

Caught up in the sweep of history

When I am troubled by the times in which we live, I turn to Óscar Romero.

by [Alejandra Oliva](#) in the [January 2024](#) issue



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We live in horrifying times, times that feel like they demand a response from us. It seems like every week there's something new—an outbreak of violence, a report

that puts climate change further and further into apocalyptic territory. These feel like everyday things, at least in part because many of them are ongoing, with no inciting event to pin your concern on. In other words: horror itself feels like business as usual. We feel called to action, but even that feels diffuse and strange. What kind of action? What kind of attention or care could possibly meet this ongoing moment? For an answer, I turn to Archbishop Óscar Romero.

In a November 1977 homily, Romero referred to God as a God of history, a wellspring of time. When he said this, El Salvador was hurtling toward civil war, Romero had been archbishop for less than a year, and his friend Rutilio Grande had been dead at the hands of unknown assassins for six months. You might argue that in those six months, Romero had been swept up into history—living during not a time but *this* time, realizing he held not only a responsibility to his fellow Christians but this very specific responsibility, shaped around his historical moment and circumstance. History, for Romero, had gone from an abstract concept to a living force, a force with its finger on his pulse, a force calling his name just as impatiently and in the same voice as God.

They may as well be the same thing. Romero describes history as omnipresent, gathering us all into its sweep, even “the tiniest child, even the nameless campesino who harvests coffee.” It doesn’t give you a choice about being involved in it; it accounts for every atom. With a God and a history so meticulous, so inescapable, Romero’s response of living into it, embracing its challenges, seems the only way to live in it at all.

It is also an eternal history that arcs into the end of days. Romero speaks of a final, crystallizing moment when the keys of the kingdom will be handed over and history will serve as an “adornment” to God, the coffee harvester and the tiniest child and Romero alike all at once preserved in the amber of time, like prehistoric insects, and freed from its constraints.

However, for all his taking of the long view, he still argues for working on history, for a betterment of time now: “Christianity proves to be better than communism when people work like communists and hope in God like Christians.” With this, he pushes back against religion as the “opiate of the masses” and instead argues for a more active, relational kind of Christianity, an eschatology focused on the betterment of the world and not simply its ending.

In another homily, given about a month later during Christmas, Romero speaks of “the horizon of history appearing dark and closed off, as if human realities have made it impossible for God’s plans to be accomplished.” The question this homily raises is, at least to me, at once one of the most clichéd and the most urgent: How can a just and merciful God be omnipotent and at the same time, allow all of *this*?

I don’t know if I agree with Romero’s assessment that “suffering is necessary,” but I do know that it makes me angry. It feels like insisting on the necessity of suffering turns religion into an opiate after all, asks people to keep their heads down in the face of their own oppression, normalizes what should not be normal. Romero goes on to say that even human error might be enough for God to do God’s work, to crack open that darkness on the horizon. He quotes Isaiah: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwell in the land of gloom a light has shone” (9:2). Patience is needed. But still, if the fullness of time, if history, can be measured in human suffering, then any time is too long.

Romero’s sense of history seems to mirror his sense of God: it is all-encompassing and something close to eternal. However, it also falls outside of God: he acknowledges that if not history, then at least the future sometimes seems impossible thanks to the interventions of man, that God seems powerless in the arc of history. How to react, then, to living in a history that is at once immersive and temporary? How to account for the specific of the temporal in the face of the eternal?

I think the lesson that Romero holds for all of us living in more interesting times than we might have liked is this: to live out the promise of your life as it’s been given, to participate fully in this time, to turn that life toward justice or peace or at the very least the lessening of suffering. It’s a lesson that feels sometimes a little small, not drastic enough; it feels like the human suffering in the world demands something more heroic of me. It feels like a time of drastic action, in the same way I’m sure El Salvador in 1977 felt.

But Saint Óscar Romero, martyred for his resistance to the arc of the history in which he lived, did not do much outside the realm of his own profession: he spoke the names of the dead, he called for peace in turbulent times, he comforted the poor and dying and oppressed, asked for justice, wrote letters on behalf of those with less power. These are all things a priest might do in any arc of history. It is in his continuing to do that work, all of it, that Romero rises above being any priest and becomes a specific one, called to his time.