Óscar Romero’s political theology

Does sainthood risk blunting Romero’s witness? Michael Lee offers a timely inoculation.

by J. Scott Jackson in the October 10, 2018 issue

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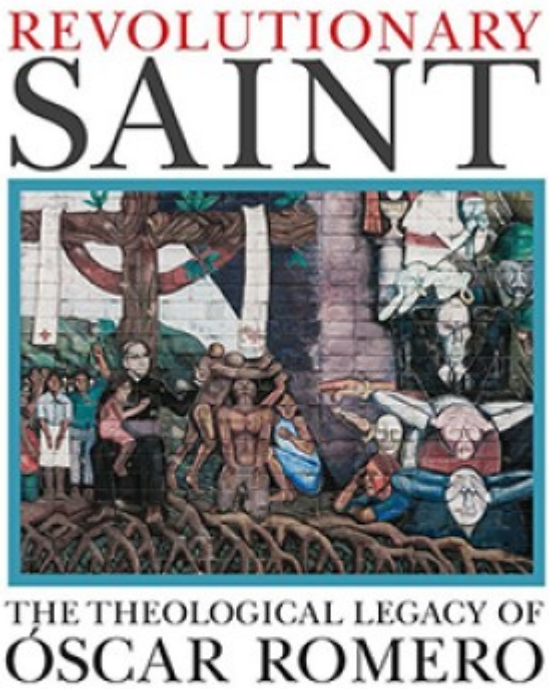

Revolutionary Saint

The Theological Legacy of Óscar Romero

By Michael E. Lee
Orbis

The blood of the martyrs is the seed of contention. This has proven true for Óscar Arnulfo Romero, the archbishop of San Salvador who, at long last, will be proclaimed a saint this month at the Vatican. Although Monseñor Romero, as Salvadorans call him, is widely seen as one of the revered human rights advocates of the past century, his path to canonization was hardly self-evident until Pope Francis cleared the way.

While El Salvador burned in the late 1970s, careening toward civil war, Pope John Paul II urged Romero to seek détente with the military government, which in league with landed oligarchs sought to silence him. The pope, an avowed anticommunist, worried that leftist insurgents would co-opt the archbishop's mantle for their own violent revolutionary agenda. If anything, such fears only intensified during the war, arguably kindled by the archbishop's murder while he was celebrating a mass on March 24, 1980. During Romero's tumultuous ministry, most of his fellow bishops, the local papal delegate, and representatives of the U.S. government sought to dampen his activism. Many Salvadoran *campesinos*, the peasants who had chafed for five decades under military dictatorships, saw Monseñor differently.

Now that cold war–era suspicions of Romero have subsided, one might wonder whether official sainthood risks blunting his radical witness. The superb theological biography by Fordham theologian Michael E. Lee offers a timely inoculation against such domestication. Lee analyzes the archbishop's life and teachings within his Salvadoran context and outlines a constructive political theology drawing upon this material.

Romero grew up a devout Catholic in a family of modest means. Schooled in neo-Scholastic theology, he became known as a conservative cleric wary of the radical theologies incubating within base ecclesial communities. Romero's vocation, though, took a dramatic turn just days after his installation as archbishop when his friend, the Jesuit activist Rutilio Grande, was gunned down along with two laypeople. Stunning supporters and detractors alike, Romero canceled services across the country and held a single requiem mass for Grande at the cathedral, vowing to boycott all government events until the priest's case was thoroughly investigated (which never happened).

The archbishop became a tireless advocate for the poor, who decried state-sponsored repression as acts of terror—intimidation, kidnapping, torture, and murders carried out by paramilitary death squads—multiplied. In weekly broadcast homilies that riveted the nation, Romero recounted the news of the day and read the names of the murdered and the disappeared. Still, some insurgents regarded Romero as too compromised, as when he tentatively endorsed a military-civilian junta he naively hoped would lead to a more just peace. He never condoned the retributive violence of the guerrilla groups, and he urged oligarchs to repent and embrace the gospel of love. Days before his murder, Romero publicly chided the Carter administration for pledging aid to the ruling military junta and urged members of the security forces to practice civil disobedience.

Lee locates Romero's vocation at the convergence of two revolutions: political independence movements throughout Latin America and novel reinterpretations within Catholic social teaching. The new religious thought eschewed a quietism that legitimated existing social orders by segregating the spiritual and temporal realms. These doctrinal shifts paralleled what biographers have called Romero's conversion. (He preferred to characterize his awakening as an evolution.) The Catholic Action movement spurred the faithful to more active engagement with social issues, and such efforts helped lead to the watershed declarations of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). Latin American bishops at Medellín, Colombia (1968), and Puebla, Mexico (1979), urged the church to face the crises of poverty and injustice head on. Though initially bewildered by aspects of these new teachings, Romero came to embrace and embody them within his own ministry.

Mining Romero's pastoral letters, public addresses, and homilies, Lee redefines *conversion* as a process of coming to follow ever more deeply God's immersion, through Jesus, in the conflicts of the polis. For Romero, this entails articulating the gospel in terms of the preferential option for the poor, who become the lens for perceiving God's work in the world. Such conversion results in a dynamic new understanding of the relationship between faith and politics. Weaving together the threads of Romero's life work, Lee also revises the notion of martyrdom, shifting attention from a narrow focus on whether the perpetrators act from hatred for the faith to the intentionality of the martyrs themselves expressed in their solidarity with the marginalized. "Far from glorifying death," Lee writes, "these martyrs testify to the value and dignity of life, and the way that the community of those who survive persecution can find meaning, share memory, and sustain hope."

Lee caps off his study by situating Romero's work in relationship to liberation theologies. Romero, Lee argues, is not a liberationist if the term is read narrowly (as by its critics) as a naive baptism of Marxism, a reduction of faith to political activism, and a rejection of such traditional dogmas as the divinity of Christ and eternal life. Romero never spurned church dogma. Rather, he sought to reframe its pastoral import for his context by homing in on the concrete demands of discipleship in a society rife with injustice. In step with such liberationists as Gustavo Gutiérrez, Jon Sobrino, and Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, Romero portrayed the church's struggle to lift up the downtrodden as the natural extension of Jesus' kingdom proclamation and sacrificial death.

Romero recognized the structural dimensions of sin and salvation in a paradigm that sought to remain free of partisan political manipulation. As we continue to grapple with the challenges of postcolonial struggle, the blight of poverty, and the rise of reactionary movements, we can draw upon such works as Lee's to retrieve a Saint Óscar Romero who speaks a prophetic word for today.

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