

A Small Scene from Romero (1989): Taking Back the Church



Biography

Archbishop Oscar Romero was born Oscar Romero y Galdamez, on August 15, 1917

in Ciudad Barrios, El Salvador. He was the son of Santos Romero and Guadalupe de Jesús Galdámez. While Oscar's family seemed to be in a better financial standing than his neighbours, the Romero household did not have luxuries like running water or electricity. All seven of the family's children did not have beds, so children would sleep on the floor.

Due to the family's limited means, Oscar Romero only received formal schooling for grades one through three. After this period, he received private tutoring until the beginning of his teens. When his family could no longer afford for his education and felt that it would no longer benefit him, Oscar took up a full-time apprenticeship with his father, in the hopes of becoming a carpenter. Oscar had been taught in his father's trade in his spare time since he was a boy, but now he would be fully exposed to carpentry.

Even though Oscar was an excellent apprentice who would likely grow up to become an even better carpenter, he received a different calling at the age of thirteen, when he was accepted into the minor seminary at San Miguel, El Salvador in 1930. The school was run by Claretian priests, who were known to advocate for the rights of the poor. It was very likely that the teachings of the Claretians influenced Oscar later in life.

In 1937, Oscar was promoted to the national seminary in the capital of El Salvador. After years of dedicated study, he completed his seminary studies at the Gregorian University in Rome, Italy, and was ordained as a Roman Catholic priest in 1942. While studying for another degree in ascetic theology, Oscar had to be summoned back home to El Salvador to supply a high demand for priests.

Oscar first worked out of a small rural parish, but was soon promoted to rector of the inter-diocesan

seminary and secretary of the Diocese of San Miguel. For 20 years, Oscar was involved in many community efforts, which included his founding of an Alcoholics Anonymous group and his assistance in building a cathedral in San Miguel. Another promotion followed in 1966 when he became the director of an archdiocesan newspaper. During his time as editor he became known for his dedication to the traditional teachings of the Church. By 1977, after three years as Bishop of Santiago de Maria, Oscar Romero had become Archbishop of El Salvador. Many priests in his country thought that he wouldn't be committed to the plight of the poor due to his conservative stance, but he would prove otherwise during his short time as bishop.

During his time as a bishop and later archbishop, Oscar spoke out against the social and political injustices that the poor in his country faced, such as poverty, torture, assassinations and a lack of education and employment opportunities. He also spoke out against American aid to the corrupt El Salvadoran government. He also travelled throughout his diocese and met with families in order to understand the problems of his people and help them through them. During his time as bishop, Oscar also witnessed, first hand, the atrocities of the military government, as he was often called to perform mass for the families of the deceased and console them.

Oscar's rhetoric towards the government would not go unnoticed during his time as a public figure, and he received death threats from many soldiers and members of mercenary 'death squads' in El Salvador. After years of witnessing the murders of many of his parishioners at the guns of the military and death squads, Oscar was assassinated while celebrating mass on March 24, 1980. More tragedy would follow six days later when the site of Archbishop Romero's funeral was bombed and shot at by an unknown group.

Calling

Archbishop Oscar Romero received many callings in his life, which led to other callings that contributed to his efforts. The first of these callings was his calling to the priesthood at the age of 13. If it wasn't for his entrance to the priesthood, he wouldn't have been able to understand the plight of the poor, while having the vast resources of the Church at his disposal. Later on in life, he received a greater calling in 1974 when he was promoted Bishop of Santiago de Maria, and was able to witness problems facing the poor.

Many sources say that Archbishop Romero did not want to be a source of political controversy, especially during his days as editor of an archdiocesan magazine. However, he was reluctantly drawn into the politics of his country later in his since it interfered with his duty to guard the rights of all El Salvadorans, including the poor.

He would often write letters to government figures, including Arturo Armando Molina; the head of the military junta ruling El Salvador at the time. Archbishop Romero also recognized that the struggles of the El Salvadoran people were aggravated by US military aid to the El Salvadoran government, and so he implored the US to stop its military aid. America refused. Archbishop Romero's humanitarian work became a vocation because his advocacy for proper treatment of the poor and his call for an accountable government were two of the most important priorities in his life aside from God, and also

were his most notable works as archbishop.

Turmoil

During his time as Archbishop, Oscar Romero went through great turmoil. His speech towards military leaders offended them greatly, and so they directed death threats at him. The first time Archbishop Romero received a death threat was in 1975, after El Salvadoran National Guardsmen hacked five farm workers to death. After praying with their families and celebrating mass with them, Archbishop Romero voiced his outrage at the attack. The Guardsman responded by saying, "Cassocks are not bulletproof." This would be one of many death threats directed at Archbishop Romero during his lifetime.

During the beginning of his work as Archbishop, his appointment was received well by the wealthy because they thought him to be a conservative. They thought that his ideals would work in their favour. However, this was not the case, and during the three years that he was Archbishop of El Salvador, he managed to gain the mistrust of some wealthy El Salvadorans, as well as the mistrust of various militias within El Salvador. Members of such militias would spray paint slogans like, "Be A Patriot – Kill A Priest" on walls. This indicated that Archbishop Romero, as well as various other priests in El Salvador would remain targets of the country's violence.

Time of Crisis

There was much civil unrest in Archbishop Romero's home country of El Salvador at the time of his appointment, with the poor sustaining the greatest loss of life and civil rights. While a few groups of citizens favoured an armed revolution as a way to fix their country, many people turned to the Church in El Salvador. They would form "basic ecclesiastic communities", or groups that sought to reform society in a way that follows and upholds the teachings of the church. During this time, Archbishop Romero was the highest ranking member of the Church based within the country. As a result, his words of encouragement to the poor, and his denouncement of the corrupt, formed an invaluable source of motivation for El Salvador's oppressed people.

There were reports of upper-class El Salvadorans ordering the murder of supporters of change in El Salvadoran society through mercenary "death squads" and the military. These killings were ordered because the wealthy found such activities to be unsupportive of a society that would allow them to keep their wealth. They would then reward these killers with money for every man, woman and child that they dispatched.

It is also worth mentioning that in the period after his death until 1992, El Salvador was engulfed in a bloody civil war that lasted until 1992.

Oscar Romero: Spokesperson of God

Archbishop Oscar Romero was a spokesperson between God's message and the world because of his

willingness to challenge what was wrong in order to keep his parishioners safe. He was a champion for tolerance, accountability, and respect for human rights between all El Salvadorans. Even after his death over 30 years ago, the people of El Salvador and the rest of the world still remember his struggle to bring peace to the country through endorsing equality among all people and getting in contact with leaders such as Colonel Molina of El Salvador and President Jimmy Carter of the United States.

Take Action:

You don't have to join the Catholic clergy to make change in El Salvador. There are many social justice initiatives that you can be a part of as well. Here is a list of a few of them, as well as their links:

HELP International: El Salvador

<http://help-international.org/el-salvador>

Food for the Poor: El Salvador

<http://www.foodforthe poor.org/about/work/el-salvador.html>

Save the Children El Salvador

<http://www.savethechildren.org/site/c.8rKLIXMGIpI4E/b.6151419/>

A Small Scene from Romero (1989): Taking Back the Church

In 1989, a biographical film was made about the life and times of Oscar Romero. This short scene was taken from a part of the film. An interesting fact of this film is that it was the first Hollywood feature film to be financed entirely by the Roman Catholic Church.