrating. D’Aubuisson was dead—killed by cancer of the tongue—as were many of those directly involved in the assassination of the archbishop, some under highly suspicious circumstances. Perhaps there remain a few who are happy to have their role in Romero’s death whispered only to the grave. The man who pulled the trigger, in fact, has never been caught.

Captain Álvaro Rafael Saravia was among those who celebrated the night of March 24, 1980, but his delight was to be short-lived. One of the few direct conspirators today still among the living, his experience since the Salvadoran peace sputtered into life in 1992 has been one of exile and diminishment. But back then, as one of D’Aubuisson’s most trusted lieutenants, he could only have been gratified about how well the “operation” had turned out, how professionally it had been conducted.

He had long been suspected of being the man in the Pas-sat, the man who pulled the trigger. But, tracked down after years devoted to hiding himself in the United States and Central America in flight from a civil judgment against him for the killing of Romero, Saravia is finally ready to come clean, to tell what happened that night. His role in the killing of the archbishop and many other people over the years of El Salvador's civil war has cost him dearly. After resigning his commission as an officer in the Salvadoran military in 1979, by 1985 he had left his homeland, abandoning his family. He first escaped to the United States in 1985. He soon went underground to escape a criminal court case; he had been suspected of laundering money for Colombian drug traffickers. Far from the days of his pride and glory as a Salvadoran air force officer, he worked in the United States as a pizza deliveryman and then a used-car salesman in Modesto, California. His final escape, this time into the international ether, began after a civil case was initiated against him for Romero's murder by the Center for Justice and Accountability in San Francisco.

After running for so long from Romero's assassination, Saravia is happy to set the record straight when he is brought to ground by Carlos Dada, a founding editor and investigative reporter from El Salvador's *El Faro*, a digital newspaper.

"You wrote this, right?" Saravia says, referring to an article that speculated that Saravia himself had pulled the trigger that felled the archbishop. "Well it's wrong. . . . It says here, 'Several years after murdering Archbishop Romero.' And I didn't kill him."

"Who killed him then? Someone from outside El Salvador?" Dada questioned. "No," said Saravia. "An 'indio,' one of our own. He's still out there somewhere." Was Saravia denying that he had a role in Romero's murder?

“Thirty years and this is going to persecute me until I die,” Saravia mutters to the journalist. “Of course I participated. That’s why we’re here talking.”⁵

Ironically because of the hell he is living in, an impoverished exile from history and from his own people, even from his own family (his children “look at me as if I’m Hitler,” he mournfully explains to Dada), Saravia has nothing but sympathy now for the men and women he once hunted in El Salvador as “communists.” And of course for himself.

Look at me now, he implores the reporter who has tracked him down to this poor farming community in Central America. “If I could do something for these people some day, I’d do it. Even take up arms. I’ve suffered alongside these people: So there’s no corn. Go pick some bananas then. Sometimes there’s corn, but nothing to go with it. So you have to put salt on the tortillas. . . . And sometimes there isn’t even that.

“There’s a family living across from me. Sometimes they give me four tortillas or so. And if that’s being a communist . . . it’s communist. It would have been communist to [D’Aubuisson] in those days. Take him out, wreck his house, and tell him ‘sonofabitch, you’re with the guerrillas.’” The irony of these late political epiphanies is not lost on Saravia. “How would a man not become a guerrilla when he’s watching his children die of hunger?” he says. “I’d grab my gun and go straight into hell. I wouldn’t hesitate three seconds . . . It wouldn’t take much to convince me.”⁶

The man he helped kill can be said to have unknowingly set upon the path to martyrdom on February 17, 1980, when he addressed a letter to President Jimmy Carter pleading that the American president not send military aid to the Salvadoran government. Romero warned President Carter that whatever material support the United States provided

would quickly be turned against the people of El Salvador themselves. That gesture was provocative enough, but the archbishop would soon generate even deeper animus among the men who held his life and death in their hands.

