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RESEMBRANCE

ASSASSINATION

OF A SAINT

THE PLOT TO MURDER OSCAR ROOSEVELT AND
THE QUEST TO BRING HIS KILLERS TO JUSTICE

BY

Assassination of a Saint

THE PLOT TO MURDER ÓSCAR ROMERO
AND THE QUEST TO BRING
HIS KILLERS TO JUSTICE

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Assassination of a Saint

*For the voiceless of El Salvador, for whom
Monseñor Romero gave his life*

*For my parents, whose unwavering love and support
allowed me to follow my passion*

PREFACE

SAN SALVADOR, EL SALVADOR—MARCH 24, 1980

On the surface, the advertisement buried in the middle pages of El Salvador's largest dailies was no more than a notice about a Catholic mass. A service that Monday night, the announcement said, would commemorate the first anniversary of the death of Sara Meardi de Pinto, the mother of Jorge Pinto, an outspoken publisher of a small Salvadoran newspaper. The ad began with a quote from Doña Sarita, as she was affectionately known, saying that her greatest hope in life had been to foster unity, love, and understanding. Farther down the page, a list of families sponsoring the mass comprised the elite sector of society from which Doña Sarita came. The names were instantly recognizable to any Salvadoran as a roster of the rich and famous who controlled the nation's economy. Doña Sarita, though, had led a charitable life.

The announcement included an invitation to the mass, to be officiated by the archbishop of San Salvador, the country's capital and largest city, in the chapel of the Divina Providencia hospital at 6:00 P.M. Óscar Romero, the ad's unnamed archbishop who would lead the mass, was troubled by the announcement. He was well aware that paid advertisements—*campos pagados*—were a common mode of political speech in El Salvador, and in those bloody days they carried grave significance. "Terrorists" were often unmasked in bold typeface and "fascists" were denounced in block letters. Even though El Salvador was overwhelmingly Catholic, Romero himself was a frequent target of print attacks because he dared to denounce the rampant injustices in the country. His detractors regularly called Romero a Marxist, and one publication ludicrously claimed that he ran his own terrorist cell. Now the newspaper ad broadcast to the entire country—and, more importantly, to the extremists who wanted him dead—Romero's precise location at 6:00 P.M. that night.

Romero learned about the announcement early in the day through a call from an alarmed supporter. As he hung up the phone, Romero tried to hide his concern, but the Carmelite nuns who worked with him at Divina Providencia, the tiny hospital for cancer patients where he lived, urged the archbishop to cancel the mass that night. The risk was too great, they said. The nuns knew Romero had spent the last three years in constant peril for refusing to stay quiet in the face of persecution by El Salvador's military. Even the murders of fellow priests did not keep Romero from denouncing the widespread repression. In spite of his fear, Romero's response to the nuns' caution was, as always, "We're in God's hands."¹

Around six that evening, the doors of the chapel's north entrance were open to worshippers as well as a cooling breeze. With the sun setting behind Divina Providencia's lush tropical grounds, Archbishop Romero walked the short distance from his humble living quarters to the church. Draped in purple Lenten vestments, with short hair and outdated brow-line glasses, Romero began the liturgy while a few latecomers took seats in the back. Despite the ad in the newspapers, no more than two dozen people were there, a contrast to the hundreds who had attended Romero's Sunday mass the day before and the hundreds of thousands who listened to him on the radio. Romero led the small congregation through biblical readings and a recital of the 23rd Psalm before reaching the homily, the part of the service that allowed Romero to preach about the deplorable conditions in El Salvador by tying the people's misery to lessons from the Bible. Romero's Sunday sermons were legendary for their candor about the murders and torture committed throughout the country, but in the Monday memorial service, Romero gave a more measured homily. He spoke intimately about Doña Sarita and told the audience, "We know that every effort to improve a society, especially when injustice and sin are so present, is an effort that God blesses, that God wants, that God demands from us."² These were words that guided Romero's life.

As Romero preached, a freelance photographer, Eulalio Pérez, arrived at the chapel in a taxi. He entered through the main door, sat in the second-to-last row, and prepared his camera, completely unaware that the next photos he would take would soon appear around the world. At the same time, a car turned onto the long, tree-lined driveway leading into the Divina Providencia complex. The Volkswagen circled around the parking lot and came to an idle in front of the chapel, its red roof visible to a student looking out the window of a nearby building but not to the congregants inside the church. Their attention was on Romero as he finished the homily and turned to the com-

munion hosts and wine on the altar, saying, "May this body immolated and this blood sacrificed for humanity nourish us also, so that we may give our body and blood to suffering and pain like Christ, who did so not for himself but to give justice and peace to his people." The words were prophetic. "Let us unite closely in faith and hope in this moment of prayer for Doña Sarita and ourselves—"

A deafening explosion crackled through the chapel. The worshippers threw themselves to the ground, all intimately familiar with the sound of gunfire. Several covered Jorge Pinto, assuming the bullet was intended for him. Some thought they heard a second shot. Within seconds, Eulalio Pérez jumped up, snapping photos. Pérez was so quick and so bold, in fact, that the congregants would later suspect him of being the assassin, a gun perhaps hidden inside his camera. The other churchgoers slowly raised their heads, not sure they wanted to see what horror awaited them. A woman ran to a window wondering if the shooter was still outside, while others looked toward the open door of the main entrance. A nun in another building heard the shooting and raced in terror to the chapel.

