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Transnational Religious Pluralism and Identity Formation: Oscar Romero and Salvadoran
Diaspora After the Civil War

A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of the University of Denver and the Iliff School of Theology Joint PhD
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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

By

Kristian A. Diaz

August 2022

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Acknowledgments

For Luis, Maggie, and Angie

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Chapter 1: The Lasting Memory of Sacrifice: Oscar Romero and the Salvadoran People

The thunderous roar of the spirit-filled crowd could be heard from blocks away. The beatification mass of Oscar Romero, slain archbishop of El Salvador, filled the streets with a celebratory clamor. Celebrants carried photographs of loved ones they lost during the civil war and wore tee shirts purchased from street vendors with Romero's face emblazoned on the front, the face of the future saint staring out protectively. The streets were crowded to a dangerous degree and the sun shined on the heads of the celebrants beneath a sky that was a picture-perfect blue. Attendees climbed the wooden lamp poles that were wrapped with thick, black electric wires to capture a photograph with their phones. Riders on small, clunky scooters shuttled in more tee shirts, snacks, and other merchandise to vendors who lined the streets. The ebullient scene was surreal and, for me, dissonant: it spoke of an indifference to the profound violence that had taken place in those very streets three decades ago, a violence now seemingly masked or hidden in the very celebration of a man who those present believed fought tirelessly for them, who saw their suffering when others denied it.

The ceremony began a few minutes past its scheduled time on that warm morning of May 23, 2015, at Monumento al Divino Salvador del Mundo Plaza. The amplifiers thundered to life with the sounds of old church bells. The crowd then erupted in cheers.

Folks dressed in their finest suits, shorts, tee shirts, tennis shoes, sombreros, and baseball caps seemed to tremble as the ceremony commenced. Attendees waved pictures, papers, and handkerchiefs as they celebrated in unison. The man they came to honor was, in his very essence, their celebration. For his sacrifice and courage to speak on behalf of the disenfranchised, he became known as the “voice of the voiceless,” and had long assumed a role as their unofficial Catholic saint. Along with beatification ceremony came the devotees’ joy, bewilderment, fear, loneliness, sorrow, grief, wonder, and faith. Attendees were fully aware that they were one step closer to having their first official Salvadoran Catholic saint: San Oscar Romero.¹

And as bells rang throughout the streets surrounding the Monumento al Divino Salvador del Mundo Plaza, families, reporters, and religious leaders from a global range of different faiths began a process that many Salvadoran Catholics had hoped and anticipated for decades since his death—their archbishop was finally being officially recognized. This beatification mass was a moment for Salvadoran Catholics to demonstrate pilgrimage, public devotion, and reaffirmation of their faith. It was a moment for the people of El Salvador.

Romero as a Discursive Symbol: Statement of Purpose and Research Question

This project considers the cognitive dissonance experienced by Salvadoran Catholics as civil war violence and their Catholic faith came face-to-face with Romero’s path towards canonization gathered momentum. Through binational, ethnographic

¹ Jesuit priest, Rutilio Grande, is in the process to be the next Salvadoran saint. The canonization process began in 2014 and continues.

observation and interviews, I gathered diverse and sometimes contradictory perspectives of local Salvadorans, transnational pilgrims at the celebration of Romero's beatification, and Salvadoran Catholics in Los Angeles. I center the beatification event rather than the canonization mass at the Vatican two years later, in 2018, because my primary concern is the meaning Romero holds for Salvadorans themselves, including those living in the United States. The Vatican event was for a global audience, spoken mostly in Latin and characterized by a quiet pomp and circumstance that conforms to elite Vatican culture. The canonization mass was led by Pope Francis and celebrated the canonization of five European Catholic figures, including Mother Teresa and Pope Paul VI. Romero would be the only Latin American religious figure to be canonized at the celebration on October 14, 2018. The Vatican canonization mass took place halfway around the world from the Salvadoran people who first loved him and held him as protector. In San Salvador, Romero's countrymen celebrated his beatification alongside the religious authorities from the Vatican. While the canonization cemented Romero as a Catholic saint, the beatification ceremony was a uniquely and specifically Salvadoran celebration, making evident the unresolved issues that continue to distress El Salvador's population.

Through the beatification and canonization, the Catholic Church sanctioned Romero's role as a martyr. Today, many Salvadorans continue to perceive Romero as a revolutionary figure who struggled to bring about socio-economic justice. At the same time, the hierarchy of the Catholic Church has never been comfortable with Romero's critique of the Salvadoran government, nor have official, hagiographic narratives accounted for the strong disapproval Romero received from colleagues within the

Salvadoran Catholic Church for actions that made him an enemy to the elite and a hero to the suffering masses. There are many excellent, scholarly biographies of Romero, including several of a celebratory nature that seem to support his canonization. However, this dissertation is neither a biography nor a hagiography. This dissertation is an investigation into the lived religious lives of Salvadoran people, including Salvadoran migrants in Los Angeles, through their complex relationship to Oscar Romero. While controversial at times, Romero's impression on El Salvador's history continues to play a role in the religious lives of Salvadoran Catholics. This project examines and contrasts the sanitized narrative of Romero with the unresolved legacies of violence that continue to plague Salvadorans. This dissertation analyzed interviews with 20 women and 7 men from El Salvador and the United States to understand the role of Monsignor Oscar Romero's role in their lives before and after the civil war. The figure of Monsignor Romero continues to impact the lives and religious faith of Salvadoran Catholics as they reached the borders of the United States. Romero's canonization cannot, in the final analysis, resolve or reconcile the ongoing legacies of violence and trauma that were the primary context of Romero's own life and brief episcopacy.

Although his authority was confined to El Salvador, Romero's work against injustice and the inhumane treatment of people has stretched his legacy beyond the borders of his home country. The memory of Romero and the memories of those lost during the civil war are present throughout the Americas and the ongoing pursuit for justice is now stronger than ever—especially as violence against migrants continues to grow from El Salvador to the United States. Today, his image and influence can be found

in large Latino communities from Los Angeles to Washington D.C. A statue of Romero now overlooks worshippers at Westminster Abbey. He has become a figure for justice. It is therefore appropriate that many Salvadorans viewed the beatification as a step towards justice, not only for their slain archbishop but also for themselves.

Ethnography in a Los Angeles-Salvadoran Vein

This dissertation is an ethnography, a method of academic study that gathers research from first-hand accounts. The process of conducting ethnographic research revealed shared experiences with my own and placed me directly as an insider. As an insider, I refer to a historical connection born of shared culture, nationality, and religious affiliation. The themes and questions I address here emerge from the strands of religious faith, culture, and national belonging that defined my upbringing as a Salvadoran in Los Angeles.

Being part of the Salvadoran Catholic community in Los Angeles, I was able to enter spaces closed or inaccessible to non-Salvadorans. Having lived in the same neighborhoods and while nurturing strong kin relationships; my efforts to bring these narratives to the forefront of this research were eased by my ability to relate to Salvadoran Angelinos through our shared faith and nationality. Thus, this project has resonance with Robert Orsi's insider research on Italian American immigrants practicing old-country Catholic traditions in New York City:

“Fieldwork proceeds through relationships. This means that something that was not there before -understanding, memories, disappointments, and so on, hidden,

unacknowledged, unformulated, or even unknown – becomes present in the exchanges as people tell their stories to another person who listens to them and responds.”²

As an insider, I accessed the complex and meaningful connections that Salvadoran Catholics have to Romero in the face of forced migration and civil war. By reconnecting to a shared history, I can demonstrate a richer and more nuanced context.

This is not to say that I had unhindered access to Salvadoran communities. During my research in San Salvador, I occupied the position of a relative outsider because I grew up geographically distant from my family’s country of origin. Also, perhaps to move beyond or to protect me from histories of trauma, my parents did not share stories with me about El Salvador, and I speak broken Spanish. Being American-born with less than fluent Spanish-speaking skills, it took me somewhat longer to build trust with some interviewees. However, once that trust was built, interviewees freely spoke about Romero, their migration, and their decision to remain or leave the Catholic church.

Research for this project led me back to where my parents shopped and did business in the late 1980s and early 1990s in Los Angeles at stores that were owned by Salvadoran refugees. Echo Park, MacArthur Park, and West Adams remain hamlets of Los Angeles that are also Salvadoran cultural, economic, and religious centers. As a child, they were home to me, and the face of Romero was familiar, almost ever present in Salvadoran communities, although I did not understand for a time who Monsignor

² Orsi, Robert. *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950 3rd edition*. New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2010. xliii

Romero was. Eventually, in high school, I began to ask those around me. Absent in the answers I received and the conversations that ensued were the devastating violence of the civil war, and the crippling poverty and outward migration that led my parents to leave for the United States.³ Yet everyone seemed to have an opinion about who this unofficial saint was and what he stood for. While recalling the person of Romero, eventually came stories of leaving El Salvador, memories of those who had been lost to war, and the migration stories that have become increasingly violent and dangerous since the decade when my parents crossed the borders from El Salvador to the United States. On the few occasions that my family returned to El Salvador, I was further insulated from the most difficult and painful histories of our country. To me, El Salvador of my childhood was a strange land with indescribably beautiful, richly fragrant jungle. My parents worked to protect me from the historical trauma our country had suffered.

By bridging these memories into a scholarly forum, I intend to bring awareness to the study of Salvadoran religion in the United States, where most research on Latino religions to date has focused on Mexican American and Caribbean American religious practice. There is a small body of academic literature that considers Salvadoran American religion beyond the Sanctuary movement.⁴ Empowered by ethnographic methods, I lay

³ Abrego, Leisy J. *Sacrificing Families: Navigating Laws, Labor, and Love Across Borders*. Stanford University Press, 2014; Baker-Cristales, Beth. *Salvadoran Migration to Southern California: Redefining El Hermano Legano*. University Press of Florida, 2004; Eileen Truax. *We Built the Wall: How the US Keeps Out Asylum Seekers from Mexico, Central America and Beyond*. Verso, 2018.

⁴ See Lois Lorentzen and Luis Bazan's chapter "Ahora la Luz: Transnational Gangs, the States, and Religion" in *Religion at the Corner of Bliss and Nirvana*, Manual

out an existing expression of Latin American Catholicism that has been largely ignored by scholars.

Locating a Binational Romero: Methodological Considerations

The process of finding individuals who would freely speak about their relationship to Romero within the context of migration, violence, and memory was the driving motivation to compose an important focus on binational narratives. Interviewees distinguished themselves between those who knew Romero and those that knew of Romero. Contrasting those two narrative styles and how they remember his influence and legacy lays the foundation to the interview processes that enabled this project to take unexpected turns that revealed complimentary and contradictory narratives.

I conducted ethnographic research in Los Angeles between the areas of South Central and downtown Los Angeles from the fall of 2014 through the beatification in May of 2015. Of particular interest to this project were the neighborhoods of Westlake, home to MacArthur Park, West Adams, Pico Union, and the El Salvador Corridor, home to the Monsignor Romero Square. During this period, I conducted a dozen extended interviews with active, lay Christians who now live in Los Angeles, but who originate from various parts of El Salvador. Each of these individuals personally encountered

Vasquez, and Lleana Gomez's chapter "Youth gangs and religion among Salvadorans in Washing and El Salvador" in *Christianity, social change and globalization in the Americas*. Hector Perla Jr.'s "Monseñor Romero's Resurrection: Transnational Salvadoran Organizing" in *North American Congress on Latin America*, Cecilia Menjivar's "Religious Institutions and Transnationalism: A Case Study of Catholic and Evangelical Salvadoran Immigrants" in *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, and Harold Joseph Recino's dissertation, *The Politics of Salvadoran refugee popular religion*.

Romero and expressed strong ties to his person. The Salvadoran migrants whom I interviewed ranged from forty years to sixty-five years of age; two were evangelical converts while the rest continue to have strong ties to their Catholic church. I met these participants through Romero-related events at Catholic churches in the neighborhoods, as well as through family relationships. In addition to these structured, formal interviews, I also conducted more informal, open-ended interviews with dozens of other Salvadorans throughout Los Angeles. Some of these were quite casual. For example, whenever I came across the image of Romero painted on the side of a business or mural, I inquired within and engaging with shop owners and workers.

In May of 2015, I traveled to El Salvador to conduct ethnographic research in the cities of Santa Ana, Sonsonate, and the capital San Salvador. The areas are unique in that Santa Ana is the largest populated city outside the capital while Sonsonate witnessed attacks against its population over several decades leading to and during the Salvadoran civil war. My time there was to observe the beatification mass that was being held at the capital on May 25th. I opted to conduct a survey before and after the beatification mass itself. In addition to these interviews, I was a participant observer at the beatification mass and attended the vigil the night before the beatification ceremony. I was also able to conduct three more focused, extended interviews with a Romero devotee, an evangelical convert, and an agnostic.

I demonstrate that Romero's name became a vehicle for interviewees to talk about their lives in El Salvador, even in the face of expanding Protestant communities and

youth leaving the Catholic church.⁵ Interviewees often reminisced about the wonderful times they had within their parish by way of Romero's presence. Romero was a marker of Salvadorans' longing to heal their open wounds, wounds that might never truly heal. Remembering the time while Romero still lived was a way for Salvadorians to comfort themselves decades later. And as a new generation of Salvadoran Catholics have become more familiar with their heritage, Romero has been rejuvenated as the symbol of something good and hopeful in Central America amid continuing chaos, violence, and struggle—a moral figure to be admired who stands for a more just future.

El Salvador to Los Angeles: Locating Space within the Study of the Religion

A trend amongst scholars who study Romero is to evaluate his legacy within a theological context.⁶ Both Edgardo Colón-Emeric's *Óscar Romero's Theological Vision* and Michael Lee's *Revolutionary Saint* address the theological applications that Romero's life has left behind for his followers. While Colón-Emeric uses Romero's homilies to establish a theological interpretation, Lee examines Romero's life as a manifested liberation theology. While both are concerned with a vision, whether

⁵ Cleary, Edward and Hannah Stewart-Gambino. *Power, Politics, and Pentecostals in Latin America*. Westview Press, 1998; David Martin. *Tongues on Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America*. Blackwell, Press. 1990; David Stoll. *Is Latin America Turning Protestant? The Politics of Evangelical Growth*. University of California Press, 1990. Timothy Wadkins. *The Rise of Pentecostalism in Modern El Salvador: From the Blood of the Martyrs to the Baptism of the Spirit*. Baylor University Press, 2017.

⁶ Colón-Emeric, Edgardo. *Oscar Romero: Theological Vision: Liberation and the Transfiguration of the Poor*. University of Notre Dame Press, 2018; Michael E. Lee. *Revolutionary Saint: The Theological Legacy of Oscar Romero*. Orbis Books, 2018.

