

Death Comes to the Archbishop Whose Life Was Devoted to Poor

San Salvador (RNS) — Few may realize that Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero y Galdamez, who was shot and killed during Mass here March 24 apparently because of his championing of human rights, was at times considered a "conservative."

Archbishop Romero, 62, a vigorous opponent of government repression in this Central American country, was gunned down by four well-dressed men who shot him at close range as 125 worshippers, mostly nuns, watched in horror in the chapel of the Divine Providence Hospital.

He had been a 1979 nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize.

During his years as bishop in the small town of Santiago de Maria (1974-1977), he said, "I lived a very private life — anonymous, you might say. I could have been called a conservative, I suppose but I followed the principles of Vatican II with considerable interest and noted the changes we were being asked to make."

It was at Santiago de Maria that he came close to the problems of the peasants and the repression their organizing efforts aroused.

When he became archbishop of San Salvador in February 1977, the military government of the now deposed Gen. Carlos Humberto Romero (no relation) voiced its satisfaction that a "conservative" prelate, with little interest in El Salvador's political problems, was in charge of the country's major see.

The government was in for a big surprise.

Archbishop Romero's succession coincided with allegations of fraud in presidential elections, which in turn provoked a wave of repression and the killing of two priests. It led the prelate to lash out for the first time at the government.

His strongly worded pastoral letter protested against "killings, torture, and repression" brought to bear against peasants and workers, and the "disappearance of hundreds of political opponents" of the government.



A nun kisses the forehead of Archbishop Romero assassinated March 24. (RNS)

"Yes, I have changed," the mild-mannered archbishop admitted in an interview. "Before, I was different — more spiritualistic, I guess you would say — because I thought that was what the Lord wanted of me. Here the situation is very different and so my response has to be very different."

"Our people are poor and oppressed and they are being tortured," he said.

El Salvador, trapped in a vortex of left-right violence, is a small, impoverished, predominantly Catholic country of 4.5 million, where an elite two percent of the population controls 57 percent of the land and sells cash crops abroad while at home hunger and malnutrition remain endemic.

A staunch advocate of land reform, Archbishop Romero never let up in his attacks on the government, or in his denunciation of violence by the armed forces and right-wing groups, or in his condemnation of leftist terrorism.

For his pains, he was frequently threatened with death and vilified as a "Communist" and a "traitor" by government officials,

businessmen, and the country's conservative press.

He was even at loggerheads with four of the other six bishops in El Salvador, including Bishop Arnaldo Aparicio y Quintanilla of San Vicente, who blame Communists for the unrest in their country.

Bishop Aparicio and his three colleagues criticized Archbishop Romero's pro-land reform, anti-government, anti-repression campaign as "encouragement to Communist elements bent on manipulating the church and overthrowing our constitutional government."

"There is a lamentable cleavage among the bishops," the archbishop said in an interview with Religious News Service in January of 1979. "Some think there is no persecution. They don't demand the reform that is so necessary... But I believe the church is not just us bishops. The church is the campesinos, the small basic Christian communities."

After last October's military coup against Gen. Romero, Archbishop Romero cautiously supported the five-man junta that took over, but became disillusioned over its

inability to carry out promised reforms.

When a new government of two colonels and three civilians replaced the junta on Jan. 9, Archbishop Romero continued to press for needed social change, charging that the country's entrenched, rightwing oligarchy was continuing to prevent any notable socio-economic reform.

The new government eventually launched a sweeping land distribution program, nationalized all banks, and imposed a 30-day state of siege. But government oppression and violence from both the left and right continued. At least 150 persons died violently in the week immediately preceding the archbishop's assassination.

He was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by American congressmen and British members of Parliament.

"I feel certain that I will not receive the Nobel Peace Prize," he said, "but the nomination itself is the prize to me. I would accept it not for myself but as an award to the cause of human rights. This is what sustains me — my love for God, my desire to be faithful to the Gospels, and my love for the Salvadoran people, particularly the poor."

Justice and Peace Commission Statement

Who killed Archbishop Romero? "Injustice killed him because he wanted justice. Hatred killed him because he wanted love. Lies killed him because he wanted truth." These words by Msgr. Ricardo Unosté, vicar general of San Salvador, at a funeral mass described the man Archbishop Romero.

In an interview about six months ago with Mario Rosenthal, Archbishop Romero said of himself, "I am not an agitator, I am a man of peace... I do my duty, my pastoral duty to give my life for my flock."

And so he did Monday, March 24. This man of peace who constantly spoke against violence from both the right and the left, this constant champion of the poor and oppressed, carried his cross and gave up his life as Our Lord did for his people.

The International Justice and Peace Commission of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester strongly condemns the violence prevalent in El Salvador which has taken so many lives. The commission asks dioceses to pray not only for Archbishop Romero but also for the Salvadorean people. We join Archbishop Quinn, president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, in asking President Carter to honor the request of Archbishop Romero not to send military aid to El Salvador. In a letter only a month ago, the archbishop wrote, "I am appealing to you because you are a Christian and affirm that you defend human rights. Please demonstrate this, because with military help to El Salvador, the injustice and repression against our people will only get worse."

Archbishop Quinn said, "There can be no more fitting tribute to the heroic life of this holy man than the fact that as a nation we would follow his advice."

The commission asks dioceses to write their representatives and ask that they lessen the role of the U.S. in the strife going on in El Salvador, so that we honor the principles of peace and justice to all.

The statement was issued by commission staff, Ms. Lourdes Perez-Albuerne, Ms. Audrey H. Renna, Michael J. Ryan Jr.

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Pope Condemns Assassination

Vatican City (RNS) — Pope John Paul II has condemned the "sacrilegious assassination" of Archbishop Oscar Romero y Galdamez.

The official Vatican daily, L'Osservatore Romano, ran a large front-page headline reporting the death of the prelate, who, police believe, was shot to death by rightwing extremists.

The pope said the murder "violates in a cruel manner the dignity of person" and "strikes the conscience of the ecclesiastical community as well as all those who nourish sentiments of humane brotherhood."

(And in Washington, the president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops called on the Carter administration to halt American military aid to El Salvador as a memorial to the archbishop.

(Archbishop John Quinn of San Francisco, NCCB president, pointed out that the slain archbishop called for cessation of arms shipments in his own letter to President Carter, in February.

"We in the United States tend to look at events in a country like El Salvador in a detached way, as if we were unrelated to them. In fact, however, the posture and

policies of our nation directly influence the daily life of the poor in El Salvador. Archbishop Romero called attention to this himself in his prophetic letter to President Carter on Feb. 17. In a direct personal plea to the president, the archbishop requested that no more military assistance be given to the El Salvadorean government. (As yet, the plea has not been heeded.)"

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