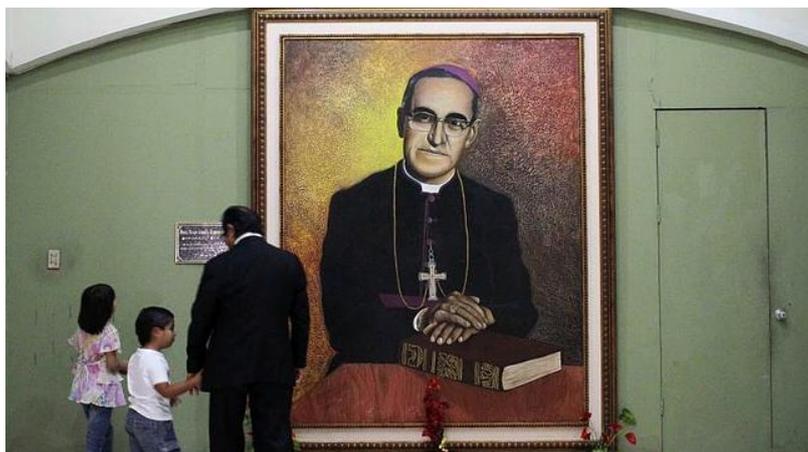


Mainstream martyr for our time



The beatification of Archbishop Oscar Romero is a watershed moment in the recovery of a fundamental truth. The key question that Romero's life and death asks of the faithful everywhere is whether the Christian duty to evangelise and the Christian calling to be holy are inseparable from the Christian duty to work for a better world by opposing exploitation and injustice. The easy answer, from generations of church leaders and teachers, was to treat the work for justice as optional – admirable, but not for everyone. That is no longer tenable.

Ever since Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* in 1967, a theological convergence between evangelisation and work for justice has been discernible, though often with two steps forward and one step back. The Church's recognition of Romero's official status as a martyr, demonstrated by his beatification in San Salvador today, is where the two trajectories finally merge – and “martyr” is here a rigorously defined technical description. It is a recognition that he was killed out of hatred for social justice and therefore that he was killed out of hatred for the faith. It is henceforth no longer correct to regard Romero as a radical, someone on the edge. He has become orthodox, representative, mainstream.

This still makes many conservative Catholics, including clerics in high places, profoundly uncomfortable. It means they have misread the Gospel. They want Romero to be seen as a saint only because of his holy life, or as a man who lived and died exceptionally in exceptional circumstances. They do not want his example to be a vindication of the central truth of liberation theology – that the Church cannot stand aside from historical processes such as the struggle of the poor for justice, nor can it choose which side to be on. There is no version of Catholicism available that is apolitical, nor is it Marxist to say so. Yet plenty of church leaders all over the world have allowed such political struggles to pass them by, concentrating instead on the state of people's souls and aligning themselves with tyrannical regimes because that served the Church's interests.

The rehabilitation of Fr Gustavo Gutiérrez, who addressed the Caritas Internationalis General Assembly in Rome this week, is symbolic of a real shift in the Vatican. Echoing Pope Francis, the father of liberation theology said the Church itself must be poor, not just be for the poor. And this was urgent. “What we are witnessing today is the biggest gap between rich and poor that humanity has ever witnessed,” he declared. Anybody who thought he might have been referring to events of little relevance to the prosperous West need only look at what is happening in the Mediterranean, or indeed Calais. In their thousands, the poor are besieging the gates of the rich, demanding to be admitted.

This transition in teaching is not just a consequence of the election of Pope Francis. It is the fruit of an historical process with roots in the Second Vatican Council and indeed in the Gospel itself. This return to biblical origins is something that Catholics everywhere have begun – with joy indeed – to recognise. Which is why Pope Francis is the Pope for this age, and Romero is its archetypal saint.

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