Romero's or their own interpretation, the basis of their interpretation derives from the extensive archives left behind. This extensive archive contains the seed that encourages scholars to examine, interpret, and wonder about Romero and his intentions.⁷ The University of Central America Press has issued five biographies, Jesus Delgado's firsthand account of Romero being one of the more scholarly cited sources. As a close friend and aide, Delgado writes a biography of a well-rounded Romero, excluding any controversy. Roberto Morozzo Della Rocca's more detailed biography and its variations have been published and translated for an English-speaking audience but has been printed through a United Kingdom publisher.⁸ Orbis has published James Brockman's biography but borrows from the initial Spanish published biographies. Other works such as those by Jon Sobrino, Irene Hodgson, and Maria Lopez Vigil use direct sources such as letters, homilies, and diary entries to address certain issues that a reader might find useful for inspiration or personal interpretation. However, the authors' use of primary sources does not interpret a theology as suggested by Colón-Emeric or Lee.

⁷ Sobrino, Jon. *Archbishop Romero: Memories and Reflections*. Orbis Books, 2016; Matthew Phillip Whelan. *Blood in the Fields: Oscar Romero, Catholic Social Teaching, and Land Reform*. Catholic University of American Press, 2020; Damian Zynda. *Archbishop Oscar Romero: A Disciple Who Revealed the Glory of God*. University of Scranton Press, 2010; Martin Maier S.J.. "Do We Still Need Reformers in the Church? The Case of Oscar Romero." *New Blackfriars*, vol. 99, no. 3, 2018, pp. 219-231.

⁸ The United Kingdom has been a strong supporter of Romero, housing the Romero Trust Fund and making him a saint in the Church of England years before the Catholic church.

Yet beyond the written works and audio recordings is an embodiment of Romero's legacy (both in El Salvador and with the transnational migrants living in Los Angeles) that speaks to the lived religions of El Salvador. Therefore, this dissertation pushes against traditional theological treatments to offer a study of the lived religion surrounding Oscar Romero. Since the invasion of Central America by Spanish forces five hundred years ago, lived religion (lived Catholicism to be exact) has existed to accompany underserved populations.⁹

This project locates itself within various conversations about localized or lived religion, immigration, and memory. Birthed and inspired from second-generation scholars who continue to test the waters of lived religion's definition within an immigrant context, I engage Romero's role as both inspiration to devotees and challenger to institutionalized Catholicism.

To understand lived religion, we should begin by understanding popular or vernacular Catholicism. I start with Orlando Espín's definition as the "religious universe that Hispanics created in order to bring closer to them what they interpreted to be the foundational and other key elements of normative Catholicism."¹⁰ What's more, popular Catholicism is meant to provide lay people access to their own faith so that they may

⁹ Scholars of lived religion include Nancy Ammerman, David D. Hall, Jennifer Hughes and Robert Orsi. Scholars differ in their definition of lived religion, but their significance to this project is the use of particular populations that inform the approach to ethnography within the study of religion.

¹⁰ Espín, Orlando. *The Faith of the People: Theological Reflections on Popular Catholicism*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997. 116.

interpret their religious understandings when official doctrines are inaccessible. David Hall adds depth to this definition by arguing,

Popular religion has therefore come to signify the space that emerged between official or learned Christianity and profane (or ‘pagan’) culture. In this space lay men and women enjoyed a certain measure of autonomy; here they became actors in their own right, fashioning (or refashioning) religious practices in accordance with local circumstance. Another aspect of this space is that religion encompassed a range of possibilities, some with the sanction of official religion and other not, or perhaps ambiguously so.¹¹

In El Salvador, popular Catholicism is a direct result of unsanctioned Catholic practices in conflict with officially sanctioned practices that transformed Romero into the unofficial saint of Salvadoran Catholics. Romero’s teachings, although official because of his position within the church, should be considered unofficial because of the backlash they (and he) received from the Salvadoran government—the very institute that housed his religious authority. The lay Catholics of El Salvador would then have to reinterpret Romero’s call for peace and justice within their own understanding of Catholicism, thereby creating their own version of popular Catholicism. That interpretation is interwoven with socio-economic justice and memories of lost loved ones. This conflict is demonstrated publicly and privately within the realm of lived religions, in particular the public beatification mass of Romero. Driving the private events that celebrate or have celebrated Romero into the public realm is often the motivator for religious entanglements in the Americas. These roots can be traced to the religious festivals

¹¹ Hall, David. *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997. Viii.

celebrated by confraternities in Central America that combine pre-Columbian rituals with centuries old Catholic figures.¹²

The definition of popular Catholicism is concerned with oppositional forces. In this case, it centers on the issue of official versus unofficial. As a result, the term has caused difficulty in the study of religion. Robert Orsi questions the functionality of the term and its definition. “Did ‘popular’ religion refer exclusively to the religious practices and imaginings of common folk? But then what becomes of ‘popular’ religion when social or religious elites participate in it (as they almost always do)?”¹³ This holds true for the devotion to Romero as his unofficial sainthood status was transformed when the Catholic Church moved to canonize him. Salvadorans venerated Romero and any discussion of transitioning him into an official Catholic saint was often met with hostile opposition. As I will show, once his beatification had been approved, even former government officials who opposed Romero’s calls for justice partook in his beatification ceremony on May 23rd.

Hall eventually rebuffed the term and suggests that scholars use “lived religions” as a preferential way of exploring case studies. He argues that lived religions should not be bound by oppositional elements. And while it is true that definitions should not be

¹² Sullivan-González, Douglass. *The Black Christ of Esquipulas*. University of Nebraska Press, 2016; Andrew Chestnut *Competitive Spirits: Latin America’s New Religious Economy*. Oxford University Press, 2007; Jennifer Hughes. *Biography of a Mexican Crucifix: Lived Religion and Local Faith from the Conquest to the Present*. Oxford University Press, 2010.

¹³ Orsi, Robert. *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950 3rd edition*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 2010. Xxxii.

bound by oppositional binaries, the case of Salvadoran Catholics allows for such structure because of the experiences Catholics witnessed and endured during the civil war. I agree with Orsi who suggests that “lived religion directs attention to institution and persons, texts and rituals, practice and theology, things and ideas.”¹⁴ This is the approach best suited to explore how Salvadoran Catholics understood and continue to understand themselves after the civil war.

In the case of El Salvador, lived Catholicism is also the result of the church’s inability to reach urban and rural Catholic communities. El Salvador, even dating to the beginning of the civil war, always lacked permanent priests.¹⁵ This is both documented in the colonial period and by survivors of the civil war. In order to have institutionalized parishes and communities, in terms of weekly masses, study groups, and basic doctrine lessons, lay leaders in the 1970s and 1980s in rural areas would take classes that could train them in liturgical readings so that they could return to their home communities and have the training to teach the bible and preach in the absence of a priest. These communities came to be known as comunidades eclesiales de base (CEBs) or grassroots

¹⁴ Orsi, Robert. *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950 3rd edition*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 2010. Xxxii.

¹⁵ Cleary, Edward. *The Rise of Charismatic Catholicism in Latin America*. University Press of Florida, 2011. Jesús Delgado Acevedo. *Historia de la Iglesia en El Salvador*. San Salvador, Secretaría de Cultura de la Presidencia Dirección de Publicaciones e Impresos, 2013; Enrique Dussel, editor. *The Church in Latin America 1492-1992*. Orbis Books, 1992.

eclesialies.¹⁶ Having to interpret a situation, such as the civil war, also allowed for the spread of liberation theology. But none of that would have been made possible without the select interpretation of Catholic doctrines that would become lived Catholicism. The interpretation of biblical readings reflected the chaos that had erupted in the country.

Lived Catholicism, for the purpose of this project, is a religious interpretation of the immediate environment that lay people come from. But this does not fully explain why Monsignor Romero's legacy has continued to grow. This has been done through the process of traditioning, in which Catholicism is transmitted from person to person. Espín elaborates on his definition of popular Catholicism by arguing that traditioning has roots in what he calls *lo cotidiano*. "Lo cotidiano is context and 'shaper' of ordinary traditioning precisely because it is daily life as daily life is lived by Christians."¹⁷ Essentially, the Christian faith is transmitted through the experiences of everyday life. When that daily life consists of fear, isolation, and violence, popular Catholicism is molded by those characteristics and later transported into the variations by which they grow. This is the case for Salvadoran Catholics continuing Romero's plight for the underrepresented. As I will later demonstrate, this becomes the case for younger generations who never met Romero but who are now among his largest subpopulations of followers. Such transmission of Catholicism that allowed for the traditioning of younger

¹⁶ Peterson, Anna. *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion: Progressive Catholicism in El Salvador's Civil War*. New York: University of New York Press, 1997. 50-51.

¹⁷ Espín, Orlando. "Traditioning: Culture, Daily Life and Popular Religion, and Their Impact on Christian Tradition. Ed. Espín, Orlando and Gary Macy. Maryknoll: Orbis, 2006. 5.

generations was a product of Romero's ability to translate the everyday life experiences of the lay Catholic to biblical text. His tone and academic understanding of biblical text, along with the teachings of the Vatican II, consoled a constantly worried and grieving nation.

Outline of Chapters

After exploring the introductory research questions within the context of the Romero beatification mass in El Salvador that took place in May of 2015 in this introductory chapter, Chapter Two lays out the historical context from the state-church relationship that existed at the turn of the twentieth century to the peace accords of 1992. The chapter begins with an overview of the socio-economic conditions of Central America prior to Romero's birth. The author creates a century-long genealogical timeline that highlights the relationship between the industrialists of El Salvador and its impoverished workers. Within this context, the author places Romero's childhood, education, priesthood, tenure as Archbishop, and death. Chapter Three focuses on the ethnographic research conducted in El Salvador during May of 2015 that encircles the beatification mass of Romero. As participant observer to the event, the author relates the relationship that Salvadorans have to Romero in post-civil war El Salvador. The chapter combines both residents and returning migrants to the event at various points throughout El Salvador to capture a fuller understanding of celebratory Catholics. The chapter concludes with an analysis of localized religion. Chapter Four focuses on the transnational appeal of Romero within Los Angeles by using ethnographic research collected from 2015 to 2018. This chapter is engaged with analyzing existing migration

and lived religion scholarship and placing Romero's religious appeal within that context. The author explores how location attracts both devotees and encourages them to participate in new religious homes. In the fifth and concluding chapter, I attempt to make sense of the ever-changing religious landscape in El Salvador and in the Salvadoran communities of Los Angeles. Even in death, Romero is a necessary figure for Salvadoran Catholics as they struggle to cope with and respond to ongoing legacies of violence and trauma, and to reckon with their cognitive dissonance that stems from the unimaginable violence they witnessed.

Chapter 2: The Priest from Ciudad Barrios

“All Salvadorans that endured the war have our arms scarred with those memories.” – Cesar. Interviewee, 2015.

Interviewees for this dissertation are interwoven with each other through the memories they have of a troubled El Salvador. There’s a commonality, born from the history, loss, and violence of the civil war that stretches over the El Salvador people that necessitates their stories be told. Their lived experiences still influence the transnational borders between El Salvador and the United States.

This chapter interweaves Monsignor Romero’s biography with the painful history of El Salvador. We will revisit El Salvador from the 1920s to the end of the civil war in 1992. I trace important moments that have impacted the lives of my interviewees and how they recall certain events in Salvadoran history. The voices and memories of my research participants structure my retelling and witnessing of their stories. The history that you read here provides key historical context for the reader to understand the importance of future chapters that present the beatification celebration of Romero among Salvadorans in El Salvador and among the migrant communities in the United States. By revisiting El Salvador’s history through a richer context, we will see why Monsignor Romero became such a pivotal figure for El Salvadoran Catholics.

He would, as some scholars would say, evolve. I would disagree with Scott Wright and Jon Sobrino's argument that Romero had a conversion. Wright writes that his experience as Bishop at Santiago de Maria with the impoverished residents brought newfound enlightenment that changed him from an office priest to an integral part of the parish community.¹⁸ Sobrino substantiates this claim by arguing that "[Romero] not only went through conversion but had a new experience of God. Never again would he be capable of separating God from the poor, or his faith in God from his defense of the poor."¹⁹ Rather, I am inclined to support James Brockman and Roberto Della Rocca who believe that his role as bishop required Romero to take the necessary steps to be the leader of Santiago. Romero grew in an impoverished home and understood the difficulties faced by peasants and a conversion into an understanding of that suffering was unlikely. Maria López Vigil and friend, Monseñor Ricardo Urioste go further and have argued that Romero evolved from his experience at Santiago rather than go through a spiritual conversion.²⁰ Conversion would mean that Romero welcomed a new formulation of faith that did not exist. Rather, he evolved from a homebody and shy student of the church to an active player in the day-to-day religious needs of his diocese.

¹⁸Wright, Scott. *Oscar Romero and the Communion of the Saints*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009. 35-36.

¹⁹ Sobrino, Jon. *Archbishop Romero: Memories and Reflections*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers. 1990.16.

²⁰ Urioste, Monseñor Ricardo. "The Spirituality of Monsignor Romero." *Archbishop Romero and Spiritual Leadership in the Modern World*. Edited by Rev. Robert S. Pelton, Lexington Books, 2015. 31.

Through a spiritual evolution, he nurtured a part of himself that allowed him to further connect to what had been a shy individual. As he had done with all his previous assignments, Romero fulfilled his role with full engagement. Romero was “visibly growing in strength and conviction, became the defender of the oppressed, ‘the voice of those who had no voice,’ the conscience of a nation.”²¹ As such, we can paint his evolution within the world that engrossed him from his childhood.

The Beginning

“Little Oscar liked to withdraw in prayer to the small village church and to get up at night to pray, according to the testimony of his younger brother Mamerto, who shared a bed with him. Mamerto, for his part, preferred to sleep.”²²

Oscar Arnulfo Romero y Gáldamez was born in the rocky hillside city of Ciudad Barrios on August 15, 1917, to Ladinos, Guadalupe de Jesús Galdámez and Santos Romero. The family lived in an adobe house; a sturdy home that exists today in the relative peaceful city that is removed from the capital. The family worked their twenty acre farm that they inherited, and Oscar and the other children were given responsibilities around the home and farm from an early age.²³

²¹ Campbell-Johnston, Michael. *Truth and Memory: The Church and Human Rights in El Salvador and Guatemala*. Ed. Michael Hayes and David Tombs. Gracewing: Herefordshire. 2001. 49.

²² Brockman, James R. *Romero: A Life. The Essential Biography of a Modern Martyr and Christian Hero*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books. 2005. 34.

²³ Della Rocca, Roberto Morozzo. *Oscar Romero: Prophet of Hope*. Boston, MA: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2015. 2-3.

