

NASSAU COUNTY RED MASS
MOST REVEREND JOHN O. BARRES, STD, JCL
OCTOBER 2, 2018

On Sunday, October 14 – just twelve days from now -- Pope Francis will canonize Blessed Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador. The story of Archbishop Romero provides a shining light of hope in a time in which we are confronted with so many problems both in the Church and in society.

We have learned of deacons, priests, bishops and even Cardinals who engaged in scandalous behavior; and we have seen the foundations of our civil society rocked by increasing conflict and rancor.

Nearly four decades ago in El Salvador, in a society in which self-interest and *raison d'etat* had become paramount, Archbishop Romero showed the world how a successor to the Apostles should lead. He died as a witness to the truths of the Catholic Faith, but most especially he died proclaiming Catholicism's focus on the inherent dignity of every human being.

Archbishop Oscar Romero was the Archbishop of San Salvador, the capital of the small Central American nation of El Salvador, then racked by civil war. At 6:25 pm on March 24, 1980, the Archbishop was celebrating Mass at the chapel of the Divina Providencia Cancer Hospital when, during his homily, a gunman entered and shot him in the heart.

Archbishop Romero was murdered because of his insistent demands that the poor and marginalized be treated with dignity and respect, even in the midst of a bitter civil war. His courageous words proved to be intolerable to those who worshipped worldly power and success, and whose faith in Christ fell far below their desire to eliminate an inconvenient voice appealing to their consciences.

Archbishop Romero died a Catholic martyr for human rights and human dignity, and as a courageous advocate of the poor. Surrounded by war, he was a humble peacemaker; surrounded by a culture of death, he was a brave defender of the Culture of Life.

As a Catholic martyr, Archbishop Romero made a holy sacrifice of his life as he celebrated the Holy Sacrifice of the Catholic Mass.

He teaches us, with his mystical embrace of the Pascal Mystery during the last Mass he would ever celebrate, how we should live the rhythm of the Catholic Mass in every dimension of our lives.

The rhythm of the Catholic Mass mysteriously gives us a courageous balance and equilibrium during times of crisis – whether it is the crisis we face in our Church, crises we face in our families, in our professional or personal lives, or the crisis looming over our national judicial system.

In his Letter to the Galatians, St. Paul describes the work of the Holy Spirit: “... the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified their flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also follow the Spirit.” [Gal 5:22-25]

Archbishop Romero, though he lived a different vocation and at a different time of history, shares much in common with St. Thomas More.

For instance, listen to this description of St. Thomas More by St. John Paul II in his year 2000 Apostolic Letter proclaiming him to be the patron of statesmen, politicians and lawyers:

“Unwavering in this rigorous moral stance, he (this English statesman) placed his own public activity at the service of the person, especially if that person was weak or poor; he dealt with social controversies with a superb sense of fairness; he was vigorously committed to favoring and defending the family; he supported the all-round education of the young. His profound detachment from honors and wealth, his serene and joyful humility, his balanced knowledge of human nature and of the vanity of success, his certainty of judgement rooted in faith: these

all gave him that confident inner strength that sustained him in adversity and in the face of death. His sanctity shone forth in his martyrdom, but it had been prepared by an entire life of work devoted to God and neighbor.” [*E Sancti Thomae Mori*, 4]

While this passage describes the legacy of the martyr and patron of statesmen, politicians and lawyers, St. Thomas More, it could also be applied word for word to the life, death, and legacy of Blessed Archbishop Oscar Romero.

Martyrs like More and Romero have a laser beam focus on the Will of God rather than on transitory human honors; a laser beam focus on the eternal treasures of heaven rather than on the fading and illusory treasures of this world. Because they are radically humble, they are also radically courageous.

With lives immersed completely in Christ, they are always consistent and coherent in the public square. They embrace the mystery of the Cross and Christ’s love rather than trying to control the mystery or refashion it. They allow the Splendor of Christ’s Truth to shine through them, first to their own times, and then to all of subsequent history.

St. Thomas More, the patron of statesmen, politicians and lawyers, your patron, would want us to celebrate with all we have the Canonization of the Martyr Blessed Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero on October 14.

Here are some ways we can do precisely that:

1) We can reflect on the heroic life and sanctity of Blessed Archbishop Oscar Romero. We can draw on his humility and his confidence in the Holy Spirit. We can draw on his courage for the crises we face in life. We can read some of his homilies and pastoral letters or, perhaps, even a biography of him.

For example, in Robert Royal’s book, *The Catholic Martyrs of the Twentieth Century: A Comprehensive World History*, the thirteenth chapter is entitled “Murder in the Cathedral: Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero of El Salvador and Some Latin American Martyrs”. Royal’s entire book is an especially helpful overview because it shows the completely global nature of martyrdom in the 20th Century. Each and every chapter demonstrates how warped philosophies and ideologies turned human history in tragic directions with

devastating consequences that countless martyrs, time and again, stood up against in every part of the world.