The night before his murder, Romero made a personal appeal in a desperate attempt to place some sort of moral obstacle before the escalating pace of the killing in El Salvador. He spoke directly to those soldiers of the night who were most responsible for the growing horror. "I would like to appeal in a special way to the men of the Army," he said, "and in particular to the troops of the National Guard, the police, and the garrisons. Brothers, you belong to our own people. You kill your own brother peasants; and in the face of an order to kill that is given by a man, the law of God that says 'Do not kill!' should prevail. No soldier is obliged to obey an order counter to the law of God. No one has to comply with an immoral law. It is time now that you recover your conscience and obey its dictates rather than the command of sin. . . . Therefore, in the name of God, and in the name of this long-suffering people, whose laments rise to heaven every day more tumultuous, I beseech you, I beg you, I command you! In the name of God: 'Cease the repression!'"

The applause was so thunderous the radio station's beleaguered audio technicians at first took it for some sort of short circuit or feedback in the system that had knocked the good archbishop off the air. But that hadn't happened; it was only the thundering endorsement of the assembly. Romero's words had been heard by all.

For Romero to have said such words after receiving so many warnings and direct threats is a testament to his faith and his courage. As far as the men who were directing the violence against the "leftists" in El Salvador were concerned, Romero was speaking the purest blasphemy to the soldiers.

They understood how the bishop's words threatened their tenuous authority and control of these men. Many of El Salvador's "professional" military were young men drawn from the peasant communities they were ordered to assault—as Romero noted it was their own brothers and sisters they were abusing, even murdering. Worse, many had been informally "conscripted" off the streets in strong-arm recruitments that were essentially kidnappings. Could such brutalized, unwilling men be relied upon to dispense, on command, so much brutality themselves? And against their own people? The anxious doubt many of the elite in the officers' ranks already maintained and now stoked by the words of the archbishop, was proving unbearable. Could someone not shut this priest up?

Salvadoran newspapers that supported the junta had already essentially called for Romero's assassination. They had condemned him as "a demagogic and violent archbishop" who "preached terrorism from his cathedral." One menaced, "The armed forces should begin to oil their weapons."

And just two weeks before he was shot through the heart, a briefcase containing an unexploded bomb was found behind the pulpit of the church where, the day before, he had said Mass for a murdered government official. The day of his final Mass, a large advertisement announced his schedule for that evening and his attendance as celebrant at the requiem. Romero cheerfully dismissed the concerns a diocesan staff member raised about the unusually prominent announcement.

He must have known they were coming for him and that it was too late to turn back. He certainly knew that death was stalking him. Since the killing of his dear friend, the Jesuit Rutilio Grande, Romero understood where the path that he was following would lead.

Though he dismissed the concerns of others, he was acutely aware that he could be preparing the ground for his

own martyrdom, and he knew in all likelihood that his death would be violent. He had already seen what had become of many who had threatened the political order in El Salvador, and that specter of his own fate filled him with dread as it would any person. Romero loved life; he loved his people. He was not eager to leave either behind. Despite all he faced, Romero remained acutely attentive to nurturing and safeguarding his spiritual life to the end. In his last retreat, he made a note of one of his final discussions with his spiritual director. "My other fear is for my life. It is not easy to accept a violent death, which is very possible in these circumstances, and the apostolic nuncio to Costa Rica warned me of imminent danger just this week. You have encouraged me, reminding me that my attitude should be to hand my life over to God regardless of the end to which that life might come; that unknown circumstances can be faced with God's grace; that God assisted the martyrs, and that if it comes to this I shall feel God very close as I draw my last breath; but that more valiant than surrender in death is the surrender of one's whole life—a life lived for God."⁷

US Ambassador Robert White heard Romero's March 23 "Cease the repression" sermon in person, surrounded at Mass by his own security detail. Because of his attentiveness to human rights issues, White was also considered suspect by the subterranean right-wing forces and had his own share of death threats with which to contend. "I really worried about him and his forthrightness," White recalled twenty-four years later as a civil trial in California began in an effort to flush out the Romero conspirators. "There were limits to how far you could go," White said. "I would have preferred that he would have been more prudent."⁸

Certainly there were men in El Salvador the night before Romero's death who heard Romero's imploring words to

the soldiers in the streets of her cities and the hills of her countryside who knew exactly what Romero was doing with those last words. He was signing his own death warrant. The men of the death squads had long ago gotten over whatever superstitions they might have had about killing a priest. Now they were ready to kill a bishop, even one standing before an altar.