The home lacked electricity (as did all the homes in the area) and the children slept in one bed, but the Romero family did well financially in comparison to others in the area.²⁴

Roberto Morozzo Della Rocca claims that his mother was very religious, although his biography of Romero is the only one to detail that. All biographers focus on his father as being the primary influencer. Biographers portray his father as a hard worker who enjoyed the leisure of reading and music but paint him as cautious. A man who did not try to push his limitations.²⁵ At his father's death, Monsignor Romero recalled that his father was not pious and most likely did not understand the fundamentals of Catholicism.²⁶ But given the circumstance, his family had the ability to read, a luxury when much of the population lacked formal education.

At age five, the young Romero was struck with an illness that left him immobile and isolated from the rest of the village children. Villagers thought that his illness was contagious and would not allow their children to interact with the boy.²⁷ This left the young Romero without much contact with the outside world. He was left in the care of his younger sister Zaida, who would help him through this period by tending to his

²⁴ Brockman, James R. *Romero: A Life. The Essential Biography of a Modern Martyr and Christian Hero*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books. 2005. 34.

²⁵ Delgado, Jesus. *Oscar Romero: Biografía*. San Salvador, El Salvador: Universidad de Centro America. 2013. 10.

²⁶ Brockman, James R. *Romero: A Life. The Essential Biography of a Modern Martyr and Christian Hero*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005. 33.

²⁷ Pineda, Ana María RSM. *Romero and Grande: Companions on the Journey*. Hobe Sound, FL: Lection Publishing, 2016.4.

various needs. Jesus Delgado and James Brockman are unsure of the illness, but Della Rocca claims the young Romero was struck with polio. Whatever illness the young Romero endured during this developmental phase of his childhood, his preference for isolation and timid personality grew from this period which followed him for the rest of his life.

After his illness, he began formal schooling. Although studious and serious, the very young Romero did not enjoy the formalities of school, shying away from classmates. By the second or third year of public school, he had been entrusted with a local schoolteacher, Anita Iglesias, for private lessons.²⁸ As he routinely enjoyed being by himself and with his chosen inner circle, the world outside Ciudad Barrios was entering chaos.

Oscar's childhood was framed by a new period of economic and political destabilization and disempowerment in Central America. In the mid 1920s, under the sway of economic elites and growing nonviolent protests over wages, Central America was thrust into the international export business, focusing on coffee and bananas as primary agricultural commodities. Dependent on large United States markets who controlled the banana companies along with the local coffee barons who were aligned with national banks, the region engaged in a sort of purposeful failure to address socio-

²⁸ Wright, Scott. *Oscar Romero and the Communion of the Saints*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009.7.

economic issues that haunted its workers for decades.²⁹ In 1929, peasant-workers challenged their employer's totalitarianism when low wages and loss of land pushed them to the edge of starvation. Pushback by peasant workers quickly snowballed into a crisis at the doorstep of Central American countries where peasants held little to no bargaining power at the national and international level.³⁰ Peasant-workers challenged the existing power brokers that owned the banana and coffee companies and envisioned a fair socio-economic nation that would redistribute wealth and power.³¹ But their challenge would be met with deadly authoritarian force.

A growing disdain amongst indigenous workers resulted in various revolts in 1932 immediately after the fall of coffee prices in the early 1930s because of the Great Depression. Of particular importance is the massacre in Sonsonate, in the Western interior of the country, where thousands of indigenous people were slaughtered. Led by General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez, it is now remembered as La Matanza (the massacre). The number of people who were killed varies since documentation no longer exists including census accounts, but various scholars estimate between eight to twenty

²⁹ Bulmer-Thomas, Victor. *The Political Economy of Central American since 1920*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1987. 6-7, 75.

³⁰ Lauria, -Santiago, Aldo A. *An Agrarian Republic: Commercial Agriculture and the Politics of Peasant Communities in El Salvador, 1823-1914*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999. 234-235.

³¹ Paige, Jeffrey M. *Coffee and Power: Revolution and the Rise of Democracy in Central America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997. 100.

thousand peasants.³² The 1932 Matanza in Sonsonate did not only reflect zealous authoritarian disregard for human life but was part of a specifically anti-communist movement unfolding in the national arena. Scholars such as Thomas Anderson, Jeffrey Page and Eric Ching have come to the consensus that the Matanza in Sonsonate represented a turning point for the country in which authoritarianism began to become normative. Here we confront the painstaking suffering of the poor who were labeled as communist and who were continuously accused as communists well into Monsignor Romero's tenure as archbishop. Through these specifically targeted groups, we can see that there exists a context for government retribution that predates the civil war.

Just prior to the genocide in Sonsonate, General Martínez had ascended to power in 1931 in thanks to the military coup that ousted then democratically elected president, Arturo Araujo. Martínez presented himself and his administration as part of a nation-wide anti-communist administration.³³ It would also legitimate his allegiance with the elite.³⁴ Therefore, the needs of non-elites would be dismissed and unimportant. Indigenous peoples in the Central and Western part of El Salvador who were considered communists, anti-government radicals, or communist sympathizers were targeted and murdered by

³² Anderson, Thomas. *Matanza*. Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 1992. 174-5.

³³ See Anderson, *Matanza* and Woodward, *Central America: A Nation Divided*.

³⁴ Bird, Shawn and Philip Williams. "El Salvador: Revolt and Negotiated Transition." *Repression, Resistance, and Democratic Transition in Central America*, edited by Thomas W. Walker and Ariel G. Armony. Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Books, 2000, pp. 28.

government officials. If any presumption of a legal system existed, individuals would be found guilty of various crimes and quickly and unfairly sentenced.³⁵ It would only be a matter of time before the tide would turn.

Thomas Anderson argues, “[Country elites] had sensed for a long time dark rumblings among the masses of the people, as the plantation owners of the Old South must have sensed.”³⁶ But the genocidal sentiment was predominantly directed toward indigenous peoples. Virginia Tilley has argued that the Matanza genocide attempted to eliminate both the physical and cultural body of indigenous peoples of El Salvador. Further, narratives from that time associated indigeneity with communism. As a result, violence was justified and condoned against Central American indigenous people in the spirit of anti-communism. However, the role that communist rebels played in the Sonsonate genocide have been inflated since 1932. The uprising was influenced by various socio-economic instabilities including land rights, wages and anti-indigenous sentiment amongst villagers in the Western part of El Salvador that consisted of conflicts between mostly indigenous and Ladino workers.³⁷ The deeper underlining issue was the existing political power struggles that existed between indigenous peoples and Ladinos

³⁵ Ching, Erik. *Authoritarian El Salvador: Politics and the Origins of the Military Regimes, 1880-1940*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014. 322.

³⁶ Anderson, Thomas. *Matanza*. Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 1992. 170.

³⁷ Ching, Eric. “In Search of the Party: The Communist Party, the Comintern, and the Peasant Rebellion of 1932 in El Salvador.” *The Americas*, vol. 74, no s1, 2017, pp. 229, 238.

were at an all-time high.³⁸ Historian Eric Ching makes the case that during this period, natural resources were at the heart of the discord amongst Salvadoran indigenous peoples and Ladinos who worked for banana and coffee companies. At stake were water rights and issues pertaining to leasing fertile farming land. Both indigenous and Ladino peoples held substantial negotiating power, however the backdoor dealings of the more politically powerful Ladinos, particularly in the city of Izalco, initiated a crisis that became a national issue resulting in the genocide of eight to twenty thousand indigenous people and transitioned the country into five decades of authoritarianism.³⁹ This preferential treatment towards Ladinos whereby families could own property helped the Romero family as their name and bloodline (Spanish) prevented them from suffering the hardships that other families endured in Ciudad Barrios.⁴⁰ For example, in the 1930s Ladinos were demonstrating newfound wealth and power. The wealth and power were comprised of owning coffee farms, participation, and influence over the local police and

³⁸ This dissertation uses term Ladino as defined by Virginia Tilly as an “Indian who sought to escape the tributary laboring conditions...by abandoning his or her Indian identity, through marriage, lifestyle, and probably a move out of the community.” See Tilley, *Seeing Indians: A Study of Race, Nation, and Power in El Salvador*. 109.

³⁹ Ching, Erik. *Authoritarian El Salvador: Politics and the Origins of the Military Regimes, 1880-1940*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014.508. See also Erik Ching “Patronage and Politics under General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez, 1931-1939” in *Landscapes of Struggle: Politics, Society, and Community in El Salvador*.

⁴⁰ Delgado, Jesus. *Oscar Romero: Biografía*. San Salvador, El Salvador: Universidad de Centro America. 2013. 10.

involvement in the national guard. The increase of wealth through landownership which would sustain and uphold their economic interests would also include their involvement in civil (and later national) militarization in suppressing indigenous people.⁴¹ Bloodlines and heritage meant a great deal, especially as indigeneity was violently assaulted. Being Ladino helped the Romero family in the sense that inherited land and home represented a class separation from the landless indigenous people that worked for wages. Although the hidden politico-economic conflict was not openly discussed, the result was an assault on well-connected, well-organized, and politically driven indigenous peoples who were in conflict with the new economic system that included unfair land leasing practices and untrustworthy banking.

Historian and documentary filmmaker, Jeffrey Gould, along with historian, Aldo Lauria-Santiago agree that this massacre was the turning point for the country.

Government agencies such as local police, military personnel and generations of powerful elites pushed anti-communist headlines to the national level in order to justify the massacre and discriminate against indigenous workers.⁴² The massacre therefore hid the true manifestations of indigenous/Ladino conflicts and created an oppositional two party system that became increasingly hostile and violent as tensions built in the following decades.

⁴¹ Tilley, Virginia, Q. *Seeing Indians: A Study of Race, Nation, and Power in El Salvador*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2005. 132-3.

⁴² See Jeffrey Gould and Aldo A. Lauria-Santiago's *To Rise in Darkness: Revolution, and Memory in El Salvador, 1920-1932*.

A Different Path for the young Romero

During this tumultuous period in history, the Romero family began to endure hardships as well. They were not sheltered from the discriminatory injustices that overall plagued El Salvador. Romero's father lost coffee lands to moneylenders and his mother became disabled. To help the household, the family rented out their upstairs to tenants who eventually did not pay.⁴³ Fortuitously, Romero's father Santos, had taught the young boy to be a letter carrier and a telegraph operator.⁴⁴ But these small, part-time jobs were not enough for Romero. More resilient than ever, the now thirteen-year-old Romero was determined to become a priest. Romero's life would begin to transition in slow but steady steps.

His father apprenticed him to Juan Leiva, known to his caretaking sister Zaida as one of the best carpenters in the city.⁴⁵ But Romero's dream to become a priest outweighed his father's desire. With his mother's permission and Ciudad Barrio mayor,

⁴³ Vigil, María López. *Monseñor Romero: Memories in Mosaic*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013. 4.

⁴⁴ Wright, Scott. *Oscar Romero and the Communion of the Saints*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009. 7.

⁴⁵ Vigil, María López. *Monseñor Romero: Memories in Mosaic*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013. 4.

Alfonso Leiva's recommendation, the teenage Romero was sent to the Claretian seminary in San Miguel.⁴⁶

Romero would spend the next seven years in San Miguel until he transitioned to the San Salvador Seminary. During his time at San Miguel, he and his classmate Rafael Valladares would compete for first place in their academic assignments.⁴⁷ He and Valladares would play off each other and would later share a lifelong friendship. Once Romero had moved to San Salvador, he along with Valladares were chosen to study in Rome at different times. Valladares was Bishop Juan Antonio Dueñas' nephew and had been chosen four years earlier to study in Rome in 1934. Valladares would later become auxiliary bishop in El Salvador in 1956.⁴⁸ Della Rocca argues that Romero found it difficult to imitate Valladares because Valladares had come from rich landowning parents as well as being nephew of the bishop. Valladares had access to various upper-class circles not known to Romero. However, I would argue that these interactions with upper class individuals contributed to Romero's ability to understand differing socio-economic backgrounds. This would be a valuable tool as he gained power and had to defend his actions to government and church authorities, some of whom also were from elite

⁴⁶Brockman and Della Rocco have conflicting accounts pertaining to the influential individuals who, along with his mother and mayor, pushed for Romero's acceptance. Brockman points to returning priest, Father Monroy, while Della Rocco points to the routinely visiting Father Benito Calvo.

⁴⁷ Pineda, Ana María RSM. *Romero and Grande: Companions on the Journey*. Hobe Sound, FL: Lektion Publishing, 2016. 8-9.

⁴⁸ Brockman, James R. *Romero: A Life. The Essential Biography of a Modern Martyr and Christian Hero*. Orbis: Maryknoll. 2005. 36.

families. Furthermore, I would argue that Romero learned the differing worlds that he encountered which allowed him to ease and choose his words more carefully as he attempted to connect his future homilies and actions to individuals who did not know the economic, political, and cultural struggles of those who looked to him for help during the civil war.

In Rome, Romero and Valladares studied at the Pontifical Latin American College. The late 1930s to the early 1940s would see Romero's intellectual growth reach new depths. I would further argue that Romero's leadership role as priest and archbishop was shaped from the intellectual framework found at the Pontifical Latin American College. Romero would be influenced not only by Valladares and their competitive natures but from Pope Pius XI's stance during World War II. He was part of a group of clergymen dedicated to what is referred to as a Roman church. A Roman church separates church and state, has a universal (non-provincial) understanding of the church, and a desire to distance itself from financial patronages that was a well-accepted practice in El Salvador since the colonial period.⁴⁹ Juan, who I interviewed in 2015, recalls that in the 1950s he would attend mass and could not sit in the front pews because they were reserved for the first patron families of his small hamlet. This meant, that Romero was influenced by inclusive church where a peasant could sit any seat they pleased. Second, Romero was a great admirer of Pope Pius XI. Delgado, Brockman, and Della Rocca point

⁴⁹ Della Rocca, Roberto Morozzo. *Oscar Romero: Prophet of Hope*. Boston, MA: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2015. 5.

to Pope Pius XI's vehement denouncement and fearless attitude against fascism and Nazism as a key factor that influenced Romero's later life. Pope Pius XI has been quoted as saying "as long as I am pope, no one will laugh at the church."⁵⁰ I would argue that it was Pope Pius XI's stance on protecting the church that led Romero's reactionary cause against the mistreatment of the church and its priests during the civil war. And while Romero was sheltered from the political eruptions that were occurring in El Salvador, he would soon have to witness them once he returned in the 1940s.

