

# Canonization for the Masses

BY

EILEEN MARKEY

The Catholic Church's canonization of Oscar Romero is a welcome embrace of faith for the many, not the few. But the martyred lay Catholics who fought and died for liberation in Central America deserve recognition, too.

Pope Francis recently canonized Oscar Romero, making the martyred Salvadoran bishop an official saint in the Catholic Church. Romero is a favorite of the religious and secular left, assassinated because he advocated for victims of US-funded state terror during the civil war in El Salvador. His canonization is the culmination of Pope Francis's efforts to open the deeply reactionary halls of the Vatican to liberation theology, an interpretation of Christianity that argues that God suffers when the oppressed suffer, that the physicality of the Christ story is an endorsement of humanity, and most importantly, that God isn't on some other plane, elevated and distant, pie in the sky when you die: rather, this life and its physical conditions matter tremendously. The Latin American theologians who developed the ideas were suppressed under the previous two papacies.

It's important that Romero has been named a saint. But the movement he has come to represent can't be understood by the example of an individual great man. What made liberation theology revolutionary and dangerous to church and state alike is that it was about the collective — and it came from the bottom.

The archbishop's bravery was in response to a religiously grounded social movement that swelled when farm laborers and shantytown workers began to see their religion as something that offered a blueprint for a more equitable society. It was their practice of claiming the stories in the Christian bible as their own that changed what church meant. The innovation came from a thousand reflection circles up and down the spine of Central America. If we recognize saints of that era, we need to recognize these lay Catholics, too.

## **A Saint Produced by a Movement**

Romero was killed by a sniper's bullet while celebrating mass for the mother of an opposition journalist, the hit arranged by the country's wealthy. He had won the coffee oligarchs' enmity by using the church to build a network of human-rights observers who documented the brutality of the right-wing government and by turning the grand colonial buildings of San Salvador into shelters for families fleeing the terror of an indiscriminate counterinsurgency campaign (guided by US advisors who learned their trade in Laos and Vietnam).

The weekend before he was killed, Romero used his nationally broadcast radio homily to urge soldiers to lay down their arms, reminding them that God did not require they follow an unjust command. He knew his death was imminent, but he continued. If there is such a thing as a saint, clearly Romero is one.

Canonizing him highlights the face of the church most Catholics would rather think about: the one that advocates untiringly with and for poor people, as opposed to the corrupt and criminal cabal the recent Pennsylvania grand jury report on sexual abuse revealed (again) or the ugly scheming and self-reverence in the most patriarchal of organizations. It's a step in the right direction for a church forever torn in its allegiances between the words of the Gospels and the prestige of its princes.

The next step is to honor the tens of thousands of ordinary Central American Catholics killed during the proxy wars of 1980s because they took their faith seriously. The Central American martyrs offer something to aspire to as examples of commitment under tyranny, but they also suggest an alternative model of organization for an institution desperately in need of one.

These lay Catholics applied liberationist Christian values under viciously unjust regimes in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. Operating in lay-led and female-empowered small communities that doubled as centers of activism and resistance, ordinary Central Americans offer a lesson this endlessly disappointing institution needs to remember: it's the people in the pews who constitute the church. They were the ones who led a mass movement animated by liberation theology. Brave and good as he clearly was, Romero was responding to a movement that rose from below.

The bishop has been venerated as a saint by poor Salvadorans and people throughout Central America since the time he died, his stoic face staring out from a thousand village *ofrendas*, his photo hidden beneath many mattresses during the war and hung on so many walls today that its absence is a disconcerting statement. But it took the Roman Catholic Church longer to decide on his holiness.

A church version of Cold War politics slowed down Romero's sainthood. Too political, enemies whispered. Pope Francis pushed the cause along, declaring that Romero was a martyr: killed because of *odium fidei*, hatred of the faith. This is significant, because it establishes that the work of advocating for justice, acting in defense of the organized,

standing against the gross accumulation of wealth, *is* the religion. If you hate those things, you hate this religion. The bishop wasn't killed for his prayers, he was killed for his actions.

Likewise, the tens of thousands of Salvadorans and Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Nicaraguans who moved from church to street were religious in their conviction. The faith doesn't happen somewhere else in the clouds. It's applied here. They were thrown from helicopters and buried in shallow graves because they practiced their belief — a dangerous belief that God was close and wanted better for them.

The saints we need are those Central American martyrs who studied their faith and learned it meant justice, who understood their belief was unavoidably political and carried on attempting to build the society they believed that Jesus Christ heralded, even in the face of awful oppression. These people were the church, the students, workers, and farm laborers arrested, tortured, and disappeared; the ones who read the Gospels and learned they had far more to say about economics than sex; who studied the prophets' definitions of justice with one eye trained on the door, knowing a government spy was listening; the ones who kept up when the priests evacuated, when the church buildings were bombed, who smuggled hand-painted crosses depicting Christ as a emancipated peasant woman into refugee camps and sang their songs about a God who comes to bring liberation to the oppressed.

Over and over they paid with their lives. They are the saints the broken institution of the Catholic church needs to honor — and the ones the secular fans of revolution should remember in their fullness.

## **People, Not Princes**

In the United States, we're so used to thinking of religion as the provenance of the Right that many on the Left wash it out of our stories, dismiss its radical potential for transformation, or condescend to the vast majority of the world's peoples who build their lives under its realities as uneducated and superstitious. But something held so close, so intimately, that gives people a way of existing outside the market is worthy of consideration.

The faith practiced in El Salvador and its neighbors in the 1970s and '80s was so disruptive to the powers that be that it drove a wedge between the church and the other two legs of the five-hundred-year-old power structure: the landowners and the military. The separation was driven by farm laborers and slum dwellers meeting to study the Beatitudes, spurred by what had seemed innocuous church reforms in the 1960s. There are other famous martyrs of the period: the four North American churchwomen, nuns, and a lay woman, killed in El Salvador in December 1980, the Jesuits at the University of El Salvador and their housekeeper and her daughter killed in 1989. But the vast majority of the dead are regular people, those who made the church and carried the faith.

There is precedent for recognizing a large group of lay people. In 2000, Pope John Paul II canonized a group of eighty-eight Chinese Catholics killed during the Boxer Rebellion and a number of other Chinese and foreign missionaries killed in China the nineteenth and twentieth centuries because of their religion. Canonizing a joint group of Central American martyrs would be a powerful reminder both for Catholics and secular progressives that power comes from the bottom.

The world we seek can't be made by lone heroes: it's built by us. For that most hierarchical of institutions to honor the martyrs of Central America would be a powerful reminder of how US foreign policy aided in the persecution, torture, and murder of Catholics throughout the region — and an acknowledgement that the people, not the princes, are who lead.

CONTRIBUTORS

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