

tinue taking part in the violence against their brothers. The next day Romero was gunned down while celebrating Mass at a hospital chapel in San Salvador by an unknown assassin. Although still unsolved, it's likely that the murder was ordered by a government official. More than a quarter of a million El Salvadorans attended his funeral.

Not long before his death, Romero wrote:

Martyrdom is a grace from God which I do not believe I deserve. But if God accepts the sacrifice of my life, then may my blood be the seed of liberty, and a sign that hope will soon become a reality. May my death, if it is accepted by God, be for the liberation of my people, and as a witness of hope in what is to come. Can you tell them, if they succeed in killing me, that I pardon and bless those who do it. But I wish that they could realize that they are wasting their time. A bishop may die, but the Church of God, which is the people, will never die.

These are not the motivations of a renegade politician. Rather, we see a man with a profound interior life whose holiness exhibits conformity to Christ. In this reflection a saint is manifested, whose interior freedom, which results from a profound relationship with Christ, enables him to offer his life in imitation of Christ's undying love.

What Is a Martyr?

In every time and place men and women are raised up by God as witnesses to the Gospel. And in them we see the cost that comes with discipleship. But with that, we know the reward, as Jesus promised, "whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Mt 16:25).

The disciple's life, then, is a journey of self-abandonment in the arms of God. And those who achieve this to a heroic degree are the saints. Their greatest trea-



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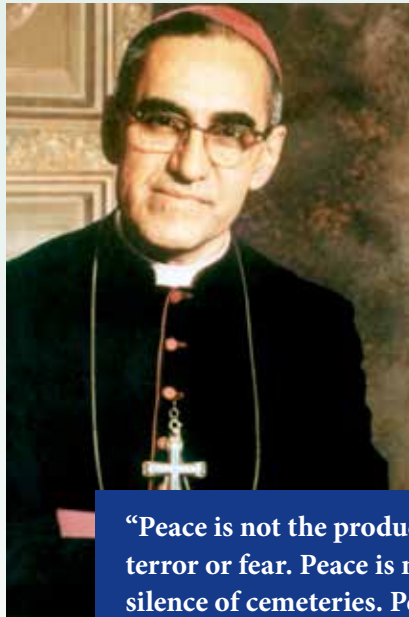
sure is a deep, abiding relationship with the Lord and an undying love for the Faith he gave us. The saints, then, practice their faith robustly, unable to hold back from sharing it in any way.

Saints will not abandon their faith, no matter the cost. Saints endure suffering in one form or another, which the Lord tells his believers to expect (see Lk 9:23). Some, like St. Oscar Romero, are martyrs — those who pay discipleship's highest price by shedding their blood.

The word martyrdom finds its roots in the Greek for "testimony." For the most part, during the earliest days of Christianity, the martyrs were the first saints. By shedding their blood, martyrs give testimony to the Faith, lending credibility to the Gospel and leading others to believe. As the early Church Father Tertullian once wrote, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church."

There is an intensive ecclesial process by which someone is declared a martyr in the Church. It must be proven that the martyr's death comes as the result of hatred for the Faith. After decades of investigation, much of which centered on the complexity of his situation and claims surrounding his own political motivations, Romero was declared a martyr by Pope Francis in 2014.

According to current norms of the Church, once designated as a martyr beatification occurs. A miracle needed for canonization was approved for Romero in 2017, paving the way for his 2018 canonization.



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"Peace is not the product of terror or fear. Peace is not the silence of cemeteries. Peace is not the silent result of violent repression. Peace is the generous, tranquil contribution of all to the good of all. Peace is dynamism. Peace is generosity. It is right and it is duty."

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Shepherd and Martyr

The Life and Death of Oscar Romero



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Early Life

Born August 15, 1917, St. Oscar Romero lived and died in El Salvador, the backdrop for his heroic and prophetic ministry that ultimately cost his life. From an early age he wanted to be a priest, and after eventually studying in Rome, Romero was ordained there in 1942. After returning home, Romero spent nearly 25 years as a parish priest, mostly in El Salvador's second-largest city of San Miguel. For many years he had many additional duties, including serving as a seminary rector. He had a reputation as a hard worker and took initiative to begin many groups and projects — always putting his people's needs before his own.