In the 1930s General Martínez and his hand-picked successor General Andrés Ignacio Menéndez rotated control of the government until the early 1940s when support for General Menéndez began dissipating amongst landowners and the elite. Martínez had failed to diversify export goods such as cotton and sugar and attempted to take control of the privately-run national bank while polarizing political enemies who he once associated with throughout his earlier presidencies. He began to court populist thought that included labor organizing and land reform.⁵¹ Even while this seemingly appearing change of heart, General Martínez's goal was always the maintenance of power, regardless of the changing public rhetoric. His style of underhanded governing created the building blocks or blueprint for future presidencies where the veil of democratically elected officials was

⁵⁰ Romero, Oscar. *Datos biográficas del Excelentísimo Señor Obispo Auxiliar de San Salvador Monseñor Rafael Valladares y Argumedo*, San Miguel, 1962, p11.

⁵¹ Stanley, William. *The Protection Racket State: Elite Politics, Military Extortion, and Civil War in El Salvador*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1996. 61-63. See also Patricia Parkman, *Nonviolent Insurrection in El Salvador: The Fall of Maximiliano Hernández Martínez* and Sara Gordon, *Crisis política y Guerra en El Salvador*.

hidden by military ambitions that would enable country elites the power to control the markets and maintain their financial interests. And where opposition seemed to thrive, intervention soon appeared, particularly in the 1940s.

Becoming a Priest

“I was at the church of San Francisco. We were poor. Poor. Poor. Poor. We couldn’t put three coins together because we only had one or two. We only had one pair of shoes. We were poor! But we had these basketball teams and [Romero] would ask the patrons to gift us uniforms, shoes, and basketballs. There were no televisions. We would play and he would be there with us.” – Juan. Interviewee, 2015.

Romero reached his boyhood ambition on April 4, 1942, he was officially ordained a priest at the college chapel in Rome. He would remain in Rome until 1943. World War II had started four years prior, and seminarians tackled hunger, air raids and home sickness.⁵² Romero had been in the doctoral program in Rome when Bishop Dueñas called he and Valladares to return to El Salvador in August of 1943. The two planned to traveled from the Iberian- peninsula to Mexico, but as consequence of tensions caused by the war, they were captured and imprisoned in a Havana concentration camp. Brockman, Della Rocca and Vigil have concluded that they were detained then arrested because Cuban authorities mistook both men for spies. However, there was no direct link aside from the political fallout of the enduring war. The men were sent to the Tiscornia

⁵² Della Rocca, Roberto Morozzo. *Oscar Romero: Prophet of Hope*. Boston, MA: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2015. 9.

Camp, northeast of where they docked in Havana. The concentration camp consisted of large white concrete army-like barracks that was surrounded by barbed wire and a tall lighthouse that overlooked the ocean.⁵³ There, they had no contact with the outside world and labored everyday with insufficient food. They would wait to be freed, attempt to escape, or die. Both young priests suffered physical hardships and Valladares was near death when officials determined that they were not enemies of Cuba and they were released.⁵⁴ Once released, they sailed to Mexico then traveled by land to El Salvador where a celebration awaited them that December.⁵⁵ Romero never publicly recalled or lamented his detention in the Havana concentration camp.⁵⁶ Yet, experiencing and witnessing the unjust consequences of political turmoil must have shaped Romero's outlook once precepts of war were at Romero's doorstep in El Salvador. It must have been a formative lesson for the unforeseen and upcoming challenges he would have to confront. I would argue that Romero took this traumatic experience as a reference point when he later had to retrieve priests from torture or speak to the suffering masses about

⁵³ X, Carlos. "Oscar Romero's Odyssey in Cuba." *Super Martyrio*. 21 December 2015, <http://polycarpi.blogspot.com/2015/12/oscar-romeros-odyssey-in-cuba.html>. Accessed 17 June 2021.

⁵⁴ Delgado, Jesus. *Oscar Romero: Biografía*. San Salvador, El Salvador: Universidad de Centro America. 2013. 26.

⁵⁵ Brockman, James R. *Romero: A Life. The Essential Biography of a Modern Martyr and Christian Hero*. Orbis: Maryknoll. 2005. 39.

⁵⁶ X, Carlos. "Oscar Romero's Odyssey in Cuba." *Super Martyrio*. 21 December 2015, <http://polycarpi.blogspot.com/2015/12/oscar-romeros-odyssey-in-cuba.html>. Accessed 26 March 2020.

their missing loved ones who disappeared.⁵⁷ Romero did not simply empathize with his flock, he could reflect on his own experience, thereby allowing himself to be one with his followers.

When he returned to El Salvador, he was sent to a small mountain town, Anamóros. Young priests were sent to priest-scarce locations so they could rise to pastor at a faster rate.⁵⁸ After a few months, his talents shined and he was sent to become the San Miguel diocese secretary, a post that he would hold for more than two decades. He then became pastor of the Santo Domingo parish. In addition to serving as pastor at Santo Domingo, he was responsible for the Church of San Francis, worked as the editor of *Orientación*, served as promoter for the devotion of la Virgen de la Paz, and was charged with the construction of the new cathedral that would replace Santo Domingo.⁵⁹ All these necessary functions of the church would demonstrate Monsignor Romero's intelligence and determination to be secretary of the diocese of San Miguel.

However, at this early-stage Monsignor Romero was not the well-developed and well-loved individual that is now remembered. He verbally attacked communism, Protestants, and refused to allow ceremonies involving individuals associated with the

⁵⁷ Brockman, James R. *Romero: A Life. The Essential Biography of a Modern Martyr and Christian Hero*. Orbis: Maryknoll. 2005. 38.

⁵⁸ Delgado, Jesus. *Oscar Romero: Biografía*. San Salvador, El Salvador: Universidad de Centro America. 2013. 39.

⁵⁹ Delgado, Jesus. *Oscar Romero: Biografía*. San Salvador, El Salvador Universidad de Centro America. 2013. 29.

Masons.⁶⁰ For example, in 1964 he was targeted by local authorities who claimed he was attempting to influence politics. Romero retorted by claiming that Masons were compromising the Christian consciousness and he had a duty to uphold it by leading his flock.⁶¹ However, closer to the end of this life, Romero argued for an inclusivity that included all countrymen and women.

He admired Opus Dei for its rigidity and practiced the spiritual exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola.^{62,63} He followed doctrine and exemplified academic structure. He was a product of pre-Vatican II but graciously adhered to the new changes. But for all the criticism he received as being an arm chaired priest, he visited prisons and made great effort to treat the unfortunate with care and kindness, perhaps remembering how Zaida cared for him as a child.

Romero kept to his office in the 1960s while the country saw its land being converted from self-sufficient food producers to export-agriculturists. The lowlands grew corn, the highlands grew coffee and now the midlands grew sugar cane – leaving small

⁶⁰Brockman, James R. *Romero: A Life. The Essential Biography of a Modern Martyr and Christian Hero*. Orbis: Maryknoll. 2005. 40.

⁶¹ Della Rocca, Roberto Morozzo. *Oscar Romero: Prophet of Hope*. Boston, MA: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2015.20.

⁶² Della Rocca, Roberto Morozzo. *Oscar Romero: Prophet of Hope*. Boston, MA: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2015. 14-15.

⁶³ The spiritual exercises of the Catholic saint, Ignatius of Loyola, allow an individual on personal retreat to determine the path that God has set forth for them. The exercises are commonly used by Jesuits priests of the Roman Catholic Church.

farmers landless and jobless in rural areas where family farmers now depended on a sole family provider where once the whole family worked as a collective. My grandfather was part of this population. He had lost his lands but was able to find work as a mason. Where the family could once grow corn together, my uncles now moved away to wage jobs. In other cases, the male breadwinner of the family had to wait until harvest season for a job.⁶⁴ Robert Williams argues that cotton and beef production were key factors in causing social unrest amongst indigenous workers. Cotton lands were contaminated with chemicals and overuse while cattle grazing took over where once lush forests existed.⁶⁵ When faced with resistance from indigenous landowners, elites used physical threats to run them off. In addition, the United States began intervening in elections as fear of communism once again threatening national and international interest.⁶⁶ The United States attempted to prevent leftist revolution from rising to power by insisting on economic and political reforms through monetary assistance. However, by easing participation in elections, leftist parties began gaining traction in the political forum. The result was government intervention into elections, most prominently in the future 1972 elections.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Pearce, Jenny. *Promised Land: Peasant Rebellion in Chalatenango El Salvador*. London, UK: Latin American Review, 1986. 29-31.

⁶⁵ See Also Alastair White, *El Salvador: Nation of the Modern World*.

⁶⁶ Williams, Robert. *Export Agriculture and the Crisis in Central America*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1986. 155-161.

⁶⁷ Bird, Shawn and Philip Williams. "El Salvador: Revolt and Negotiated Transition." *Repression, Resistance, and Democratic Transition in Central America*, edited by Thomas W. Walker and Ariel G. Armony, Scholarly Resources Books, 2000, pp.29.

In addition to monetary assistance from the United States that would aid hospitals, schools, and other social programs, its military aid allowed for extensive gathering of subversive intelligence.⁶⁸

The country had been split for decades and elites once again feared an indigenous uprising. Indigenous workers had been well organized as a collective in demanding higher wages and freezing food prices in a time when most agriculture was being exported. Simultaneously, elites had mortgaged their lands to the limit and banks were overly cautious in lending more credit as the economy was threatened by high costs of agriculture production, oil and natural disasters striking Central America.⁶⁹ While reforms were attempted by raising wages, the result was underemployed and unemployed wage workers who were discouraged from cultivating small plots of land. To curtail starvation, about 300,000 Salvadorans crossed the Honduran border. They legally settled there until Honduras abruptly removed them after months of cultivation.⁷⁰ This resulted in the “Soccer War,” named after a riot that occurred after a soccer match between El Salvador and Honduras that determined which team would qualify for the World Cup.

⁶⁸ Stanley, William. *The Protection Racket State: Elite Politics, Military Extortion, and Civil War in El Salvador*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1996. 81-82.

⁶⁹ Williams, Robert. *Export Agriculture and the Crisis in Central America*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1986.163-165.

⁷⁰ Montgomery, Tommie Sue. *Revolution in El Salvador: From Civil Strife to Civil Peace*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992. 59-60.

At the time, the Honduran government had a weaker export market and began importing goods from El Salvador leading to negative effects for the Honduran economy. Honduran elites then used Salvadoran farmers who had been cultivating Honduran federal lands as a scapegoat to gain back control of that land.⁷¹ The confiscated land would then be used for export agriculture. William Stanley argues that the war was predicated to be an easy military victory for El Salvador. Within 100 hours, El Salvador invaded deep into Honduras and only withdrew because of United States pressure to sanction El Salvador. The war succeeded in making President Fidel Sanchez Hernandez a national hero with the ability to defeat any political opponent in the following election.⁷² However, the government also succeeded in saturating departments with returning landless Salvadorans who tended to align themselves with revolutionary organizations.⁷³ Now saturated with unsustainable populations, the government attempted to institute reforms on water usage – only to be thwarted once again by Salvadoran elites.⁷⁴ Time and

⁷¹ Stanley, William. *The Protection Racket State: Elite Politics, Military Extortion, and Civil War in El Salvador*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1996.84-85. See also William H. Durham, *Scarcity and Survival in Central America: Ecological Origins of the Soccer War*.

⁷² Armstrong, Robert and Janet Shenk. *El Salvador: The Face of Revolution*. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1982. 57.

⁷³ Stanley, William. *The Protection Racket State: Elite Politics, Military Extortion, and Civil War in El Salvador*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1996.85.

⁷⁴ Baloyra, Enrique. *El Salvador in Transition*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1982. 45.

time again, indigenous people's livelihood took a backseat to elite greed. Less than a decade later and little done in terms of socio-economic reforms, the first rumblings of a revolution began.

The Catholic Church would undergo its own revolution with the Second Vatican Council in 1962-5.⁷⁵ Romero was a devout student of the Second Vatican Council and spent a great deal of time attempting to implement the new directions into his pastoral life.⁷⁶ But he refrained from delving into the changes proposed by the Second Episcopal Conference of Latin America in Medellín. One such change would mean wearing everyday clothing. Instead, he reverted back to his timid ways, continuing to wear his black cassocks and typing away in his office.⁷⁷ By this time, Latin American priests were now driven by a new flame that was definitively sparked by Medellín. This spark was generated by Liberation Theology and Christian Based Communities. But Romero did not follow suit, rather he remained an opponent of these reform suggestions. Romero's refrain and studious approach to pastoral life helped in the future as he rose amongst the clergy. In 1967, he was promoted to secretary general of the national bishop's

⁷⁵ See Giuseppe Alberigo, *A Brief History of Vatican II* translated by Matthew Sherry and John W. O'Malley S.J., *What Happened at Vatican II*.

⁷⁶ Della Rocca, Roberto Morozzo. *Oscar Romero: Prophet of Hope*. Boston, MA: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2015.22-24.

⁷⁷ Wright, Scott. *Oscar Romero and the Communion of the Saints*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009. 26.

conference, and again in 1968 to executive secretary of the Central American Bishop's Secretariat. And in the late afternoon of April 21, 1970, the nuncio called Romero asking if he would accept the role of auxiliary bishop.⁷⁸

Rumblings of a Revolution

“What Monsignor Romero orientated was a reality. He could cut off the entire government because what he was saying was true.” – Don Miguel. Interviewee, 2015.

Four decades had passed since the matanza genocide initiated authoritarian rule in El Salvador. Land reform was nothing more than a talking point, cheap wage labor had replaced small scale farming and military might was growing in part because of U.S. aid. And Romero would be faced with unsurmountable challenges.

The 1970s snowballed into what would become the civil war. By 1975, 75% of agricultural workers (campesinos) saw their wages drop again.⁷⁹ And various sectors of business began to protest unfair conditions that seemed to accompany a growing dissatisfied population. One of the first to protest in large scale demonstrations was the teacher's union, the National Association of Salvadoran Educators. They were simultaneously joined by trades unions who supported their causes but did not ask themselves for better benefits. The teacher's union reached and occupied the Ministry of

⁷⁸ Brockman, James R. *Romero: A Life. The Essential Biography of a Modern Martyr and Christian Hero*. Orbis: Maryknoll. 2005. 42.

⁷⁹ Pearce, Jenny. *Promised Land: Peasant Rebellion in Chalatenango El Salvador*. Latin American Review, 1986.43.

Education in the attempt to gain benefits.⁸⁰ Unfortunately, the kidnapping and murder of two teachers from the National Association of Salvadoran seemed to have momentarily stopped public demonstrations.⁸¹ But soon, smaller protests began to spring up, such as the one blamed on Father Rutilio Grande at the La Cabaña sugar mill.

