

# CATHOLIC COURIER

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## Saluting seniors!

The *Catholic Courier's* graduation supplement begins after page 8.



## Martyrs provide models for the faithful

By Lee Strong  
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — In the early morning hours of March 24, 1980, Archbishop Oscar Romero was gunned down while saying Mass in the chapel of a Carmelite Convent in the Salvadoran capital of San Salvador.

Although no proof has been found, most observers believe the prelate was assassinated because of his opposition to the policies of El Salvador's right-wing government.

Despite division among the bishops of the Archdiocese of El Salvador, Archbishop Arturo Rivera y Damas announced on the 10th anniversary of Archbishop Romero's death that he was launching an official investigation into the cause for martyrdom — and thus sainthood — for Archbishop Romero.

Whether the investigation ultimately leads to Archbishop Romero's declaration as a saint and martyr of the church will depend on a process that may span decades. That process also may be influenced by such factors as the political climate in El Salvador, the wishes of the archbishop of that country, the desires of the pope, and even the evolving understanding of what constitutes martyrdom.

Martyrdom has been a part of Catholicism from the church's inception, noted Kenneth Woodward, religion editor of *Newsweek* magazine and author of the book *Making Saints*.

"Martyr" isn't just another category of saint, it is the category," Woodward asserted in a telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier*.

During the first few centuries of church history, martyrs were the only people to be declared saints,

explained Woodward, a graduate of Notre Dame University.

Derived from a Greek word meaning "witness," the term martyr was applied to men and women who chose to die rather than to renounce their Catholic faith. The example of Jesus installed this ultimate sacrifice as a vital part of Catholic beliefs, Woodward noted.

"The 'God who dies' places martyrdom at the center of the (Catholic) religion in a way that it does in no other," Woodward observed.

*'We need to have people we can hold up and say, "These are what we should be like." We need heroes, and these people are certainly heroes.'*

— Father Albert Nevins, MM

Indeed, the story of St. Stephen — the first martyr — in *The Acts of the Apostles* follows the pattern established by the death of Jesus, Woodward said. Stephen is arrested, undergoes a trial in which he proclaims his beliefs, refuses to reject those beliefs, and is executed. This became the model for subsequent martyrs.

But while praising martyrdom, the early Christians did not actively seek it, noted Father William J. O'Malley, SJ, author of *The Voice of Blood: Five Christian Martyrs of Our Time*, and a former member of the faculty of McQuaid Jesuit High School in Rochester.

"They didn't want to die," Father O'Malley said during a telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier* from his office at Fordham University. Citing the early Christians' frequent escapes from the Roman authorities, he noted, "They weren't suicidal. They just got caught."

Thus they became martyrs because they persevered in the face of extreme danger, Father O'Malley said. "The most important thing is these people didn't flinch," he remarked.

While dying in defense of the faith was an essential element of martyrdom, Woodward observed, an underlying element was often politics.

"In most cases, martyrdom is also a political act," Woodward's book points out. Jesus, the text explains, was persecuted for challenging the Temple authorities and, in the years that followed, the early Christians "challenged the sacred base of Roman authority by refusing to honor the emperor as divine."

In fact, Woodward told the *Courier*, defending the church — not simply the individual's personal faith — gradually became a second path to recognized martyrdom, especially after the church itself became a temporal power.

Thus such saints as Thomas á Becket, Thomas More and John Fisher died martyrs because they defended the power and rules of the church against English kings.

The definition of martyrs was further complicated during the European colonial era, when indigenous people killed missionaries who had entered their lands with conquering armies, Woodward's book explains. Should such missionaries be declared mar-

Continued on page 14

Bishop Matthew H. Clark last week unveiled a Transitional Education Plan for parishes and Catholic schools outside of ...

3

Father John P. Norris, the outspoken pastor of Assumption Church in Fairport, retires this month after 45 years in the priesthood.

6

The DeSales baseball team earned its fourth consecutive sectional title with a win over Campbell last Saturday.

11