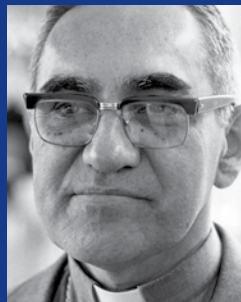
In 1966, Romero was appointed secretary for the bishops' conference of El Salvador and moved to the capital, San Salvador. Four years later, he was appointed auxiliary bishop there. And four years after that, he was named diocesan bishop for Santiago de Maria, an impoverished and rural region of the country. It was during this time that Romero became keenly aware of the growing problems concerning poverty and human rights in El Salvador.

Prophetic Shepherd

In 1977, Pope Paul VI, canonized on the same day as Romero in 2018, appointed Romero archbishop of San Salvador. The growing political unrest in his country would be the defining issue for his time as chief shepherd in El Salvador's capital.

At the time, El Salvador was on the brink of civil war. A right-wing military dictatorship was gaining power and had in its cross hairs a coalition of several left-wing groups. It became a time of widespread violence, death squads and human-rights violations. Protesters were killed on both sides. An innocent citizenry had little defense or recourse.

“The Church will always exist as long as there is one baptized person, and that one baptized person who is left in the world is responsible before the world for holding aloft the banner of the Lord's truth and of his divine justice.”



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With prophetic strength and determination, Romero spoke out against both sides. As a surprise to many who knew him, Romero preached the Gospel in fierce opposition to the widespread social injustices and violence. He became a defender of the poor who had become oppressed and abused by those in power and those seeking power.

Some in the Church were not satisfied with Romero's lack of support for the government. To the misunderstanding of many, the leftist radicals leading the opposition to the dictatorial government were widely seen by many in the Church as the enemy. But Romero saw the dictatorship no differently than its opposition. Both sides legitimized the use of terror and ordered assassinations and executions. “It is not enough to be good. It is not enough to not do evil. My Christianity is something more positive; it is not a negative,” Romero said. Because of his positions, some accused Romero of being a left-leaning politician.

Through his preaching, particularly with effective use of media such as radio, Romero gave a spiritual context to the horrors facing his people. Romero said: “I don't want to be an anti, against anybody. I simply want to be the builder of a great affirmation: the affir-

“You cannot reap what you have not sown.

How are we going to **reap love** in our community if we only **sow hate?**”



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mation of God, who loves us and who wants to save us.”

Romero sought not to impose the Faith, but to propose its goodness, truth and beauty

in the midst of violence. He believed the Church had no other option, saying, “The Church would betray its own love for God and its fidelity to the Gospel if it stopped being ... a defender of the rights of the poor ... a humanizer of every legitimate struggle to achieve a more just society ... that prepares the way for the true reign of God in history.”

As a leaven among his people, Romero encouraged them to speak out, saying, “Each one of you has to be God's microphone.”

Challenging both sides of the war, Romero's voice of conscience and peace brought the Faith into the reality of his people's suffering. He wrote: “There is no dichotomy between man and God's image. Whoever tortures a human being, whoever abuses a human being, whoever outrages a human being abuses God's image, and the Church takes as its own that cross, that martyrdom.”

Thanks to his labors in defense of human dignity Romero's reputation grew internationally. He spoke



Newscom

El Salvador's Saint

El Salvador has the densest population of any country in Central America, yet is the smallest in size. Catholicism arrived with the 16th-century Spanish conquistadors. Today the country has a Catholic majority, yet with a large and growing evangelical Protestant community. The country's name refers to “The Savior” and takes the feast of the transfigured Lord (August 6) as its national feast. St. Oscar Romero is the first to be canonized from El Salvador.

out against foreign intervention in the war, especially American funding of the military government, which continued throughout the entire civil war.

Within El Salvador, Romero became despised by those in power and those vying for it. Though he knew there was a price on his head, he never left his people. Rather, he stayed with them, and as brother killed brother he took their pain upon himself.

“There are many things that can only be seen through eyes that have cried,” he said.

A shepherd never abandons his flock, especially at the sign of danger. And Romero believed this and the cost that could come along with it in his heart's depth.

“I have frequently been threatened with death,” he said. “I ought to say that, as a Christian, I do not believe in death without resurrection. If they kill me I will rise again in the people of El Salvador. I am not boasting; I say it with the greatest humility. I am bound, as a pastor, by a divine command to give my life for those whom I love, and that is all Salvadorans, even those who are going

to kill me. If they manage to carry out their threats, from this moment I offer my blood for the redemption and resurrection of El Salvador.”

Martyred Saint

On March 23, 1980, Romero preached a homily in which he called for the government's military to surrender to their Christian consciences and refuse to con-

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