Workers at the sugar mill went on strike until the owners agreed to better wages.⁸² They protested for six hours until the owner gave into their demands. And while teachers on the opposite side of the country were supported in their effort by middle to lower-class Salvadorans, the demonstrations always ended in violence and their claims dismissed.⁸³ But the teacher's union was not the only dissatisfied profession, as it seemed that national unrest affected all sectors of life. Romero was simultaneously facing vocal pushback from Christian Base Communities and fellow colleagues, such as church authority Freddy Delgado, who vehemently disagreed with this style of educational structure at the seminary level.⁸⁴ Romero and Delgado would go back and forth in their effort to control

⁸⁰ McClintok, Cynthia. *Revolutionary Movements in Latin America: El Salvador's FMLN and Peru's Shining Path*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1998. 257.

⁸¹ Stanley, William. *The Protection Racket State: Elite Politics, Military Extortion, and Civil War in El Salvador*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996. 82.

⁸² Montgomery, Tommie Sue. *Revolution in El Salvador: From Civil Strife to Civil Peace*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992. 91.

⁸³ Stanley, William. *The Protection Racket State: Elite Politics, Military Extortion, and Civil War in El Salvador*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996. 87.

⁸⁴ See María López Vigil, *Monseñor Romero: Memories in Mosaic* and Roberto Morozzo Della Rocca, *Oscar Romero: Prophet of Hope*.

the educational structure. And as always, the residual Romero kept to his work and steadily moved along. The same could not be said of the country.

For a time that seemed to mirror previous unrest in this small country, El Salvador was faced with three major choices. The first was to create agrarian reform that would satisfy those in the countryside; the second would create and allow for free and fair elections; and the third was a complete rejection of any type of reform. This third option would allow the oligarchy to maintain power at the risk of alienating most citizens.⁸⁵ El Salvador's ruling party would come to adopt the third option – allowing for the inevitability of civil war. For those that could afford the long trek, left El Salvador. Thus, starting an initial transnational connection to El Salvador that would create a link for those escaping government violence in the forthcoming years.⁸⁶

With exacerbated national unrest, the Salvadoran President Fidel Sanchez Hernandez tried land reform before the next election, just as his predecessors had with the help of the United States. However, by that time the presidential election season arrived in 1972, various trade unions, teachers and student groups had grown extensively

⁸⁵ Byrne, Hugu. *El Salvador's Civil War: A Study of Revolution*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1996. 42. See also Enrique Baloyra, *El Salvador in Transition* and Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America*.

⁸⁶ In 1980 approximately 94,000 Salvadorans lived in the United States, by 1990 over 550,000 had migrated to the United States. See "El Salvador Immigration Statistics 1960-2022. *Macrotrends*. World Bank, <ahref='https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/SLV/el-salvador/immigration-statistics'>El Salvador Immigration Statistics 1960-2022. www.macrotrends.net. Retrieved 2022-02-05 and Cecilia Menjivar, *Framented Ties: Salvadoran Immigrant Networks in America*.

tired and had non-violently supported each other against Hernandez.⁸⁷ Repeatedly, the oligarchy devised campaigns against the reforms and eventually had the reforms retracted.⁸⁸ The oligarchy would then nominate a candidate who aligned himself with their concerns, primarily a candidate who could rule with a stronger iron fist and allow for the status quo to continue.⁸⁹ The stage was set for another contentious election.

The February 20, 1972, election would once again be determined by the elite. This time, however, the fraudulent victory surpassed the acceptability of voting Salvadorans.⁹⁰ When the conservative's oppositional party (National Opposition Party) appeared to have been the winner, the military government stopped covering the election over the radio. The next day, the conservative Colonel Arturo Molina was pronounced the winner of the elections. Large protests ensued throughout the country.⁹¹ One of the

⁸⁷ Almeida, Paul D. *Waves of Protest: Popular Struggle in El Salvador, 1925-2005*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008. 97.

⁸⁸ Manuel, Anne, et al. *America's Watch: EL Salvador's Decade of Terror: Human Rights since the Assassination of Archbishop Romero*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991. 6.

⁸⁹ Bryne, Hugu. *El Salvador's Civil War: A Study of Revolution*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1996. 44.

⁹⁰ See Paul D. Almeida, *Waves of Protests*, Phillip Williams and Knut Walter, *Militarization and Demilitarization in El Salvador's Transition to Democracy*, Robert Armstrong and Janet Shenk, *El Salvador: The Face of Revolution*, Enrique Baloyra, *EL Salvador in Transition*, and Thomas Walker and Ariel Armony, *Repression, Resistance, and Democratic Transition in Central America*.

⁹¹ McClintok, Cynthia. *Revolutionary Movements in Latin America: El Salvador's FMLN and Peru's Shining Path*. Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1998. 105

larger protests took place at the University of El Salvador where military personnel attacked the university with tanks and airplanes, arresting 800 people – including university officials.⁹² Molina would later use the university as an example of a communist-influenced institution and a rally cry for the conservative oligarchy for all that was wrong with the country.⁹³ This demonstration of military strength provided the seeds to anti-government sentiments. For example, at the time of the 1972 election, one known guerilla group existed. Kidnappings and assassinations were still years away. What came from this election was a divisive environment where any ground that political moderates had hoped to gain were crushed – leaving them voiceless in government affairs.⁹⁴ The election quickly created a rapid increase in armed guerilla groups and other organizations that included laborers, peasants, and leftist priests.⁹⁵

Romero's Promotions through Restraint

“I was subjected to many false accusations by the other bishops. I was told that my preaching is subversive, violent; that my priests provoke a climate of violence among

⁹² McClintok, Cynthia. *Revolutionary Movements in Latin America: El Salvador's FMLN and Peru's Shining Path*. Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1998. 105. See also Roberto Armstrong and Janet Shenk, *El Salvador: The Face of Revolution*.

⁹³ Montgomery, Tommie Sue. *Revolution in El Salvador: From Civil Strife to Civil Peace*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992. 66.

⁹⁴ Baloyra, Enrique. *El Salvador in Transition*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1982. 49.

⁹⁵ Bonner, Raymond. *Weakness and Deceit: U.S. Policy and El Salvador*. New York, NY: Times Books, 1984. 33.

the peasants: and that we should not complain about the abuses that the authorities are committing.” – Oscar Romero April 3, 1978.

Romero demonstrated restraint and kept to his post thereby quietly reflecting over the situation.⁹⁶ If you were to summarize the biographies of Romero’s life during this period, little shines through except Romero’s isolated nature. Perhaps his timid and analytical nature prevented him from speaking out, but it certainly maintained his influence from his time in Rome when he saw the need for the separation of church and state. This came at a time when priests started to take up arms and revolutionize rural areas. But again, Romero remained in his studious ways. On December 14, 1974, he was appointed as Bishop of Santiago de Maria. However, unlike previous posts where he would shy away in his office, he sought immediate guidance from Rome. He immediately left for the Vatican, arguing that the intellectual bedrock of Rome would allow him to help navigate and respond to increasing tensions back home.⁹⁷ He spent two years in Santiago de Maria parish and came to understand the challenges that his flock had to endure, the least of which were religious in nature.⁹⁸ He attempted to speak with

⁹⁶ Della Rocca, Roberto Morozzo. *Oscar Romero: Prophet of Hope*. Boston, MA: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2015.42-43.

⁹⁷ Della Rocca, Roberto Morozzo. *Oscar Romero: Prophet of Hope*. Boston, MA: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2015.44.

⁹⁸ The Santiago de Maria parish had a population of about ten thousand with the entire diocese having a population of less than half a million. The entire population was estimated to be 95% Catholic. The majority of the people lived in rural areas and were overwhelmingly poor.

everyone, dedicated himself to performing duties at remote areas of the diocese and attempted to address the devastating poverty by setting up programs that helped those with immediate needs.⁹⁹

Scholars point to Romero's confrontation with government atrocities during his tenure at Santiago. One such example is that of five peasants who were heinously butchered by military guardsmen. The military guardsmen responsible for the murders accused the five victims of subversive activity – a common accusation at the time – and seemed indifferent about the deaths.¹⁰⁰ Romero spent time with the grieving families, even seeing the body of one of the victims. The event left him disturbed and increasingly uneasy with military presence.¹⁰¹

Romero would later send a private letter on June 22, 1975, to President Molina requesting a full investigation. Romero, although moved by the incident and perhaps blinded by some bias, believed that the military could not be responsible for such atrocities and returned to focus on his affairs within the church.¹⁰² Up to this point, although aware of the ongoing political affairs, Romero was still sheltered. He had been

⁹⁹ Della Rocca, Roberto Morozzo. *Oscar Romero: Prophet of Hope*. Boston, MA: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2015.49-52.

¹⁰⁰ Brockman, James R. *Romero: A Life. The Essential Biography of a Modern Martyr and Christian Hero*. Orbis: Maryknoll. 2005. 54.

¹⁰¹ Walters, Kerry. *Saint Oscar Romero: Pastor, Prophet, Martyr*. Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media, 2018. 65.

¹⁰² *Ibid.* 54.

confined to desk work – a secluded figure. His focus was almost purely on internal church matters. Therefore, it made sense that individual instances of violence at the margins of national awareness did not reach him. As it was, Romero’s focus concentrated on the tasks necessary of church officials.

Even as he ministered to his flock, Romero was very concerned with protecting the church. Romero worried about the politicization of the church by Salvadoran priests, producing a document entitled *Three Factors in the Priests’ Political Movement in El Salvador*. The 1975 letter demonstrates an unmistakable ignorance to the political injustices of El Salvador. Located at the archives of the Diocese of Santiago de Maria, Michael Lee interprets Romero’s letter as a focus on the role of church leaders and their role in non-political formats. Romero focused on church doctrine, while questioning the intent of politically motivated priests.¹⁰³ Essentially, he was not quick to fully question government affairs that led to atrocities. But as time passed, this too would change as violence rose to unprecedented extremes. Romero was not fully ready to accept the truth of his surrounding as peasants from the country were. At the edge of undoing the social fabric of El Salvador, the next election would open Pandora’s box for national repressive violence.

Building up to Civil War

“We all knew since 1977. I used to go to the protests. They tried to kill us. We would pass by soldiers and make fun of them. They would turn their guns on

¹⁰³ Lee, Michael. *Revolutionary Saint: The Theological Legacy of Oscar Romero*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books. 2018.39.

us. But what made me come [to the United States] was seeing the killing of a pregnant woman.” – Ana. Interviewee, 2015.

Twenty-five of the twenty-seven interviewees, mostly women now in their 60s, noted that the civil war was already underway well before the officially accepted date. El Salvador was a boiling cauldron that would spout hot liquid every so often until it finally boiled over. The shadows of the past that boiled for years were alive and well in 1977, a new president and a new archbishop were on their way. The new president, General Carlos Humberto Romero (no relation to Oscar Romero) worsened the situation for Salvadorans: the numbers of victims of political violence increased from dozens per month to hundreds.¹⁰⁴ Eight days after his election into office, a mass police shooting of protestors in Plaza of San Salvador left one hundred dead.¹⁰⁵ It was estimated that upwards of 50,000 people had come to protest.¹⁰⁶ In 1978, four hundred peasants protested high loan interest rates and high costs of fertilizer. Police opened fire on them, killing four and wounding thirty.¹⁰⁷ It seemed that one president after the next would only

¹⁰⁴ McClintok, Cynthia. *Revolutionary Movements in Latin America: El Salvador's FMLN and Peru's Shining Path*. Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1998. 106

¹⁰⁵ Manuel Anne, et al. *America's Watch: EL Salvador's Decade of Terror: Human Rights since the Assassination of Archbishop Romero*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991. 6.

¹⁰⁶ Stanley, William. *The Protection Racket State: Elite Politics, Military Extortion, and Civil War in El Salvador*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996. 100. See Also, William Stanley, *The Protection Racket State*.

¹⁰⁷ Armstrong, Robert and Janet Shenk. *El Salvador: The Face of Revolution*. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1982. 99.

worsen the situation for the average wage-earning worker. “The regime’s rejection of the opposition’s apparent electoral victories of 1972 and 1977 helped polarize the political process, marginalized moderate politicians, and strengthened the arguments of radicals on the need for armed struggle to overthrow the regime.”¹⁰⁸ And for the first time, the oligarchy began campaigns against the Catholic Church – the one institution that once stood by its side.¹⁰⁹ This opened the doors to kidnappings and murder of priests throughout the country, including Rutilio Grande and Archbishop Romero. The country no longer wanted moderates’ repeals or reforms, but a replacement for the oligarchy-controlled government.¹¹⁰ This included the archaic and oligarchy-friendly church.

Then Archbishop Luis Chávez y González started to implement the teachings of the Second Vatican Council and sent a shockwave to El Salvador’s elite Catholic corners. The refocus on church matters and attention given to the greater body of Catholics in El Salvador disturbed the elite who thought themselves to have the ear of church leaders. Archbishop Chávez y González quickly became disliked and in early 1977, retired at the age of 75. The papal nuncio consulted both the oligarchy and government, deciding on someone who would not oppose the government and had not shown any sign of

¹⁰⁸ Bryne, Hugu. *El Salvador’s Civil War: A Study of Revolution*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1996. 43.

¹⁰⁹ Armstrong, Robert and Janet Shenk. *El Salvador: The Face of Revolution*. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1982.89-90.

¹¹⁰ Almeida, Paul D. *Waves of Protest: Popular Struggle in El Salvador, 1925-2005*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008. 103-104.

controversy.¹¹¹ February 3 of 1977, a name had been put forth for the new archbishop. Bishop Romero was the new Archbishop of El Salvador. He was promoted in the hopes that he would turn a blind eye to the oligarchy's patronage. The oligarchy was already divisive and upset those peasants from numerous churches were rebelling against them, disrupting their financial interests. By contributing to the building of churches and paying the salaries of church officials such as Catholic school teachers, the oligarchy expected the church to keep peasants complacent.¹¹² This may have been a clear win for the oligarchy under previous tenures, but Romero had evolved into a role that they were unaware of. He transitioned into his new role with the same fervor he had in Santiago. It was with the assassination of his friend, Father Rutilio Grande, that the country and oligarchy saw the unseen Romero. The death of his friend revealed and altered the course of the war in El Salvador but also the way that the Catholic Church came to be seen. The startled Romero of Santiago had to shift for this new role as archbishop and respond to the death of one of his priests.

Rutilio Grande was a Jesuit priest who was shaped by the liberal political culture of the University of Central Americas and was noted as one of the best priests in the town of Aquilares. He was born into the peasantry class of El Salvador and spent his years as a

¹¹¹ Eisenbrandt, Matt. *Assassination of a Saint: The Plot to Murder Óscar Romero and the quest to bring his Killers to justice*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017. 46.