Archbishop Romero, the actual target, slumped to the floor behind the altar. A splintered bullet had already severed his aorta. A group rushed to the altar and, finding Romero on his side, tried to roll him onto his back. The blood gushed from Romero's mouth and nose, streaming down his face and pooling on the floor. A crucifix hanging on the wall above, showing the suffering Jesus nailed to the cross, provided a disturbing parallel to the tragedy unfolding below. A nun put her ear to Romero's chest and another knelt in desperate prayer while Pérez captured it all on film. Outside, the assassin's car drove quickly away.

A man offered his truck to take Romero to the hospital. The shocked congregants hurried his limp frame outside, lowered the tailgate on the yellow pickup, and pushed the dying archbishop into the camper. A nun and a few Divina Providencia employees jumped in. As they drove away, though, it was already too late. Romero was dead before they reached the hospital. A guiding light in El Salvador's growing darkness was extinguished. The nun would later say that Romero uttered his last words in the back of the truck, "May God have mercy on the assassins."³

INTRODUCTION

Óscar Romero is one of the towering heroes in El Salvador's history whose influence transcends the borders of that small country. Romero's impact can be measured quantitatively, by the 100,000 mourners who risked their lives to attend his funeral, or by the disturbing truth that his assassination accelerated El Salvador's descent into civil war. That conflict ended over two decades ago, but it still permeates every aspect of Salvadoran life, and Romero is honored in every corner of the country. Schools, highways, and the international airport carry his name. Romero's legacy spans the globe, with dignitaries like Barack Obama paying homage at his tomb. A statue of Romero now stands next to Martin Luther King's in Westminster Abbey, and his bust joins those of Mother Teresa and Rosa Parks in Washington, D.C.'s National Cathedral. Even after two decades of withering on the vine of Vatican politics, a campaign to name Romero a saint in the Catholic Church is succeeding. Pope Francis, the first Latin American pontiff, shepherded Romero's cause and declared him a martyr of the church. In May 2015, 300,000 followers stood in the San Salvador sun to witness Romero's beatification. His canonization, the final step to sainthood, is imminent.

For all his notoriety, Romero's time in the spotlight lasted only three years, from 1977 to 1980, when he served as archbishop of San Salvador, but they were years of tremendous upheaval. In 1977, a military dictatorship ruled the country and would soon hand over the government to another military leader under the guise of an election that was rigged from the start. The Salvadoran armed forces maintained power in this way for decades and justified their brute force and perpetual rule with the never-ending need to stamp out Communism. The specter of Marxism dated back to the 1930s, when the military massacred tens of thousands of Salvadoran peasants

(*campesinos*) while putting down an uprising engineered in part by the Communist Party of El Salvador. But the ideology's appeal to certain Salvadorans in 1932, just as in 1977, had little to do with Soviet global hegemony and instead emanated from a hope to alleviate the dire socioeconomic inequalities in El Salvador. Throughout the twentieth century, a small, intermarried clique of moneyed elite, known as the oligarchs, dominated the Salvadoran economy, particularly the critical coffee sector, and benefitted from a system that denied *campesinos* their basic rights and the possibility of overcoming subjugation and poverty. The Salvadoran military, through an implicit agreement, defended the oligarchs' economic interests and used violence to maintain the status quo.

By 1977, however, the military's ability to suppress dissent was weakening. Social movements of all kinds—labor unions, *campesino* groups, teachers' federations, church organizations—more openly defied the threat of violence or imprisonment and called for change. Strikes, marches, and occupations of buildings increasingly paralyzed the country. At the same time that these groups advocated change, bands of armed guerrillas carried out a small-scale insurgency through bombings, kidnappings, and assassinations. These tactics were successful enough to convince some oligarchs that the armed forces could no longer protect them. Hard-line military officers, many of them trained by the United States, agreed and stepped up clandestine operations to murder and torture people they deemed "Communists."

Romero became archbishop of San Salvador in February 1977 not as a champion for reform but through the support of oligarchs and conservative forces in the Catholic Church. El Salvador was an overwhelmingly Catholic country in which the archbishop held enormous sway on the national stage, and tradition dictated that the Vatican's ambassador consult the military government and members of the oligarchy before the Vatican chose the new archbishop. These power brokers considered Romero a political and theological traditionalist who was too cautious to advocate major changes. Their perception of Romero was particularly significant because doctrinal changes in the Catholic Church during the previous two decades, starting with the Second Vatican Council from 1962 to 1965, had led to a radical rethinking of how the church should function. Many priests, particularly in countries like El Salvador where millions lived in poverty, took these directives to mean they should work toward the transformation of society and elimination of the underlying causes of inequality. This movement came to be known as Liberation Theology, but to many oligarchs and other conservatives, it

smacked of Marxism. In 1977, the elite saw Romero as a safe choice to keep the “radical” priests in check.

