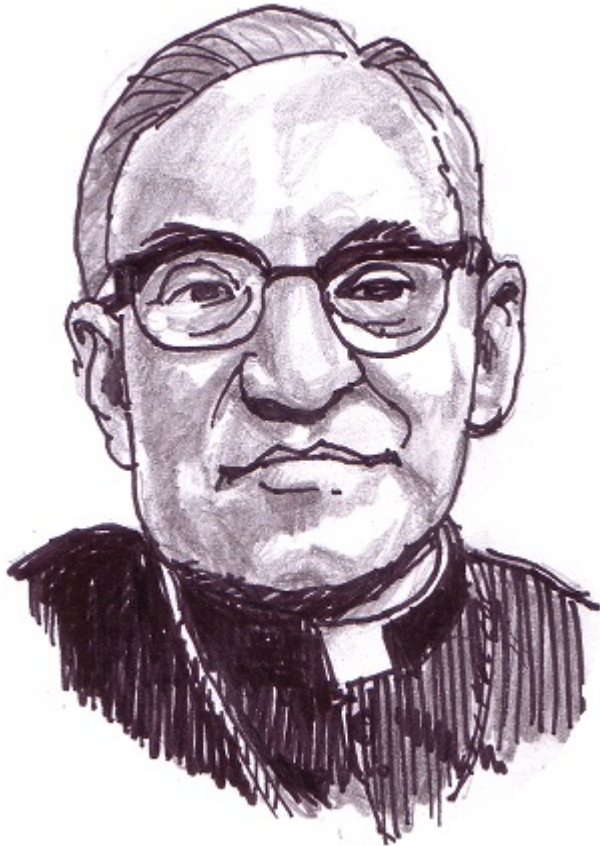


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by Pat Marrin

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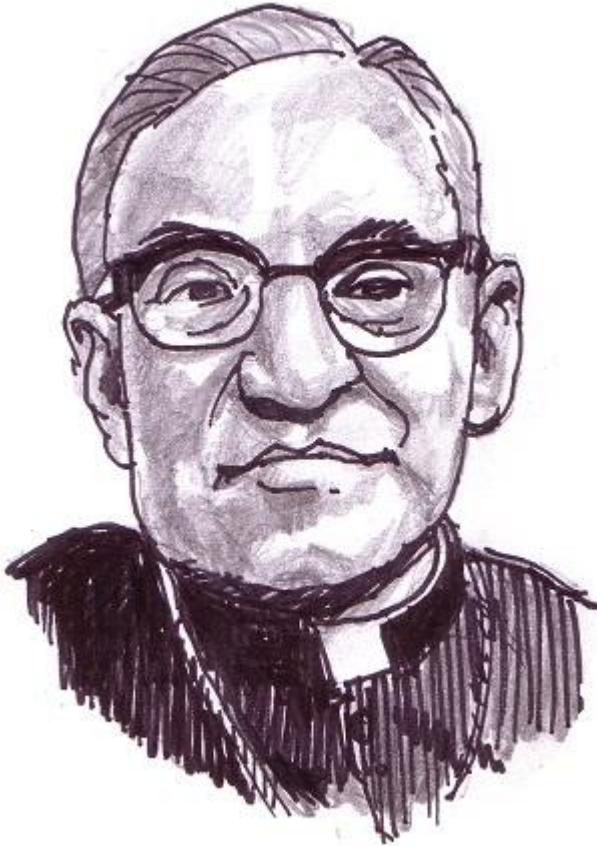
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March 26, 2020

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“With revilement and torture let us put him to the test” (Wisdom 2:19).

*Wis 2:1a, 12-22; John 7:1-2, 10, 25-30*

Last Tuesday the church celebrated the life and death of St. Oscar Romero, archbishop of San Salvador, who was assassinated on March 24, 1980, while saying Mass. Today’s readings highlight an aspect of his martyrdom that can be overlooked because of the sudden, dramatic nature of his death at the altar, and this was the continuous anxiety and fear he endured during his three years as archbishop.

Wisdom describes a figure who is subjected to slander and threats and plotted against by enemies who seek to test his claims of special favor from God. This persecution is mirrored in the treatment of Jesus in the fourth Gospel as the authorities in Jerusalem seek his arrest and death.

Romero was appointed archbishop because of his conservative theology at a time when the church was expected to be an impartial player between an oppressive military government and a growing protest and insurgency by the campesinos, labor leaders and activists pushing for change. As he witnessed the violence claiming

thousands of civilians and members of his own clergy, Romero emerged as a courageous advocate for the poor and a decisive leader who lived with vilification and death threats up until his death.

Perhaps Romero's deepest suffering came from his own bishops, some of whom engaged with the apostolic nuncio in a campaign of calumny that went all the way to Rome, accusing Romero of supporting revolution and siding with communist agitators. In the weeks before his death, during a visit with Pope John Paul II in Rome, he was scolded for not working with the government to resolve the conflicts.

Alone and criticized for distorting the spiritual role of the church, Romero found solace among the people of El Salvador, who sheltered in his pastoral care for them and his fearless defense of the Gospel in his weekly homilies, broadcast by radio throughout Central America. Rejecting the idea he should flee the country, Romero faced his own fear of being kidnapped and tortured, praying for a sudden death, a hope that was answered by a bullet to the chest as he began the offertory prayers during his final Mass.

After almost four decades of controversy and delays in recognizing his holiness and orthodoxy, Romero was declared a saint by Pope Francis on October 14, 2018. His death during Lent in March of 1980 is now a reminder to the universal church and to all believers of the cost of discipleship. His long, three-year martyrdom also reminds us that our commitment to the Gospel is not just about how we might die for the faith but how we must live it every day in our own circumstances and challenges on behalf of others.

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