¹¹² Della Rocca, Roberto Morozzo. *Oscar Romero: Prophet of Hope*. Boston, MA: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2015. 61.

priest promoting their well-being and demanding social justice. “Rutilio favored the unionization of campesinos from Aquilares, in order to improve the conditions of their lives but wanted to distinguish between membership of the church and membership of politics.”¹¹³ He was known for being a man of action rather than a man of words. It was his labor and desire to help the poor that eventually made him a target of military violence. On March 12, 1977, Grande was driving back home with a young boy, Nelson Lemus, and Manuel Solórzano when the car was struck by bullets.

After Monsignor Romero was informed of Father Grande’s death in Aquilares, President Molina called to give Monsignor Romero his condolences. Such precision in time allowed for suspicion that the president perhaps arranged the execution of Father Grande.¹¹⁴ Nonetheless, after the death of Father Grande, Monsignor Romero wrote to President Molina expressing his concern over rumors involving the government’s role in the assassination. Romero hesitated from taking quick judgment until an official report from a properly conducted investigation was presented. President Molina eventually wrote to Monsignor Romero accusing leftist rebels of the murders.¹¹⁵ It became clear that the president and the Salvadoran government had no intention of conducting a proper

¹¹³ Della Rocca, Roberto Morozzo. *Primero Dios: Vida de Monseñor Romero*. Edhasa: Buenos Aires. 2010. 173.

¹¹⁴ Delgado, Jesus. *Oscar Romero: Biografía*. San Salvador, El Salvador: Universidad de Centro America. 2013. 76.

¹¹⁵ Brockman, James R. *Romero: A Life. The Essential Biography of a Modern Martyr and Christian Hero*. Orbis: Maryknoll. 2005. 11.

investigation. Monsignor Romero met with priests and advisors and concluded that he should protest the government by not attending state events until a proper investigation concerning Father Grande's death was underway.¹¹⁶

Following the funeral of Father Grande, Romero and Salvadoran archdiocese clergy voted to close all Catholic schools for three days as a way for families to reflect on the murders, and the decision was made to have one mass the following Sunday, March 20.¹¹⁷ Those who could not attend could listen over the radio, making the mass a national event.

As the newly appointed archbishop of El Salvador, Romero's first homily came in the wake of his friend's assassination. In his homily, he reminded his listeners that the church has no enemies, but rather, it has only love to offer. And in a prepared statement for radio and newspapers, he wrote: "We should all take example from Rutilio, he made a choice and took it to the end. He made the choice to be the voice for the voiceless."¹¹⁸

The moniker would eventually be retrofitted to describe Romero.

¹¹⁶ Campbell-Johnston, Michael. *Truth and Memory: The Church and Human Rights in El Salvador and Guatemala*. Ed. Michael Hayes and David Tombs. Gracewing: Herefordshire. 2001. 48.

¹¹⁷ Campbell-Johnston, Michael. *Truth and Memory: The Church and Human Rights in El Salvador and Guatemala*. Ed. Michael Hayes and David Tombs. Gracewing: Herefordshire. 2001.. 14-15.

¹¹⁸ Della Rocca, Roberto Morozzo. *Primero Dios: Vida de Monseñor Romero*. Edhasa: Buenos Aries. 2010. 175.

Following the funeral of Father Grande, the nuncio of bishops scolded Romero for being “irresponsible, imprudent, and inconsistent in his as action as bishop.”¹¹⁹ The overall sentiment by the Salvadoran bishops was to keep a working relationship between the Salvadoran Catholic Church and the government. According to Della Rocca, most bishops supported oligarchic rule of El Salvador and “they were not especially interested in the ecclesiastic renovation according to Vatican II.”¹²⁰ This could not have been clearer than at the inauguration of President Romero where the attendance of pro-government Bishops Alvarez of San Miguel and Barrera of Santa Ana were overshadowed by Archbishop Romero’s absence.¹²¹

Internal discord had been ongoing, even recently as delegates spoke for and against the canonization of Romero. Just after a month of being archbishop, Romero felt ignored by the Salvadoran government and challenged by the nuncio. With conflicts at home, Romero left for Rome on March 26, 1977. This visit came to Rome as a complete surprise and many cardinals were left alarmed from the archbishop’s actions.¹²² There, he

¹¹⁹ Campbell-Johnston, Michael. *Truth and Memory: The Church and Human Rights in El Salvador and Guatemala*. Ed. Michael Hayes and David Tombs. Gracewing: Herefordshire. 2001. 15.

¹²⁰ Della Rocca, Roberto Morozzo. *Primero Dios: Vida de Monseñor Romero*. Edhasa: Buenos Aires. 2010. 354.

¹²¹ Bishop Alvarez as El Salvador’s military vicar and a former colonel for the Salvadoran military.

¹²² Delgado, Jesus. *Oscar Romero: Biografía*. San Salvador, El Salvador: Universidad de Centro America. 2013. 88.

requested an audience with Cardinal Sebastiano Baggio – the prefect of the Congregation for the Bishops. Cardinal Baggio’s role was to appoint, remove and evaluate the performance of bishops.¹²³ Romero and Bishop Baggio spoke for half an hour. That Wednesday after arriving, Romero was able to speak with Pope Paul VI about the issues concerning the people of El Salvador and the murder of Father Rutilio.¹²⁴ Although there was evidence of a brief working relationship, nothing came of it.

This would not be the last time internal disagreement in the Salvadoran Catholic Church would become a papal matter. As archbishop, Romero would make four trips to Rome. With every trip, he would have to defend his actions as archbishop. Soon, fellow bishops attempted to challenge Romero’s authority by writing to Rome. In early 1979, Bishops Aparicio of San Vicente, Alvarez of San Miguel, Barrera of Santa Ana and Revelo of Santiago de Maria sent a letter entitled Political-Religious Situation in El Salvador.¹²⁵ In the letter, the bishops described Romero as engaging and promoting Marxism, and accused leftist priests and other religious leaders as dividing the religious population, creating a “crisis of faith.”¹²⁶ Brockman argues that the letter “distorts beyond

¹²³ Brockman, James R. *Romero: A Life. The Essential Biography of a Modern Martyr and Christian Hero*. Orbis: Maryknoll. 2005. 20.

¹²⁴ Brockman, James R. *Romero: A Life. The Essential Biography of a Modern Martyr and Christian Hero*. Orbis: Maryknoll. 2005. 20.

¹²⁵ Will, Emily Wade. *Archbishop Oscar Romero: The Making of a Martyr*. Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2016. 139-140.

¹²⁶ Brockman, James R. *Romero: A Life. The Essential Biography of a Modern Martyr and Christian Hero*. Orbis: Maryknoll. 2005. 179.

recognition [Romero's] attitude and actions in relation to the popular organizations. It accepts wild theories about the priests and lay workers killed to explain away the persecution of the part of the church that was trying to follow Medellín."¹²⁷ Such divisions amongst the bishops and Romero meant that he could find little solace back home as he attempted to situate himself into a role that could bring about change.

Romero traveled again to Rome for the beatification mass of Father Francisco Coll. While there, he also attempted to speak with the new Pope, John Paul II in order to discuss the situation in El Salvador. He had attempted to obtain an audience from the pope in advance through the Salvadoran ambassador, Prudencio Llach, but was unable to receive one.¹²⁸ Romero seemed to have left his case in the hands of God.¹²⁹ "I am still very concerned about the attitude they show to the pastor of a diocese, considering that I asked for this audience some time ago...I have put it in God's hands."¹³⁰ Continuing to make his case to Rome, that Saturday, Romero was granted an audience for Monday May 7. His meeting, like most of his meticulous attention to detail in his personal life, was

¹²⁷ Ibid. 180.

¹²⁸ Brockman, James R. *Romero: A Life. The Essential Biography of a Modern Martyr and Christian Hero*. Orbis: Maryknoll. 2005. 166.

¹²⁹ Romero, Oscar. *Mons. Oscar A. Romero: Su diario desde 31 de mazo de 1978 haasta Jueves 20 de marzo de 1980*. Librería Mons. Luis Chávez y González Arzobispado de San Salvador: San Salvador. 158-159.

¹³⁰ Romero, Oscar. *Archbishop Oscar Romero: A Shepard's Diary*. Trans. Irene B. Hodgson. Cincinnati, Ohio: Saint Anthony Messenger Press, 1993. 211.

crafted to be direct and informative. He included folders that investigated human rights violations and inquiries over the deaths of priests.¹³¹

Romero and Pope John Paul II discussed the disunity of the bishops of El Salvador. Pope John Paul II noted that Bishop Quarracion of Avellaneda had traveled to Rome to suggest that an administrator be placed in El Salvador.¹³² However, Romero's role and authority were not challenged. Rather, Pope John Paul II advised him to be prudent and to continue to protect the church.¹³³ Although Romero felt somewhat uneasy considering the reports being sent to Rome, he reassured himself that Pope John Paul II had confidence in him based on the words he had told him at the meeting.

Whatever the circumstance and whatever trust Romero had in Pope John Paul II, the Vatican sent three apostolic visitors to look over matters in El Salvador. The Congregation of Bishops, led by Cardinal Baggio, considered appointing an administrator who would temporarily take over all archbishop duties.¹³⁴ However, Cardinal Baggio

¹³¹ Romero, Oscar. *Archbishop Oscar Romero: A Shepard's Diary*. Trans. Irene B. Hodgson. Cincinnati, Ohio: Saint Anthony Messenger Press, 1993. 389.

¹³² Brockman, James R. *Romero: A Life. The Essential Biography of a Modern Martyr and Christian Hero*. Orbis: Maryknoll. 2005. 167.

¹³³ Della Rocca, Roberto Morozzo. *Primero Dios: Vida de Monseñor Romero*. Edhasa: Buenos Aires. 2010. 389.

¹³⁴ Campbell-Johnston, Michael. *Truth and Memory: The Church and Human Rights in El Salvador and Guatemala*. Ed. Michael Hayes and David Tombs. Gracewing: Herefordshire. 2001. 49.

thought that appointing another bishop from El Salvador would not work and bringing someone from outside El Salvador would be unmanageable considering the situation of the country at that time.¹³⁵

Romero was left to continue his work as archbishop. Just as the relationship between the bishops and Romero seemed futile, politics had become deadlier.

The New Frontline of War

“I was small, I could hear the gunshots. I remember when it took 24 hours to take down the barracks in Chalatenango. At night we could see the glow of all the bombs from the house.” – Mauricio. Interviewee, 2015.

The hopes of mutually progressive politics had now ended, and new tactics were being used by those disenfranchised with the political state. The rebel opposition took to the same strategies as the military. Kidnappings by leftist groups had become commonplace.¹³⁶ Leftist guerillas demanded money or would murder selected victims because of their association with the government. The ransom money from kidnappings would go towards the purchase of weapons to prepare a military-style attack against the government. Over time, the murder of oligarchy members, mayors and soldiers became justifiable retribution.¹³⁷ However, the targeted groups or individuals

¹³⁵ Romero, Oscar. *Archbishop Oscar Romero: A Shepard's Diary*. Trans. Irene B. Hodgson. Cincinnati, Ohio: Saint Anthony Messenger Press, 1993. 216.

¹³⁶ President Duarte's daughter would later be kidnapped by rebels and released in 1985.

¹³⁷ Armstrong Robert and Janet Shenk. *El Salvador: The face of Revolution*. Boston: South End Press, 1982. 104. 127.

were not the only victims. Leftist groups killed individuals who had no party affiliation.

Leftist groups would plant land mines at roadblocks and throughout specific routes.¹³⁸

Larry, who was a graduate student working on the Hoya de Ceren archaeological site recalls being told by locals not to stop for women with “babies” in their arms.

Locals claimed that those babies were explosives. As Larry saw women with babies attempting to hitchhike, he remembered “[getting] the hell out of there.” The leftist militants’ use of violent force was portrayed as a bigger threat than the government. The most infamous left group, FMLN, grew from this environment.¹³⁹

FMLN, comprised of several leftist groups who gained recruits ranging from students to farm workers, were the new giant. Their success came from being well-organizing and creating a sense of community by supplying sufficient food, medical assistance and assigning tasks for every person in the community. The tasks were directed towards the soon-to-be civil war, specifically in areas such as Chalatenango and Morazán. Women were encouraged to join, based on the commitment to equality and trust among FMLN community members.¹⁴⁰ Social scientist Tommie Montgomery claims

¹³⁸ Manuel Anne, et al. *America’s Watch: EL Salvador’s Decade of Terror: Human Rights since the Assassination of Archbishop Romero*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991. 10.

¹³⁹ See Cynthia McClintock, *Revolutionary Movements in Latin America*. [PAGE NUMBER?]

¹⁴⁰ Viterna, Jocelyn. *Women in War: The Micro-Process of Mobilization in El Salvador*. Oxford University Pres, 2013.62-67.

that upwards to 30% of women were combatants while 20% held leadership positions.¹⁴¹ Although not always voluntary, in some cases FMLN forced recruitment in the later part of the war.¹⁴² In Morazán, leftist militants entered the town and demanded that civilians join their cause or leave town.¹⁴³ With the deadly political climate that existed at the time, Salvadorans could choose between anti-government militias or the state-run military. The growing number of recruitments and the pending international attention drawing to El Salvador had now caused wide-spread panic.¹⁴⁴

And suddenly, that July of 1979, Sandinistas had successfully taken over neighboring Nicaragua.¹⁴⁵ Salvadoran military officials feared this political wave would extend into El Salvador. Indeed, leftist groups were encouraged by the success of the Sandinistas and began restructuring as a way to combine forces against the Salvadoran

¹⁴¹ Montgomery, Tommie Sue. *Revolution in El Salvador: From Civil Strife to Civil Peace*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992. 123.

¹⁴² D'Haeseleer, Brian. *The Salvadoran Crucible: The Failure of US Counterinsurgency in El Salvador, 1979-1992*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2017. 117.

¹⁴³ Manuel Anne, et al. *America's Watch: EL Salvador's Decade of Terror: Human Rights since the Assassination of Archbishop Romero*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991. 65.

¹⁴⁴ In 1979, President Romero traveled to Mexico in order to secure oil but was questioned about growing concern over human rights violations which then drew attention from U.S. officials.

¹⁴⁵ The Sandinistas were a leftist political menagerie in Nicaragua, associated with communism, who were able to take control of the Nicaraguan government in 1979. Their rise to power stems from support and rebuttal to the violent military assault on its citizens – a virtual mirror of the political turmoil occurring in El Salvador.

government.¹⁴⁶ Salvadoran officials viewed President Romero as unable to control the country if mass revolution took place in El Salvador. The United States once again went as far as pressuring President Romero to attempt land reform in exchange for military help to prevent the next Nicaragua.¹⁴⁷ Nonetheless, faith in the president was minimum and the coup to remove President Romero went forward. Jose Napoleon Duarte became the president of El Salvador.

