



PAUL VI, OSCAR ROMERO AND FRANCIS' CHURCH OF THE POOR -- *Dylan Corbett, October 17, 2018*

*In a canonization ceremony last Sunday, Pope Francis raised a number of new saints to the altars, including Pope Paul VI and Mons. Oscar Romero, the slain archbishop of San Salvador. How do these new saints reflect Pope Francis' commitment to the "church of the poor"?*

The recent canonization of Paul VI and Archbishop Romero together by Pope Francis, the first Latin America pope, is not without significance.

Pope Francis has made known that he sees his own pontificate in deep continuity with Paul VI.

Paul led the Catholic Church through the modernizing reforms of the [Second Vatican Council](#). He restyled the papacy, transforming the figure of the pope from a distant figure ensconced in the Vatican into a globetrotting pilgrim. He authored the first encyclical on development, [Populorum progressio](#), which broke new ground by addressing the legacy of colonialism and the imperative to overcome the disparity between rich and poor nations.

Paul VI was the first pope to visit Latin America, where he opened the Second General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate in Medellín, Colombia. It is hard to overestimate the significance of Medellín for the life of the church in Latin America. Medellín inculturated the insights of the Second Vatican Council for the continent and through its "preferential option for the poor" reoriented the church away from alliances with economic and political elites towards a more radical stance in defense of Latin America's excluded.

In 1977, Pope Paul VI appointed Oscar Arnulfo Romero Galdámez the archbishop of San Salvador.

The movie version of Romero's life paints a dramatic conversion after his appointment as archbishop, but in reality Romero had already experienced and confronted the exploitation of farmworkers by landowners and the deadly repression of the Salvadoran government as bishop

of the poverty-stricken Diocese of Santiago de María. His appointment as archbishop of the country's capital coincided with an increase in the pitch of state repression, torture and extrajudicial killings, which would soon lead to outright civil war and Romero's own death in 1980.

As consequential as Medellín was for the self-understanding of the church in Latin America, the official documents of the conference are not without internal inconsistencies. These represent the different attitudes of the bishops to the social inequalities of the continent, ranging from a conciliatory approach that favored social integration through moral suasion to a more radical one that did not exclude armed rebellion.

Romero's life and leadership as archbishop unfolded in the birthpangs of liberation theology. Liberation theology is often spoken of as if it were a single thing, but in fact there is a variety of schools and commitments among its proponents that in many ways reflects the different approaches present in the Medellín documents.

There is a liberation theology which calls the church to make political options in favor of the marginalized. There is a liberation theology which sees the poor as almost mystical bearers of a nation's wisdom and foregrounds popular traditions and religiosity. There is still another liberation theology which turns its social analysis on the church in order to overcome hierarchy.

The diversity of these approaches would have confronted Romero as he grappled with his own style of leadership in the context of a country marred by massive inequality, displacement, dispossession and in the grip of a regime which deployed death squads to defend the economic interests of the ruling class.

Common to the different approaches to liberation theology, however, is the question posed by Gustavo Gutierrez in his seminal work, *A Theology of Liberation* – how in the midst of suffering can the church credibly preach God's love in such a way that “the face of the earth may be renewed”?

While his radicalization may not have been as dramatic as portrayed in film, it is clear that Romero did experience a real conversion towards the poor. Romero's conversion was an inner journey towards greater moral integrity. In Spanish, he became *coerente*. In his own words, in his pastoral work among the poor as bishop and archbishop he “came back home again” to the reality of poverty and hunger that he had experienced as a child.

Romero's solidarity with his people was the stuff of the everyday life of base communities in El Salvador – teaching catechism, sharing food and laughter, compiling lists of the disappeared, visiting the sick, burying the dead, resistance in the face of death and torture.

Romero was not a theoretician of liberation theology. But the witness of his life and death contributed to its development. By freely walking the path towards self-sacrifice he made clear that Christian commitment is not primarily to the transition to bourgeois democracy or the assumption of power by the proletariat. And yet his death is not without political significance.

Romero's ultimate act of solidarity was a concrete contribution to the building up of a genuine political alternative. His death was an act of rebellion that demonstrated that the church's option for social justice is inherently political, but in a unique sense. He showed that it is possible in the midst of oppression and violence to build up communities where the Christian story of love can be re-enacted without regard to political expediency.

Romero's defiance of a murderous regime and demand to end torture and death helped to make the community of the excluded, the church of the poor, a real alternative to this worldly politics, showing that through a radical commitment of love one may indeed "renew the face of the earth".

Romero's conversion was primarily one of love. Romero's was not an option for an ideology, a political platform, an idea or abstraction. He chose the path of identification and solidarity with a concrete people, conscious that he too would also share in their suffering. In his actions and in his words, he anticipated his death. Just days before his assassination, while speaking with some reporters, he commented, "A bishop will die, but the church of God, which is the people, will never perish."

It is chilling to remember that Romero was killed while celebrating the Eucharist, the ritual reenactment of the meal during which Christ anticipated of his own murder. Like Romero, Christ did not die for an abstraction or an idea, but for people of flesh and blood, the community of the outcast and forgotten, the church of the poor. Romero's ultimate act of love also bore fruit. As he prophesied, "I do not believe in death without resurrection. If they kill me, I will be resurrected in the Salvadoran people."

While the recognition of Romero's sanctity is especially meaningful for the people of El Salvador, it should also serve as an occasion for Americans to bind themselves more closely to the people of that country. The current violence, poverty and migration out of El Salvador are reverberations of US support for the homicidal regime there during the civil war. Just a month before he died, Archbishop Romero wrote President Jimmy Carter, imploring him to cease military aid and end American intervention in his country. It is likely that Romero was killed by a US-trained sniper.

With the canonization of Paul VI and Romero, Francis has confirmed the lasting significance of the commitment of these two saints to the building up of the community of love, the church of the poor.

Perhaps as a reminder that this commitment is never an abstraction, but to flesh and blood persons, during the canonization ceremony the pope wore Romero's bloodied liturgical girdle and carried Paul's pilgrim staff.

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