What does one need to kill an archbishop? It did not take a lot to plan a murder in those days with so many people and materials already on hand to do the job. The author of Romero's murder, Roberto D'Aubuisson, is suspected of jotting down a brief reminder note found lodged in Saravia's agenda book—a checklist for one operation to kill a priest. Saravia had so many and varied clandestine operations going at the same time, the book was essential for keeping track of his many dark responsibilities. Much of what was revealed by the agenda was known years before by American officials and reported to Washington, according to American diplomats.

These diplomats told *The New York Times* in 1987 that the CIA had been given Saravia's notebook in 1980 or 1981, but failed to follow up on it. When asked why, an American official who served in El Salvador at the time said, "The CIA didn't mind what was going on so long as they were killing Communists."⁹

The book has been called the Rosetta stone of Salvador's bloody conflict. It offers a small window into the dark world inhabited by Saravia, D'Aubuisson, and perhaps thirty other rightist army officers and business people close to D'Aubuisson who had participated in establishing and running death squads in El Salvador.

One of Saravia's assignments was dubbed "Operation Pineapple," a simple op to smuggle in hand grenades from sources in Guatemala—an operation that is suspected of

being the cover story for the planning of Romero's assassination. D'Aubuisson's list details the "must haves" for Romero's murder: 1 starlight, 1 257 roberts, 4 automatics, grenades, 1 driver, 1 sniper, 4 security.

The "starlight" is a telescopic sight for a precision rifle. The sniper would have a difficult shot to make: thirty-five meters from the street to the chapel altar. The "257 roberts" refers to a 25-caliber Remington rifle with a telescopic lens frequently used for sharpshooting, but it was probably not the weapon used to kill the archbishop. Romero was killed with a 22-caliber bullet through the heart. Though Saravia called the sniper "one of ours," he was most likely a Nicaraguan, a veteran of the Somoza regime's notorious National Guard. He had been hired for one thousand colones. That would be about four hundred dollars. The four automatics and grenades mentioned on the list would be allocated among the four members of the detail that accompanied the sniper, providing security for the operation.¹⁰

What else is required to kill an archbishop? The hand of fate, which selected the date and time of Romero's murder. In the early morning hours on the day of the killing, Captain Eduardo Ávila Ávila, one of the conspirators, woke up Saravia and another member of the operation clutching a copy of the daily *La Prensa Gráfica*. Within its pages he had found a divine signal that today was meant to be Romero's last. The Ávila name appeared over and over again throughout a Mass announcement printed in the newspaper. He perceived it as a message, a call to strike.

The Mass had been scheduled to commemorate the first anniversary of the death of Sara Meardi de Pinto. Her son, Jorge Pinto, her grandchildren, and the Kriete-Ávila, Quiñónez-Ávila, González-Ávila, Ávila-Meardi, Aguilar-Ávila, and Ávila-Ávila families had used an advertisement

in the paper to extend an invitation “to the Holy Mass that will be officiated by the Archbishop of San Salvador in the Church of Divine Providence Hospital at 6:00 p.m. today.” The conspirators had a place and a time and, more important, they had a sign from above. This was the Mass announcement that had worried Romero’s coworker.

That evening at the Mass for Doña Sarita, Romero was finishing the homily. “In this chalice the wine is transformed into the blood that was the price of salvation,” he told the assembly before him. “May this body immolated and this blood sacrificed for humans nourish us also, so that we may give our body and our blood to suffering and to pain—like Christ, not for self, but to bring about justice and peace for our people.”

The instant when a shot cracked the quiet of the church has been captured for eternity on audiotape. The assassin found his target, and Oscar Romero, mortally wounded, tumbled to the floor behind the altar. Some sisters and others at Mass quickly reached his side, indifferent to the possible threat to their own lives as pandemonium erupted in the chapel. But the archbishop was already dead, and the red Passat, with the young man inside, was drifting away into the streets of San Salvador.