Memory of 'St. Oscar' will endure

essays in theology

By Father Richard P. McBrien

I wrote last week about Joseph, one of the church's most revered saints, whose feast we just celebrated on the 19th of this month. I turn this week to another of the church's saints, named Oscar – Oscar Arnulfo Romero, the late archbishop of San Salvador.

We know much more about St. Oscar than we do about St. Joseph. He did not live a hidden life, like Joseph, nor did he die in obscurity. Oscar Romero was martyred on March 24, 1980 – assassinated by a member of a right-wing death squad while celebrating Mass in the chapel of San Salvador's Hospital of Divine Providence. His still-unofficial feast we celebrate this coming Sunday.

But Oscar Romero and Joseph had much else in common. Both were committed disciples of Jesus. Both were men of justice. (Joseph defended Mary's honor at risk to his own; Romero denounced the oppression of the poor by military and political forces.) And both have never been formally canonized by the church, although Joseph was declared patron of the universal church by Pope Pius IX in 1870.

Papal canonizations did not begin until the end of the 10th century. During the church's entire first millennium, saints were simply proclaimed by the people. And the very first category of popularly proclaimed saints were the martyrs. The proclamation of the martyred Oscar Arnulfo Romero as a saint, therefore, is entirely in keeping with one of the oldest traditions of the church.

The papal visit to El Salvador and to the tomb of the late archbishop early last month served as a reminder of the significant pastoral role Romero played in the church of Latin America, and of the tensions that inevitably exist between the church and the political, economic, and military institutions of society.

There is a body of Catholic opinion that the two spheres should never meet. The church's mission is purely spiritual: administering the sacraments, preaching and teaching the faith, ministering to the sick and the dying. In this view, the church has no role to play in society except to remind its members that there is a life beyond this one and they must prepare their souls for it.

For those holding this view, Archbishop Romero was no hero, and certainly no martyr. He had meddled in affairs that were none of his or the church's business. He had "politicized the Gospel" and thereby exposed himself to political reprisal.

In recent years that inflexible opinion has given way to a compromise version: Although the church's mission is still primarily spiritual, it does have at least a limited role to play in the political order.

It can pressure politicians into changing or blocking public policies that the church regards as immoral (e.g., abortion, gay rights) and into granting concessions to which the church feels itself entitled (e.g., vouchers for families with children in parochial schools).

This change in thinking has been even more dramatic on the Protestant side. Many Protestant fundamentalist and evangelical churches, once totally opposed to political activity, have placed themselves in the middle of the political fray – first with the Moral Majority and now with the Christian Coalition. The Catholic Church's official stance, articulated at the Second Vatican Council, is different from both of these views. The church does have a role to play in the political order "whenever basic personal rights or the salvation of souls" are at issue ("Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," n. 76).

Nowhere has this official stance been more clearly in evidence than in the public posture of the U.S. Catholic bishops, who have expressed themselves in recent years not only on issues like abortion but also on governmental responsibility to the poor and U.S. foreign policy toward Latin America.

The most telling example of their balanced activist approach was their 1986 pastoral letter, "Economic Justice for All: Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy," a document not well received by politically conservative laity.

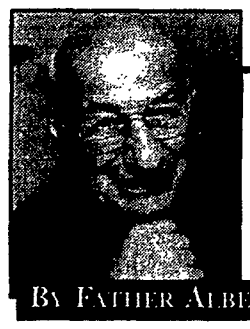
After Archbishop Romero's death in 1980, Pope John Paul II appointed a like-minded associate as his successor, Arturo Rivera y Damas. When y Damas retired last year, however, he was replaced not by his popular auxiliary bishop, Gregorio Rosa Chavez, but by Fernando Saenz Lacalle, former Vatican liaison with the Salvadoran Armed Forces and a clerical member of Opus Dei.

Since taking office, Archbishop Saenz has reforged church alliance with the government (controlled by the party whose founder ordered Romero's assassination), the military and the wealthy classes.