The Splendor of Truth illumines the path of human history, and it illumines the paths of the martyrs.

2) We can have conversations with the members of our beautiful El Salvadoran communities about the effect Blessed Archbishop Romero has had on their Catholic Faith, their parishes and their country. We can listen to the oral tradition passed on by their families and communities about him, and we can seek their advice on how to live in a more intense way in the United States the spirit of this new saint. This is a rich and important exchange that we need to have with our more than 100,000 Salvadorans on Long Island.

3) We can engage in ecumenical and interfaith dialogue and prayer. The ecumenical and interfaith opportunities that will come from this canonization can be summarized by the fact that Archbishop Romero is one of the ten 20th Century martyrs depicted in statues above the Great West Door of Westminster Abbey in London. In addition, there are also many atheists and agnostics who admire the human rights legacy of Archbishop Romero. So, we have a great and natural entrée into discussions that may lead us to explore together the philosophical and theological foundations of Romero's courageous conclusions and moral stands.

4) We can take yet another opportunity to connect the Canonization, in a spirit of pastoral charity, to the promotion of human rights and global justice, and to a call for comprehensive immigration reform for our nation. This reform must be built on the principles of the dignity of the human person, social justice, the sanctity of human life and the family, and a Good Samaritan love for the poor.

5) We can promote a Culture of Life as a response to gang violence locally on Long Island, gang violence nationally, from New York to Los Angeles, and gang violence internationally, as seen in the drug cartels of the world. We can confront the Culture of Death with the Culture of Life by continuing to comfort and support grieving families who have lost young teenagers to gang violence, by providing our young people outstanding Catholic formation and

opportunities for Catholic education, and by appealing for the conversion of the hearts, minds and souls of gang members who live in a spiral of suicide of the soul.

6) Archbishop Romero once said: “The most profound social revolution is the serious, supernatural, interior reform of a Christian.”

Blessed Romero is an ecumenical and interreligious figure of inspiration, known for his courage, his humanity and his solidarity with the poor. What is often forgotten is that he had those attributes precisely because he was a deeply humble man and pastor who was profoundly committed to the Sacrament of Penance in his personal life, and who vigorously promoted it among the people he served.

Blessed Romero understood both the power of conversion that comes from the Sacrament of Penance, and how that conversion could help provide the social change El Salvador desperately needed.

Like Blessed Romero, when we embrace personal conversion in the Sacrament of Penance, we open ourselves to the social changes needed in our time and our place in history. We begin to better understand our own role in welcoming strangers as we follow Jesus’ call and build a genuine culture of life and civilization of love.¹

7) Blessed Archbishop Romero was no stranger to anguish and pain in Church life. We can ask his intercession for the healing of survivors of abuse by clergy and for a new and powerful experience of Church reform. This reform should be grounded in holiness, mission and a commitment to *dramatic missionary growth* as we seek to bring the saving Truth of Christ to the entire world, and to renew faith in it within the entire Church.

During these turbulent times we know that Christ has forgotten neither us nor His Church. We can be certain that the tongues of flame of the Holy Spirit are descending freshly and constantly on each one of us, as we embrace the

¹ Bishop Barres’ September 21, 2017 St. John’s University Founder’s Week Convocation Keynote Address entitled “The Relationship between Catholic Sacramental Theology and Catholic Social Justice Teaching: The Sacrament of Penance in Service of ‘Welcoming the Stranger’”.

mysterious power of the Cross, in the context of a new moment of reform for our Church at every level.

Thank you for your commitment to the Word of God and to the Body and Blood of Christ. In his Apostolic Exhortation, the *Sacrament of Charity*, Pope Benedict reminds us that every reform in the history of the Church is connected to a rediscovery of the life-changing, Church-changing and World-changing truth of the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist.

It is the Eucharist and the sacrificial rhythm of the Mass which grounded the courageous spirits of St. Thomas More, a faithful layman and family man, and Blessed Archbishop Romero, an ordained priest, bishop and servant of God's people.

Both lives demonstrate the potential for us, as individuals and working together, to grow in personal holiness and to inspire that purifying holiness within the Church and throughout the world.

It was the Eucharist and the sacrificial rhythm of the Mass which guided and illumined a Catholic statesman, judge and lawyer's witness in the public square, and a Catholic Archbishop who would not be silent in the face of injustice even to the shedding of his blood.

It is the Eucharist and the sacrificial rhythm of the Mass that guides and illumines each one of us in our responsibilities and decision-making in this moment of history.

And so, in anticipation of October 14, 2018:

Mary, Queen of Martyrs, pray for us!

Archbishop Saint Oscar Arnulfo Romero, pray for us!

St. Thomas More, patron of statesmen, politicians and lawyers, pray for us!

All Martyrs of the Americas, pray for us!