Researchers Roberto Armstrong and Janet Shenk suggest that Duarte's accomplishment of attaining the presidency came from his desire to be president at any cost, even at the risk of having no power while army generals ran the operations.¹⁴⁸ Duarte, the former mayor of San Salvador who initiated reforms, now appeared to have continued the militarized regime of every president. Duarte's government quickly declared a state of emergency, banning groups of three or more from gathering, and arresting individuals who occupied factories in protest of the government's inactions over socio-economic indifference.¹⁴⁹ Similar to his predecessors, Duarte seized the opportunity to suppress the opposition. Six of my interviewees were caught in the middle

¹⁴⁶ Almeida, Paul D. *Waves of Protest: Popular Struggle in El Salvador, 1925-2005*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008. 163.

¹⁴⁷ Bryne, Hugu. *El Salvador's Civil War: A Study of Revolution*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1996. 47.

¹⁴⁸ Armstrong, Robert and Janet Shenk. *El Salvador: The Face of Revolution*. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1982.179.

¹⁴⁹ Gettleman, Marvin, et al. *El Salvador: Central America in the New Cold War*. New York, NY: Grove Press, 1981. 85.

of military violence against protestors. They all claim, as college students, to have attended the protests in a peaceful manner and were violently attacked by military weapons for no reason other than gathering to protest.

In addition, this presidency saw more deaths at the hands of the government in the month that Duarte was installed than any other time of that year.¹⁵⁰ The threat against Salvadoran lives were so high that protest numbers dropped. Snipers would target students, sit-in protestors and churches.¹⁵¹ Individuals or groups who opposed Duarte could find themselves victim to this suppression.¹⁵² Military aid from United States cemented Duarte's control over the country. To put into perspective, in 1978 the United States gave \$4 million in military aid to Central America. None of that \$4 million was given to El Salvador. By 1983, the United States was sending \$281 million in military aid just to El Salvador. This did not include covert money from the CIA, the Pentagon, and various international assistances.¹⁵³ In 1984, the United States sent \$229 million and

¹⁵⁰ Americas Watch Committee and the American Civil Liberties. *Report on Human Rights in El Salvador*. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1982. 278-281.

¹⁵¹ Almeida, Paul. *Waves of Protest: Popular Struggle in El Salvador, 1925-005*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008. 167.

¹⁵² Pearce, Jenny. *Promised Land: Peasant Rebellion in Chalatenango El Salvador*. Latin American Review, 1986.

¹⁵³ Berryman, Phillip. *Inside Central America: The Essential Facts Past and Present on El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, and Costa Rica*. New York. NY: Pantheon Books, 1985. 62.

\$132 million in 1985 to El Salvador.¹⁵⁴ The money would then be funneled to support military assignments, such as secretive death squads and air strikes.¹⁵⁵

Air strikes became a new form of defense for the military and were valued as weapons against well-hidden hamlets of guerillas. However, the use of air raids and the definition of who qualified as insurgents varied. For example, the Salvadoran military opened fire onto mostly women and children in 1981, on the Sumpel River using air strikes near the city of Chalatenango.¹⁵⁶ This attacked was coordinated using U.S. helicopters who fired on 4,500 to 8,000 peasants fleeing to Honduras. Shortly thereafter, another massacre occurred on the same river in 1982 when the Salvadoran military once again, opened fire on fleeing women and children.¹⁵⁷ Civilian casualty was nothing more than collateral damage as was the case near the Sumpel river, Chalatenango, Berlín and Mozote.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁴ Montgomery, Tommie Sue. *Revolution in El Salvador: From Civil Strife to Civil Peace*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992. 183.

¹⁵⁵ According to Hugh Bryne, death squads had previously existed and were involved in all sectors of military branches. Their effectiveness were their connections to high-ranking officials who could mask their activities.

¹⁵⁶ Stanley, William. *The Protection Racket State: Elite Politics, Military Extortion, and Civil War in El Salvador*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996. 205.

¹⁵⁷ Montgomery, Tommie Sue. *Revolution in El Salvador: From Civil Strife to Civil Peace*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992. 164

¹⁵⁸ Bonner, Raymond. *Weakness and Deceit: U.S. Policy and El Salvador*. New York, NY: Times Books, 1984. 352.

For interviewee Roberto, his brother had joined the army but recalls that “[the army] was afraid that most recruits would switch sides and leave their post.” But his brother did not abandon his post. He was sent to Protests and Morazán. “He never told me what he did. He just said that he would shoot. He was in the army for ten years, specializing in killing the enemy. Our mother never knew he killed people. He only told me that he killed people because our mother had recently died, and he was drunk and couldn’t take the guilt.” While Roberto’s brother would endure the war, he recalls that he would never be the same. His brother later committed suicide in the early 2000s. No one could escape the stranglehold of El Salvador’s military tactics.¹⁵⁹

To persuade the American government to stop sending military personnel and military equipment, Romero read his letter to then President Carter in his homily on February 17, 1980. In his letter, Romero asked the United States government to rethink their plan of further assisting the government, who “only know only how to repress the people and favor the interests of the Salvadoran oligarchy.”¹⁶⁰ He stated that as archbishop, it was his “obligation to see that faith and justice reign [on the] country.”¹⁶¹ He petitioned in the interest of human rights; stopping foreign interference; allow for

¹⁵⁹ The end of the Salvadoran civil war left 75,000 victims of violent deaths with a quarter of the country’s population migrating outward to various countries. See Hugh Byrne, *El Salvador’s Civil War: A Study of Revolution*.

¹⁶⁰ Romero, Oscar. “Letter to President Carter.” *Archbishop Oscar Romero: Voice of the Voiceless: The Four Pastoral Letters and Other Statements*. Ed. Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Martín-Baró. Orbis: Maryknoll. 1985. 189.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.* 189.

economic autonomy; and to forbid military involvement. President Carter never responded to the letter.¹⁶²

In the weeks leading up to Romero's murder, Salvadoran military advisors warned the archbishop to change his schedule and to stay out of the limelight. They encouraged him to perform mass in larger churches, away from small churches and chapels, and not to drive himself.¹⁶³ Romero was unphased: aware of the dangers, he continued his regiment to serve the people that sought his help. On March 23, 1980, to a standing room only basilica, he gave what many would consider his greatest homily to the people of El Salvador:¹⁶⁴

I would like to appeal in a special way to the army's enlisted men, and in particular to the ranks of the Guardia Nacional and the police – those in the barracks. Brothers: you are part of our own people. You kill your own campesinos brothers and sisters. Before an order to kill that a man may give, God's law must prevail: Thou shall not kill! No soldier is obliged to obey an order against the law of God. No one has to fulfill an immoral law. It is time to take back your consciences and to obey your consciences rather than the orders of sin. The Church, defender of the rights of God, of the law of God, of human dignity, of the person, cannot remain silent before such abominations...In the name of God, and in the name of this suffering people, whose laments rise to heaven each day more tumultuous, I beg you, I beseech you, I order you in the name of God: Stop the repression.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶² Vigil, María López. *Monesñor Romero: Memories in Mosaic*. Orbis: Maryknoll. 2013. 268.

¹⁶³Ibid. 269.

¹⁶⁴ Brockman, James R. *Romero: A Life. The Essential Biography of a Modern Martyr and Christian Hero*. Orbis: Maryknoll. 2005. 240.

¹⁶⁵ Romero, Oscar. "The Church in the Service of Personal, Community and Transcendent Liberation." *Romero Trust*. 23 March 1980. Web. 11 October 2015. < http://www.romerotrusted.org.uk/homilies/162/162_pdf.pdf>

The next day, Romero was celebrating mass for Sara Meardi de Pinto. She was the mother of Jorge Pinto, who was the publisher of *El Independiente* – a newspaper known for exposing the atrocities of the Salvadoran government. His homily, using the gospel as his platform, detailed the dangers necessary in life to follow Jesus Christ.¹⁶⁶ He asked his listeners to sacrifice themselves like Christ: “May his body immolated and this blood sacrificed for humans nourish us also, so that we may give our body and our blood to suffering and to pain – like Christ, not for self, but to bring about justice and peace for our people.”¹⁶⁷ A few moments later, a shot rang out throughout the chapel. Screams, cries, and fright filled the small chapel. Romero was on the floor. The “voice of the voiceless,” the Archbishop of El Salvador, the Ladino son and priest from Ciudad Barrios, Oscar Arnulfo Romero y Galdámez was shot dead in the heart on Monday, March 24, 1980.

That night, after news of the murder had reached the edges of the country, San Salvador’s most affluent neighborhoods celebrated with fireworks.¹⁶⁸ By the time the

¹⁶⁶ Romero read from John 12:23-26. The gospel points to death as the seed that bears much fruit – a gospel quote greatly used to describe the death of Romero.

¹⁶⁷. Romero, Oscar. “Letter to President Carter.” *Archbishop Oscar Romero: Voice of the Voiceless: The Four Pastoral Letters and Other Statements*. Ed. Jon Sobrino and Igancio Martín-Baró. Orbis: Maryknoll. 1985:193.

¹⁶⁸ Dada, Carlos. “The Beatification of Oscar Romero.” *The New Yorker*. 19 May 2015. Web. 10 Oct 2015. <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-beatification-of-oscar-romero>

news of Romero's murder had reached the corners of the country, the Salvadoran Catholic Church declared three days of mourning. Church schools and offices closed for those three days while other institutions requested more days for mourning – even those businesses owned by the oligarchy.¹⁶⁹

The days that followed

“La religión mata” graffiti on the sidewall of the Santa Ana Cathedral in the department of Santa Ana, El Salvador Interviewees for this project, Hilda, and Guillermo, had only recently been married when they rushed into the cathedral at Romero's funeral. The smell of sweaty bodies and the fear of having the military break into the cathedrals caused unimaginable anxiety. Guillermo without thinking, ran to the front of the church and grabbed the microphone that Romero had used for so many of his homilies.

Guillermo understood the importance of such artifacts considering that anything affiliated with Romero would bring about horrible repercussions. He stuffed the microphone in his pants and waited the chaos out.

Dina recalls seeing the Red Cross help organize the viewing. She attended the viewing with her aunt and friend. But once chaos erupted, she hid behind the large concrete base of the General Barrios statue. Once things slightly calmed, she and her aunt took off their high heels and ran barefoot back to their home. As news spread, no one had heard from her friend. Dina and another friend went looking for her. She was found dead among the other trampled victims. This was the scene at Romero's funeral.

¹⁶⁹ Brockman, James R. *Romero: A Life. The Essential Biography of a Modern Martyr and Christian Hero*. Orbis: Maryknoll. 2005. 245.

The funeral took place on Palm Sunday in front of the Catedral Metropolitana De San Salvador with Cardinal Ernersto Corripio of Mexico representing Pope John Paul II.¹⁷⁰ Absent would-be government and international officials.¹⁷¹

In what appeared now to be Salvadoran fashion, a bomb exploded during the homily, at the end of the plaza where the cathedral is located.¹⁷² Within seconds, gunshots begun to ring, and chaos ensued. Thousands of people frantically searched for safety in the very small vicinity. Early reports claimed that twenty-six were killed in the crowded plaza that held thirty thousand.¹⁷³ Later reports calculated that forty people were killed and another two hundred injured in the crowd of a speculated eighty thousand. One girl, around ten, was shot through the eye.¹⁷⁴ Many attempted to find refuge in the cathedral. Cardinal Corripio and Catholic officials quickly moved Monsignor Romero's body inside the cathedral for immediate burial. Inside the church, six thousand individuals, including church nuns, priests and church officials were held in

¹⁷⁰ Ibid. 246.

¹⁷¹ Della Rocca, Roberto Morozzo. *Primero Dios: Vida de Monseñor Romero*. Edhasa: Buenos Aries. 2010. 467.

¹⁷² Ibid. 247.

¹⁷³ Treaster, Joseph. B. "26 Salvadorans Die at Bishop's Funeral." *New York Times*. 31 March 1980.

¹⁷⁴ Times Wire Service. "40 Die in Panic at Funeral for Salvador Prelate: Incomplete." *Los Angeles Times*. 31 March 1980. A5.

temporary safety.¹⁷⁵ People crushed inside the half-completed Cathedral with shooters aiming their rifles directly at the doors.

Bishop Sergio Mendez of Cuernavaca, Mexico was heard saying “I think it is fitting that the bishops who came to honor Romero, should suffer the same situation as his people.”¹⁷⁶ Bishop Mendez’s quote would ring truer to the injustices that would continue in El Salvador’s violent history. It would be over an hour before the shooting would stop. In the end, most people did not die because of bombs or having been in the line of fire, it was the crushing weight of human bodies attempting to escape that left a total of 31 dead.¹⁷⁷

There were numerous reasons given for the chaos. One, it was believed that the extreme right was attempting to steal the body.¹⁷⁸ Two, early reports by Salvadoran news outlets blamed left-winged rebels. Even United States Ambassador Robert White mistakenly blamed the left although the Catholic Church had stated that leftist commandants had assured the Church that they would not create a stir. Washington Post

¹⁷⁵ Ibid. 8.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid

¹⁷⁷ Della Rocca, Roberto Morozzo. *Primero Dios: Vida de Monseñor Romero*. Edhasa: Buenos Aries. 2010. 467.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid. 247.

reporter, Christopher Dickey reported that shots came from the government building across from the Cathedral.¹⁷⁹ But ultimately, no reason was ever given. Catholics faced war at church.

The War: Be a Patriot, Kill a Priest

“My cousin’s mother-in-law went crazy. They killed five of her sons. They did not do anything, and they killed them. They killed them! My cousin saw victims being hung with a sign that read “do not touch,” so you would see the bodies fall apart as they hung and rotted.” – Silvia. Interviewee, 2015.

On January 10, 1981, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) began counter attacks, officiating the Salvadoran civil war.¹⁸⁰ FMLN had the capability to defeat the Salvadoran army in 1981, however United States intervention forced the war to continue.¹⁸¹ FMLN’s effectiveness in combating the Salvadoran government was its ability to mobilize and change venues throughout the countryside. In addition to having various leaders with different military goals, the process of combating leftist military groups became a difficult task for El Salvador’s military.¹⁸² And by debilitating essential

¹⁷⁹ Dickey, Christopher. “40 Killed in San Salvador.” *The Washington Post*. 31 March 1980. A1.

¹⁸⁰ Uclés, Mario Lungo. *El Salvador in the Eighties: Counterinsurgency and Revolution*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1996. 41.

¹⁸¹ Montgomery, Tommie Sue. *Revolution in El Salvador: From Civil Strife to Civil Peace*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992. 119.