Many Salvadorans – clergy, religious, and laity alike – are discouraged by the appointment, but as Catholics they will take the long view of history. St. Oscar and his martyrdom for justice will be remembered and celebrated years, even centuries, after Archbishop Saenz and his like-minded patrons and supporters have gone to their heavenly reward.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

God can always raise a sinner



a word for sunday

By Father Albert Shamon

Sunday's Readings: (R3) John 11:1-45. (R1) Ezekiel 37:12-14. (R2) Romans 8:8-11.

The theme of Sunday's readings is a baptismal one: resurrection. Ezekiel speaks of a national resurrection: the restoration of the nation Israel. St. Paul speaks of a double resurrection: from sin now through baptism, which causes the Spirit of God to dwell in us; and from death at the end of life. In the Gospel, Jesus proves he is the master of life and death.

In the four Gospels there are three accounts of Jesus raising up people from the dead. At Bethany, two miles outside Jerusalem, he raises up Lazarus. At Nain, five miles southwest of Nazareth, he raises up a widow's son. At Capernaum, he raises up the 12-year-old daughter of Jairus.

The resurrection of these three differ from the resurrection of Jesus on Easter Sunday. Jesus rose on Easter to a glorious life, symbol of our resurrection after death. But Lazarus, the widow's son, and Jairus' daughter arose from the dead, not to life eternal, but to their former life on earth. Thus their resurrection symbolizes, not our resurrection to eternal life, but the resurrection of sinners from the death of sin through a good confession.

St. Augustine said that these three persons symbolize the three states of sinners. The 12-year-old daughter of Jairus represents those starting on the road to sin. The young man represents those caught in the habit of sin. And Lazarus, the full-grown man, represents those hardened in sin and buried in a life of sin.

The point Augustine makes: No matter how deeply one is entrapped in sin, no matter if one's sin is as red as scarlet or as numerous as the sands of the sea, God's mercy can always free the sinner, raise him up from the death of sin – provided that the sinner, like Mary and Martha, goes to Jesus and uses the sacrament of mercy, confession.

All this is possible because God loves us so much. Four times in the Gospel, John mentions the love of Jesus for Lazarus.

If Jesus loved Mary and Martha and Lazarus so much, why did he let them suffer? Why did he let Lazarus get sick, die and be buried without so much as a single word or message of comfort? He who answered the prayers of a heathen woman; who cured the sick; who, unasked, raised a widow's son from the dead – why did he not hurry to those whom he loved so much? Can we not imagine the hurt of Martha and Mary? "If only you had been here," they said when he finally had come.

Whom God loves, he disciplines for a greater good. He wanted to strengthen the faith of Mary and Martha, of his disciples, and of the Jews who had come to comfort Mary and Martha; and to deepen their joy. Affliction comes, not like the lightning bolt that blasts the tree, but like the strokes of the sculptor on marble, forming it into an image of beauty and loveliness.

At the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus cried out in a loud voice: "Lazarus, come out!" Words are feeble, but in the mouth of God-made-man they are all-powerful, able to produce what they say.

That is what sacraments are: words that produce what they say, because they are spoken by another who acts in persona Christi, who is another Christ. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* introduces its section on sacraments with a mosaic from the catacomb of Sts. Marcellinus and Peter in Rome around the year A.D. 300. It is a picture of the woman with the hemorrhage of blood, and as she touches the hem of Jesus' garment, power from him heals her.

Then the catechism goes on to give this magnificent definition of sacraments. They are, says the catechism, "powers issuing from the body of Christ." What a definition! What wonderful things the sacraments are! How tragic it would be to neglect them, especially Holy Eucharist and confession.

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming, N.Y.

Daily Readings

Monday, Mar. 25
Isaiah 7:10-14; 8:10; Hebrews 10:4-10; Luke 1:26-38

Tuesday, Mar. 26
Numbers 21:4-9; John 8:21-30

Wednesday, Mar. 27
Daniel 3:14-20, 91-92, 95; John 8:31-42

Thursday, Mar. 28
Genesis 17:3-9; John 8:51-59

Friday, Mar. 29
Jeremiah 20:10-13; John 10:31-42

Saturday, Mar. 30
Ezekiel 37:21-28; John 11:45-56