Only three weeks after Romero became archbishop, gunmen murdered one of Romero’s friends, Father Rutilio Grande, a trailblazing advocate of Liberation Theology. Grande, a Jesuit priest, had worked closely with *campesinos* to help them understand the Bible and organize themselves to advocate for their rights. These activities and Grande’s passionate preaching were enough for right-wing extremists to brand him a Communist and a target for assassination. Grande’s grisly murder affected Romero deeply, and the new archbishop took immediate, public action that belied his conservative image. Angering those who had supported him, Romero canceled all the Sunday masses throughout the archdiocese in favor of a single mass in San Salvador—a *misa única*—to show solidarity among the clergy.

From that point on, as repression continued against the church in the form of murder, torture, and threats, Romero spoke out forcefully, and his reputation grew among progressive priests, nuns, and laypeople who initially had opposed him. Romero also became a hero to Salvadoran *campesinos* as he forcefully advocated for the plight of the poor, the protection of human rights, and the need for nonviolent change in El Salvador. He repeatedly criticized the Salvadoran military for torturing and killing innocent civilians and denounced the oligarchs for underwriting the violence. An eloquent speaker, Romero used the pulpit masterfully, in particular through his Sunday homilies that were broadcast around the nation. As the repression and Romero’s stature grew, Salvadorans dubbed Romero the Voice of the Voiceless.

Romero lived in constant danger, receiving numerous death threats and enduring relentless slander. Oligarch-owned newspapers painted Romero and other priests as Communists, terrorists, and traitors to El Salvador. In the face of these attacks, Romero became more strident as the bloodshed increased and the country fell apart. In February 1980, Romero wrote—and read in public—a letter to Jimmy Carter chastising the U.S. president for sending aid to the brutal Salvadoran military. On March 23, 1980, in what would be his final Sunday homily, Romero went further than ever before and called on Salvadoran soldiers to disobey the commands of their tyrannical superiors. Invoking the sanctity of God’s law, Romero ordered them, “¡Cese la represión!” (Stop the repression!).¹ The next day, as Romero said mass in the Divina Providencia chapel, an assassin ended his life with a single bullet through the chest.

Despite Romero’s standing and the substantial evidence against the men who killed him, no one in El Salvador went on trial for Romero’s murder.

Violence, dirty tricks, a lack of political will, and the eventual enactment of an amnesty law giving immunity to the authors of the war's worst atrocities derailed the few attempts made to prosecute Romero's case. Separate investigations by journalists, human rights activists, the Catholic Church, and others resulted in the publication of detailed conclusions about the crime, but no convictions followed.

In 2001, a Salvadoran man working with a U.S.-based nonprofit organization, the Center for Justice & Accountability (CJA), got the surprise of his life in a lawyer's office in San Francisco when he spotted one of Romero's killers. An article later that year in the *Miami Herald* reported that the perpetrator, Álvaro Saravia, now lived in California. CJA, with its mandate to bring torturers and war criminals to justice, launched an investigation that gathered steam in 2002, the same year I joined the organization as a twenty-six-year-old staff attorney. The previous investigations into Romero's murder, including one by a United Nations Truth Commission, provided the primary evidence on which we relied, much of it implicating Saravia in the crime. These investigations showed that Saravia belonged to a paramilitary group run by one of El Salvador's most famous but enigmatic figures, Roberto D'Aubuisson, who had close connections to the oligarchs and later founded El Salvador's most successful political party. At CJA, our immediate goal was to harness the existing evidence and bring Saravia to justice in the United States. To do so, we would examine his role as a member of D'Aubuisson's "death squad," a term that described the phenomenon of active and discharged military figures, and sometimes civilians, working in small groups to carry out assassinations, bombings, and other violence. Our broader objective, however, was to help expose the truth and possibly stimulate change in El Salvador. This required an investigation of the oligarchs suspected of aiding the death squads and specifically the Romero assassination.

For over a year, my colleagues and I conducted a full-scale inquiry to locate witnesses who had information about the functioning and financing of the death squad that killed Romero. In partnership with Salvadoran colleagues, we interviewed people who had given secret testimony decades earlier and found others who had never spoken. We eventually put Saravia on trial in a U.S. court, but much of the evidence we collected never came out publicly, for reasons that this book will explain.

I was surprised to discover during our investigation that no one had ever written a book about Romero's murder despite the numerous volumes on his life and theology. This book presents and synthesizes the most relevant infor-