

ROMERO REVISITED

El Salvador 30 years later

STORY AND PHOTOS BY TOM HOCKER



The public grade school of La Palma, El Salvador sits on top of a hill. In its courtyard small children from poor families are gathering. They are graduates dressed in mortarboard caps, gray capes, and white gloves, each one escorted by a proud family member.

Today diplomas will be handed out to

students completing kindergarten and the ninth grade. But first all the students will parade down the hill to attend Mass at the parish church, even though a strong minority attend evangelical churches. There's so much hope and promise today.

I remember my first visit to this town in 1985. At that time the U.S. government sent billions of dollars in military assistance to the Salvadoran regime to fight a widespread insurgency by the National Liberation Front, which was viewed as a communist movement. Two separate acts of violence in El Salvador had shocked the church in 1980.

First, in March, Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador, an outspoken critic of government oppression, was

shot while saying Mass.

Then in December four American church women—Maryknoll Sisters Ita Ford and Maura Clarke, Ursuline Sister Dorothy Kazel, and laywoman Jean Donovan—were abducted, raped, shot, and buried in shallow graves by a death squad of military personnel. This year marks the 30th anniversary of their martyrdom.

Romero served as archbishop from early in 1977 until his death on March 24, 1980. On the day before, in a broadcast of his sermon, he had advised soldiers that their Christian conscience demanded that they disobey military orders contrary to justice. Many politicians and commanders were outraged.

Despite a mild demeanor, Romero's charismatic presence moved many and still does through his writings. Romero spoke out repeatedly to defend his catechists, even as the army and death squads hunted them down. He had no illusion that he would be exempt from this violence.

Shortly before his death Romero accepted an honorary degree from the University of Louvain in Belgium, explaining that the church "becomes incarnate among the poor.... As we draw near to the poor, we find we are gradually uncovering the genuine face of the Suffering Servant of Yahweh.... And therefore the church suffers the fate of the poor which



TOM HOCKER, is a photojournalist and industrial photographer. He sells Salvadoran folk art at thetreeoflifeimports.com.



2009

Kindergarten graduates march proudly down the street to celebrate Mass in La Palma, El Salvador.



The coffin of a child is carried to a cemetery through the streets of San Salvador.

1985

is persecution. Our church glories that it has mingled the blood of its priests, its catechists, and its communities with that of the massacred people.”

Why such a murderous campaign against teachers of religion? The threat they posed to the repressive regime was explained to me by an American missionary serving as a parish priest in the eastern zone of conflict that I visited in 1985.

We sat alone in his living room one evening, and he spoke very quietly. I will never forget his intensity, the restrained grief and rage that he dared not express for fear of his life. Teachers conduct classes, he explained, and they might inspire a new way of thinking to a group that would reinforce each other’s conviction concerning injustice. One by one his teachers simply disappeared or turned up dead. He felt a terrible burden for not being able to protect the members of his community.

Back in 1985, the rugged terrain beyond La Palma harbored a major stronghold of the insurgent forces. The government army sat in a major encampment beside the town, and each street corner was occupied by two or three soldiers with assault rifles and full packs, who settled in for a long day.

Today the bullet holes in the walls have long since been plastered over along the narrow streets. As the graduates walked the five blocks to Mass, the rest of the grades, assembled on the path leading to the church door, applauded vigorously at their arrival.

As I moved about quietly photographing the service, I found myself next to a woman named Cupertino. I first met Cupertino when I visited the capital to observe the 1988 presidential election. She was the maid of Salvadoran artist Francisco Llord, with whom I stayed. While Llord and his family fled back to La Palma, I was entrusted to guard his home and Cupertino, who was then seven months pregnant. We had to fill the bathtub for drinking water while bombs exploded during the night.

Now her son was escorting her niece to the service. At the sign of peace, tears filled my eyes as she and I shook hands.

At the altar stood a picture of Romero, whose presence 30 years after his death remains conspicuously large in El Salvador. I have seen his portrait hung in countless homes. His prominence is unchallenged, though the cause of his sainthood has encountered tremendous political resistance over the intervening years.



2009





Despite the hope today's graduation inspires, Romero's homeland still suffers many of the same troubles. The civil war erupted in the late 1970s because the ruling class of landowners and business leaders used the army to oppress those who protested economic hardship.

Today democracy largely functions, but the economy remains stagnant. With an insufficient number of jobs, people remain destitute. The solution to the huge numbers of unemployed has been to export them. Somewhere between one quarter and one third of all Salvadorans, around 2 million, live abroad, mostly in the United States.

Although more women are traveling now, the majority of emigrants have been men, leaving many of the households among the urban poor and rural areas without men. The amount of money (*remesas*) they send back has become essential to keep the population out of extreme poverty and reached a high in 2007 of more than \$3 billion. However it has fallen by a third since the beginning of the current recession.

In 2001 the Salvadoran government scrapped its national currency and adopted the U.S. dollar. But the large influx of unearned income has driven up the price of food and land. The money fuels consumption, but it is not invested in ways that encourage productivity.

Just as Romero expressed a preferential option for the

poor in the midst of political oppression, I am sure that today he would defend them against economic suffering that forces them from home. He would challenge policies that favor the wealthy and undermine the best efforts of the poor.

As we mark the 30th anniversary of Romero's death this month, we can still hear the piercing cry of the prophet from his small, seemingly insignificant corner of the globe: "One has the heart of the poor when one knows that financial capital, political influence, and power are worthless, and that without God we are nothing. To feel that need of God is faith and conversion."

The civil war that consumed the life of Oscar Romero is largely forgotten, as is the heroism that demands his sainthood.

Romero may be widely venerated, but people have forgotten the oppression he opposed. What is lost is the true courage needed to confront injustice. The latest and grandest version of Romero's tomb reflects his shift into a mythic stature, where his personal example is more obscured and hence less challenging to us today. **USC**



1985

Clockwise, beginning with top: A majority of Salvadoran emigrants are men, leaving women in charge of many poor and rural households.

A Salvadoran army patrol examines my passport before allowing me to journey into an area of active conflict.

The grave of Oscar Romero.