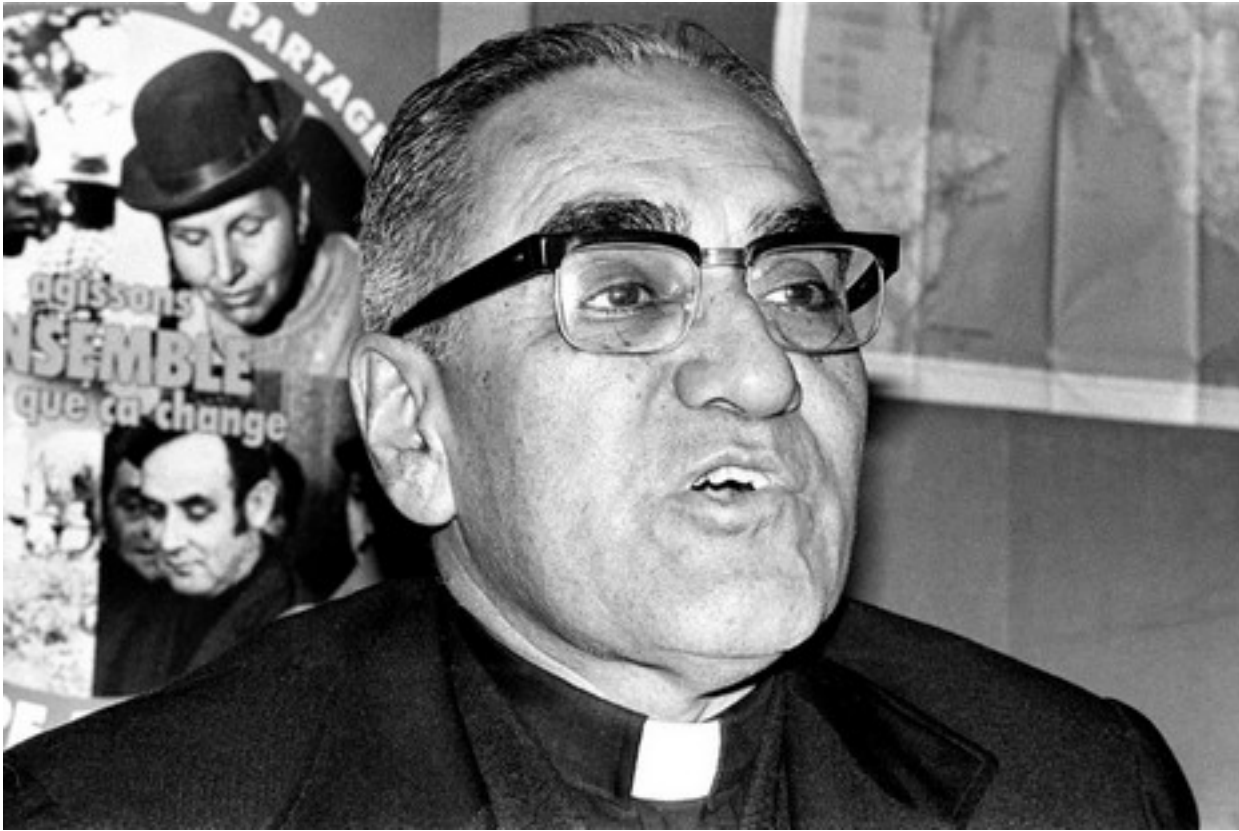


Judge reopens inquiry on Archbishop Romero's murder

Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador, who was assassinated in 1980 and whose cause for canonization is under way, has become one of the most popular figures of the Latin American Church. "La Croix" looks at his life and legacy.



Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador (1977 - 1980) was assassinated on March 24, 1980. / CIRIC archives

An El Salvadoran judge last week reopened the file of Archbishop Oscar Romero, an icon of the Catholic Church in Latin America, who was assassinated in 1980 as he celebrated mass in a chapel of the Divine Providence hospital in San Salvador. Almost forty years after a murder that shook the whole continent, this is a significant turnabout.

Why was the dossier reopened?

The decision by Judge Ricardo Chicas follows the abrogation last year by the El Salvador Constitutional Court of an amnesty law prohibiting the prosecution of the perpetrators of crimes during the civil war that tore the small Latin American country apart between 1980 and 1992.

The removal of this obstacle now enables prosecutors to reopen the inquiry into one of the most spectacular murders of this dark period. The magistrate, therefore, asked prosecutors to open proceedings against the main suspect, Alvaro Rafael Saravia, a former soldier who was sacked in 1993.

The latter belonged to one of the extreme right wing death squads that fought left-wing rebels during that time causing thousands of deaths among their ranks.

What do we know about the assassination of Archbishop Romero?

The military dictatorship of the time killed more than 30,000 people, as shown by the unending list engraved on the Victims Wall in Cuscatlan Park not far from the San Salvador cathedral.

The United Nations Truth Commission inquired into the crimes committed during the civil war in El Salvador from 1980 to 1992.

In 1993 the commission established that the assassination of Archbishop by death squads had been ordered by Roberto d'Aubuisson, a Salvadoran army major and founder of the ARENA nationalist party.

D'Aubuisson died in 1992 and was never prosecuted. But the reopening of the file will allow his role to be established more clearly and help to determine the precise responsibility of the government of the time in the assassination.

What significance does Oscar Romero have in Latin America?

"If they kill me, I will be resurrected in my people," said Archbishop Romero, who was beatified in 2015 before a crowd of more than 300,000 faithful from more than 57 countries.

Taking up the defense of landless farmers and calling on soldiers to stop firing on the crowd, the archbishop had drawn the anger of the most conservative groups in the country. Moreover, in his homilies, he had often condemned the repression and poverty.

In El Salvador, where nearly 30% of the population is poor, according to the World Bank, the death of Romero, who was devoted to the poorest and to ending the military dictatorship, signaled the beginning of a painful civil war.

The war would last from 1980 until 1992 causing the deaths of 75,000 people and at least 7,000 more disappearances.

Romero, whose canonization was blocked for a long time by conservative groups, still does not have unanimous support in his own country with D'Aubuisson's Republican Nationalist Alliance (ARENA) still very powerful.

Nevertheless, Salvadoran parliamentarians passed a law in February 2010 decreeing that March 24 will henceforth be commemorated as "Archbishop Oscar Romero Day".

Today, El Salvador remains under the influence of many criminal bands including the tattooed Maras gangsters, who continue to sow terror among the people.

Samuel Lieven-La Croix International