

Church urges new look at archbishop's murder: The Romero assassination

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El Salvador's Catholic Church is calling for a renewed investigation of the 1980 assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero following a ruling in which a Salvadoran man now living in California was found liable for the crime.

A federal judge in Fresno, California, ruled September 3 that Alvaro Saravia, a former Salvadoran military captain, should be held responsible for Romero's murder and ordered that Saravia pay \$10 million to a relative of the archbishop.

Romero, an outspoken advocate of human rights, was assassinated in 1980 while saying mass. His death was a tragic milestone in a turbulent era for El Salvador and the church in Latin America.

In the midst of a civil war and insurgency that eventually killed 75,000, Romero became a hero to populist elements of the church with his criticism of the Salvadoran military and right-wing death squads.

The death squads and conservative Salvadoran politicians of the time portrayed Romero as sympathizing with left-wing guerrillas; Romero said he was defending the poor, and he remains a revered figure in El Salvador today.

The decision by Judge Oliver Wanger marked the first time that a single individual has been held responsible for the assassination—prompting praise by the church, which has pushed for Romero's eventual canonization. Nonetheless, church officials continued to assert that the full story of the murder has yet to be told.

"This is a sign that justice will come in El Salvador—it's a ray of hope," said Maria Julia Hernández, chief legal officer for the archdiocese of San Salvador, the nation's capital. But the ruling should also prompt the government of El Salvador to reopen the case so it can be investigated, said Hernández, who was quoted by the Reuters

news agency following a news conference.

The Center for Justice & Accountability (CJA), a San Francisco-based human rights group, was among those bringing the suit, alleging that Saravia played a key role in arranging the killing, including providing the assassin with a weapon. It has not yet been determined who the actual sniper was. Though it is unlikely that anyone will see any monetary compensation as a result of the suit, human rights and church officials termed the ruling a moral victory.

“For us, Oscar Romero was like Martin Luther King for the United States, or Gandhi for India,” said Francisco Acosta, a witness at the trial and a founder of Archbishop Romero University in El Salvador. The case, he said, helps “provide a sense of closure for all of Salvadoran society.” *-Religion News Service*