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Remembering the murder of Archbishop Romero

Brendan Butler | Mar. 24, 2013 NCR Today

Throughout the military dictatorships in Latin America from 1950 to 1990, the hierarchies of the Catholic church and heads of Catholic religious orders took up varying positions in relation to the brutal suppression and the crucifixion of their peoples carried out by these dictatorships, whether in Argentina, Brazil or El Salvador.

However, the touchstone by which we should measure these hierarchical responses, or lack of them, should be the person of Msgr. Oscar Romero, archbishop of San Salvador for just three years from 1977 to 1980, when he was assassinated.

He was just a month in office when a Jesuit priest, Rutilio Grande, and his two friends were murdered. The new archbishop demanded a public presidential enquiry into these deaths, and when it wasn't forthcoming, he boycotted the new Salvadoran president's inauguration. When many of his priests were murdered by the dictatorship, he rejoiced, declaring that priests were now a real part of the suffering people of El Salvador by sharing their fate.

He refused to have any security when his life was threatened, stating that the poor of El Salvador had no security, so why should he have this privilege? All but one of his fellow bishops boycotted him, even changing the times and dates of important episcopal conferences without informing Romero. The papal nuncio, Archbishop Emanuele Gerarda, was openly critical of Romero, and Romero wrote to the Vatican complaining that the nuncio had shown himself influenced more by government, diplomatic and business interests than the suffering of the Salvadoran people. Romero was called to Rome twice, and a month before Romero's death, Pope John Paul II chided him for not maintaining unity with the other Salvadoran bishops, one of whom was a colonel in the Salvadoran Armed Forces.

The responses of the various Jesuit provincials and other orders in the subcontinent to the ongoing martyrdom of its people also varied greatly. In Central America, especially through the depths of the sufferings of the people in the 1980s, the Jesuits were fortunate in having a provincial, Fr. Cesar Jerez, who supported his brothers in speaking out loudly and clearly in the defense of human rights. On a visit to Ireland, he showed us the original of the letter he helped Archbishop Romero write to the then-U.S. President Jimmy Carter, demanding an end to the U.S. military support of the Salvadoran Armed Forces, as it was being used, according to Romero, for the repression of his people.

The Jesuit order in El Salvador was an outstanding public defender of the human rights of the Salvadoran people, and Jesuits were Romero's supporters, advisers and spiritual directors and when Romero was killed, these Jesuits continued to denounce the grave violations of human rights. Nine years later, they too ended up as martyrs.

However, the Vatican has, for the last 33 years, refused to recognize Romero or the Jesuits as martyrs and saints, though they were following in the footsteps of their Lord who through the days before his crucifixion continued unflinchingly in his mission of proclaiming the compassionate face of a God of Justice.

March 24, the 33rd anniversary of Romero's murder, could be a watershed. Pope Francis could set the record straight and declare both Romero and his Jesuit brothers as martyrs, true witnesses of Jesus Christ who were not afraid of consequences when they spoke out when they saw not only priests but their poor suffering.

[Brendan Butler is president of the Irish El Salvador Support Committee [1] which began in 1979.]

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