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Romero's message resonates with new generation of Catholics

by Rhina Guidos by Catholic News Service



A boy takes part in a commemoration of Archbishop Oscar Romero near the 30th anniversary of his death March 20, 2010, in San Salvador, El Salvador. (CNS photo/Luis Galdamez, Reuters)

WASHINGTON -- Each spring, the doors of the small church near Candler, close to Asheville in North Carolina, are flung open to let in the burgeoning number of congregants.

Seats fill fast on or around March 24, said Edith Segovia, a parishioner of St. Joan of Arc Church. Increasingly, she sees younger churchgoers arriving to celebrate the life of a man who died before many of them were born.

"They see Monsenor Archbishop Romero as a Christ who walked on this earth," said Segovia, 38, who talks to younger parishioners about Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador, who was killed March 24, 1980.

Segovia, who hails from El Salvador, said she keeps his memory alive to her children, but also to her church's younger parishioners.

Romero was one of about 75,000 people killed during El Salvador's 12-year civil war that ended in 1992.

Despite the years and distance between them and their country, memories of him still flourish among Salvadorans who witnessed the chaos and violence of the war, and his message now resonates with their U.S.-born children.

Take Martha Duenas, 28, of Berkeley, Calif. Her parents left El Salvador a day after Romero was killed while celebrating Mass in a chapel on the grounds of a hospital.

"It touched me," Duenas said about what her parents have told her of his life and death, and how he would plead with soldiers to stop killing.

His story "was something that was alive in my home, growing up," she said in a telephone interview with Catholic News Service.

Armando Garcia, of Swannanoa, N.C., said he, too, heard the stories. Though born in El Salvador, he wasn't influenced by Romero's life until he migrated to the United States.

Garcia, now 28, said when he watched a film about him once he was in the U.S., he "learned to admire his life story. He was a common man and one with defects."

Audio, video and photos have made the archbishop's message more accessible to younger Catholics like Garcia, who tunes in to his homilies on his iPod and often exchanges YouTube presentations about the archbishop with peers.

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Garcia said he was deeply affected by listening to his homilies and watching films about Romero's conversion from a quiet, cerebral archbishop to one whose outreach to the poor led to his death.

Hearing his words "gives you goose bumps," he said.

Even though violence and death was part of the story, Jose Artiga, a Salvadoran who now lives in San Francisco, said he made sure his three U.S.-born sons knew about Romero.

Artiga, executive director of the California-based SHARE Foundation, a nonprofit that promotes an array of causes in El Salvador and for Salvadorans living in the U.S., compared telling the tale of Romero's death to the way others address the Crucifixion.

Such events need to be talked about, he said. Death squads were common in El Salvador at that time, and killings took place daily for any number of reasons but didn't make the news, Artiga said. Because of his position and the fact he was killed at Mass, the archbishop's murder made world headlines, he added.

As each anniversary of his death approached, Artiga and his wife took their sons to Mass, to events that addressed the tragedy but also the good that has come from it over the years, he told CNS.

He also has taken his sons to El Salvador to see where Romero is buried, in a crypt in the Cathedral of San Salvador.

"They saw people praying, placing their petitions," at the crypt, Artiga said, which showed his sons how some Salvadorans still revere him and pray to him to answer their petitions. They could see "Archbishop Romero is inside each one of us," Artiga said.

Elsa Flores Portillo, a 24-year-old college student from Washington, D.C., said her Salvadoran parents have taught her about the archbishop, with her late mother especially talking often about him and his struggle for social justice.

"His legacy had a great influence in her life and she would show it by helping everybody around her," Flores said.

Sometimes that meant her mother urged her or her sisters to help the elderly, give up a seat at church, or just to stop complaining because there were bigger hardships, Flores said.

Flores' own admiration of him deepened after attending events at Sacred Heart Church in Washington, where priests and others would retell the Romero story during commemorations of his life. The parish has a history of tending to Salvadorans who fled during the war.

"I realized that we get distracted with all the entertainment and technology in our lives that we forget that simple acts of kindness can have a positive impact in the lives of others," she told CNS. "Celebrating his life gives us the chance to reflect on our own lives and to ask ourselves, 'What are we doing for society?'"

According to Artiga, the archbishop's story, once shared mostly within Salvadoran families who had affection for him, has spread to universities, groups and communities interested in social justice.

That's how Nancy Kelsey of Detroit learned about him.

Though the 29-year-old is the daughter of a Salvadoran mother and part of her family fled El Salvador because of the civil war, she first heard about his life in details at Creighton University in Omaha, Neb.

Her mother's family suffered a lot of the injustices Romero talked about, including poverty that bordered on slavery, she said.

"I know those were hard times for my family," she said.

During retreats at Creighton, she began reading about his life but also reflecting on his homilies and how they apply to the world today. It is a universal message and one that transcends generations, she said,

because injustice was not confined to El Salvador or that particular period of time.

During difficult times, Kelsey said she draws strength from Romero.

"It reminds me we could all be doing something," she said.

Among young and old, there is support for Romero's canonization. His cause has been under study at the Vatican for several years.

Kelsey, who also is American Indian from the Ottawa and Potawatomi tribes, said she's seeing the excitement among American Indians over the upcoming canonization of Blessed Kateri, an Algonquin and Iroquois American Indian religious laywoman. It would be great to see the same for Romero, she said.

"He's a kind of hero the way (Kateri) is to native people," Kelsey said. "If he isn't made a saint, the Vatican is underestimating his staying power, the message of social justice. It transcends the civil war and it's a universal message."

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