¹⁸² Uclés, Mario Lungo. *El Salvador in the Eighties: Counterinsurgency and Revolution*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996. 60.

infrastructure such as essential bridges and roadways throughout El Salvador, and doing so, in small doses, meant that FMLN could create a national insurrection that could easily topple the government.¹⁸³ By June of 1983, FMLN controlled one-fifth of El Salvador and reduced the Salvadoran army by one-third.¹⁸⁴ 1984 saw the FMLN attack a United States-built barracks, important roadways that left the military discouraged and momentarily defeated.¹⁸⁵ Both parties were prepared for the long haul. The military and FMLN would draw out the civil war until 1992.

Unlike previous presidencies that targeted so-called communists (peasant farm workers and union trades who challenged the government's mishandling of social reforms) President Duarte's administration indiscriminately targeted its political opponents such as union organizers, student protesters and teachers.¹⁸⁶ For instance, prior to the Duarte presidency murders numbered 4,419 (1982) and 2,375 (1983) and 2,375 (1983).¹⁸⁷

¹⁸³ D'Haeseleer, Brian. *The Salvadoran Crucible: The Failure of US Counterinsurgency in El Salvador, 1979-1992*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2017.109.

¹⁸⁴ Uclés, Mario Lungo. *El Salvador in the Eighties: Counterinsurgency and Revolution*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996. 65.

¹⁸⁵ D'Haeseleer, Brian. *The Salvadoran Crucible: The Failure of US Counterinsurgency in El Salvador, 1979-1992*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2017. 97.

¹⁸⁶ See Joe Fish and Cristina Sganga, *El Salvador: Testament of Terror*.

¹⁸⁷ Montgomery, Tommie Sue. *Revolution in El Salvador: From Civil Strife to Civil Peace*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992.173.

One hundred and five thousand Salvadorans were displaced from their homes.

In 1984, that number rose to 468,000 in El Salvador and 500,000 in the United States.¹⁸⁸

Death squads, on the other hand, functioned as de facto muscle at the ground level to discourage insurrections at all levels and create round the clock fear. It had been a technique that was customary for government leaders but grew in popularity after Duarte became president. Through its own metamorphosis over the wartime period, public display of murders by death squads had been replaced with large scale massacres in the countryside.¹⁸⁹ Of the more internationally publicized massacres occurred before the Duarte presidency in the hamlet of Mozote in the department of Morazán where FMLN had a stronghold. However, the Mozote massacre occurred in the heavily Protestant populated community who were known for their neutrality during the civil war. Protestants were not associated with communism, indigenous people or ministering to the poor. The massacre demonstrated an indifference to the victims, as it was a means to eradicate political opponents. It was, as Leigh Binford argues, meticulously planned and executed to deplete civilians from villages to leave guerilla soldiers isolated from human buffers.¹⁹⁰ Guerilla soldiers had warned them of the impending dangers, but

¹⁸⁸ Bryne, Hugh. *El Salvador's Civil War: A Study of Revolution*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1996. 115.

¹⁸⁹ Stanley, William. *The Protection Racket State: Elite Politics, Military Extortion, and Civil War in El Salvador*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996. 229.

¹⁹⁰ Binford, Leigh. *The El Mozote Massacre: A Compelling Story for Everyone concerned with the lives of Third World Peoples*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1996. 16.

villagers decided to go about their daily lives.¹⁹¹ The Atlacatl battalion death squad entered the town and commanded everyone to gather at the town plaza, including refugees from neighboring communities.¹⁹² The next day on December 11, 1981, the Atlacatl battalion carried out the massacre. The battalion separated everyone according to sex and age. The men were tortured, decapitated, and machine gunned while the women were raped and strangled. The children could be heard screaming as the battalion committed their murders.¹⁹³ After the massacre, the battalion began the attempt to bury and burn the victims. It is believed that between 700 to 900 Salvadorans were killed at Mozote.¹⁹⁴ Survivors began reporting the events but would take several days before news reached around the world. The FLMN began inviting reporters to Mozote while the Salvadoran government denied any massacre had taken place.¹⁹⁵

The Salvadoran government's execution of its own civilians had no limits, no remorse and denied their role in the massacre.

¹⁹¹ Bonner, Raymond. *Weakness and Deceit: U.S. Policy and El Salvador*. New York, NY: Times Books, 1984. 338.

¹⁹² Binford, Leigh. *The El Mozote Massacre: A Compelling Story for Everyone concerned with the lives of Third World Peoples*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1996. 18-20.

¹⁹³ Banner, Mark. *The Massacre at El Mozote*. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1993. 77.

¹⁹⁴ Banner, Mark. *The Massacre at El Mozote*. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1993. 89.

¹⁹⁵ Banner, Mark. *The Massacre at El Mozote*. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1993. 89. See also Mike Hoyt, "The Mozote Massacre," *Columbia Journalism Review*. 31.5, Jan 1, 1993

At the administrative level, President Duarte had hoped to replace military officials with civilians for administrative positions.¹⁹⁶ This initial attempt by Duarte at social reform was superficial at best since the administration was widely and openly corrupt as it was violent, and no change came about from those changes. Corruption was as wide as it was deep; the documented cases touched the [presidential home], government ministries and agencies across the country. There were reports that government jobs were given only to those with letters of recommendations from [conservative party] officials; that scarce teaching positions went only to party members; and that displaced person were threatened with a cutoff of benefits, including U.S.-funded food aid if they did not participate in progovernment demonstrations.¹⁹⁷ The task was complete control over people, economy, and movement at every social level.

The audacious and public mass murder of civilians was key to resolving the civil war on a human rights level. However, key figures were pronounced in convincing the Salvadoran public that the government had undertaken new and damning actions. The murder of Catholic missionaries was a path not seen before in the country's violent history. This strange amalgamation of terror and reprisal towards its so-called enemies thrust El Salvador again into the spotlight.

¹⁹⁶ Williams, Phillip J and Knut Walter. *Militarization and Demilitarization in El Salvador's Transition to Democracy*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997. 117.

¹⁹⁷ Montgomery, Tommie Sue. *Revolution in El Salvador: From Civil Strife to Civil Peace*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992.201.

Initiated with the arrest and torture of Father Rafael Barahona in 1975 and again in 1977, the government had warned Archbishop Romero that he would be responsible for his priests' actions.¹⁹⁸ However, with the assassinations of Farther Rutilio Grande in 1977 and Archbishop Romero in 1980, Catholics in El Salvador suffered enormous setbacks as the Church began to focus away from the oligarchy and focus on its peasant population. The tide had turned, and the country now saw violent attacks on their religious authorities that would last the next decade.

Shortly after the assassination of Archbishop Romero, Maryknoll sisters Ita Ford, Maura Clark, Ursuline sister Dorothy Kazel and lay church woman Jean Donovan were followed, raped and murdered on December 2, 1980 by the Atlacatl death squad.¹⁹⁹ Local authorities were ordered to cover up the murders but nearby residents made Archbishop Romero's successor Archbishop Damas and United States ambassador Robert White aware of the international crime.²⁰⁰ The Carter administration momentarily stopped military aid in hopes of a real investigation but insiders in the White House were aware that the government was behind the crimes and any aid or the lack thereof

¹⁹⁸ Sanchez, Peter. *Priest Under Fire: Padre David Rodriguez, the Catholic Church, and EL Salvador's Revolutionary Movement*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2015. 116-117.

¹⁹⁹ Americas Watch. *El Salvador's Decade of Terror: Human Rights Since the Assassination of Archbishop Romero*. New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1991.94-96.

²⁰⁰ Noone, Judith. *The Same Fate as the Poor*. New York, NY: Orbis Books, 1996.

would not stop the Salvadoran government from killing Salvadoran or American citizens.²⁰¹ El Salvador was a rogue nation.

And for a moment, it appeared that the Catholic Church had come to the defense of its churchmen and women. Pope John Paul II scheduled a pastoral visit to El Salvador in 1983. Once there, he demanded that his handlers stop at Romero's tomb so he could pray.²⁰² He would again visit his tomb in 1996. Michael Lee argues that Pope John Paul II's initial judgement of Romero stemmed from the desire to keep peace amongst the bishops. Since years had passed since Romero's death, Pope John Paul II's understanding of Romero had evolved.²⁰³ The pope called Romero a "zealous and venerated pastor who tried to stop violence. I ask that his memory be always respected and let no ideological interest try to distort his sacrifice as a pastor given over to his flock."²⁰⁴ With that said, the Pope's visit and reaffirmation of Romero's sacrifice could not sway the military from hurting church officials.

On November 16, 1989, the same Atlacatl battalion attempted to force their way into the Jesuit residence at the Central American University. The priests voluntarily

²⁰¹ LeoGrande, William M. *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. 62-63, 93.

²⁰² The Archbishop Romero Trust. "Romero Century," *The Archbishop Romero Trust*, <http://www.romerotrusted.org.uk/romero-century-1981-2017>. Accessed 28 March 2020.

²⁰³ Lee, Michael. *Revolutionary Saint: The Theological Legacy of Oscar Romero*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018. 183-184.

²⁰⁴ Newpower, Paul D. and Stephen T. DeMott. "The Pope in Central America: What Did His Trip Accomplish?" *St. Anthony Messenger*, June 1983.

allowed them to search the premise, not knowing the actual cause for their arrival. The battalion was ordered to assassinate the university rector, Ignacio Ellacuría and not to leave any victims.²⁰⁵ Jesuits Ignacio Martín-Maró, Segundo Mones, Amando López, and Juan Ramón Moreno were killed in the process. They were told to go the garden were the Atlacatl battalion executed them.²⁰⁶ Along with the Jesuits, Father Joaquín López y López, Julia Elva (housekeeper), and Celina Ramos (daughter of Julia Elva) were murdered in the residence. The battalion took notes, writings and information belonging to the Jesuits. After the murders had taken place, a picture of Monsignor Romero was discovered with a bullet hole in the heart.²⁰⁷

When the battalion finished, they regrouped, drank beer²⁰⁸ and left a note “FLMN executed those who informed on it. Victory or death, FMLN.”²⁰⁹

The Toll of War

“It was tremendous, but we had to learn to live with war. We had to continue with life. We had to live. We had to go to work, live for our kids, take our sick to hospitals.

²⁰⁵ Betancur, Belisario, et al. *Report of the UN Truth Commission on El Salvador*. New York: United Nations. Print. 50.

²⁰⁶ Betancur, Belisario, et al. *Report of the UN Truth Commission on El Salvador*. New York: United Nations. Print. 51.

²⁰⁷ Whitefield, Teresa. *Paying the Price: Ignacio Ellacuría and the Murdered Jesuits of El Salvador*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995. 13.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.* 13-14.

²⁰⁹ Betancur, Belisario, et al. *Report of the UN Truth Commission on El Salvador*. New York: United Nations. Print. 51.

We could not stop living. We knew that we were battling against the bad things in our country.” – Don Victor. Interviewee, 2015.

The price of civil war had taken its toll, the cries for peace needed to be resolved. The war left 75,000 people dead²¹⁰ and would cause one in four Salvadorans to find new homes outside of El Salvador.²¹¹ FMLN had attempted peace talks from 1981 to 1984 without success. Then President Duarte attempted peace talks from 1984 to 1987. Initial attempts by FMLN in 1981 were first dismissed by the Salvadoran government and then pressure came from the United States to initiate peace talks in 1984 stalled. Both attempts failed. Meaningful peace talks were not materialized until the period of 1989 to 1992 when FMLN and the conservative party ARENA came together to finalize a peace treaty in 1992.²¹² With record numbers of deaths and refugees migrating out of El Salvador, a resolution was needed. FMLN and the conservative party ARENA came together for three weeks in April of 1991 to end the war.²¹³ The negotiations were finalized on

²¹⁰ Wood, Elisabeth. *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 8.

²¹¹ Coutin, Susan Bibler. *Nation of Emigrants: Shifting Boundaries of Citizenship in El Salvador and the United States*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007. 7

²¹² Uclés, Mario Lungo. *El Salvador in the Eighties: Counterinsurgency and Revolution*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996. 200.

²¹³ Provisions in the peace accords included FMLN as a legal political party, issues pertaining to legislative, executive and judicial branch of government. The agreements reduced the size of the military, suspended forced recruitment, and a cease-fire of six months.

January 16, 1992, in Mexico.²¹⁴ With a cease fire, the Plaza Cívica in San Salvador was bombarded with civilians celebrating. FMLN banners were hung from the national palace as the cathedral bells rang out.²¹⁵

While this was a new beginning for the worn-torn country, El Salvador still had an enormous uphill task ahead. The country was in physical ruins. And the church that raised Romero from a young boy, now housed his body and spirit.

²¹⁴ Wood, Elisabeth. *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 28.

²¹⁵ Wood, Elisabeth. *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.51.

Chapter Three: The Bi-Nationalism of Monsignor Romero in the Parishes of Los Angeles

One of my earliest memories as a child was a trip with my mother to El Piojito market in MacArthur Park. Trash littered the outside store facade and the smell of rotting fruits left a pungent fragrance that permeated the overcrowded sidewalks. But despite the crowds, El Piojito was where the Salvadoran community of Los Angeles shopped for their necessities.²¹⁶ We were living in South Los Angeles at the time and the weekly trips to MacArthur Park seemed long, endless, and burdensome. Salvadorans in the 1980s and 1990s made efforts to stay under the radar in Los Angeles. MacArthur Park was one microcosm where Salvadorans could feel at ease but simultaneously live in fear. Salvadorans encountered discrimination and physical attacks from Mexican and Mexican Americans living in close quarters. These attacks eventually spawned the birth of the Salvadoran gang, MS-13.²¹⁷ MS-13 started as a metal music appreciation group in the 1980s, composed of ex-patriots from El Salvador that quickly morphed into a violent gang. During its formative years MS-13 was physically attacked by neighboring gangs, and to protect its members, MS-13 began displaying extreme acts of violence. The

²¹⁶ El Piojito was an outlet market that no longer exists in MacArthur Park. It catered to immigrants and the impoverished of the area.

²¹⁷ See “The Origins of Southern California Latino Gangs” by Al Valdez in *Maras: Gang Violence and Security in Central America* and T.W. Ward’s *Gangsters without Borders: An Ethnography of a Salvadoran Street Gang*.

violent acts committed by the newfound gang members were similar in nature to the ones witnessed during the El Salvador's civil war. The gang's transformation from a music appreciation group to violent gang was initiated to help the day-to-day existence of members who felt physically threatened in their new home of Los Angeles. The formation of the gang was another survival mode. Salvadorans in Los Angeles worked to survive the day-to-day realities of living in a large city, working low hourly wages and sending remittances to loved ones who could not migrate to Los Angeles during the Salvadoran civil war.²¹⁸ During the period of the early 1990s, the Salvadoran population continued to increase. According to the 1999 United States Census Bureau's sample data, in 1980, close to 95,000 Salvadoran people were within its borders. By 1990, over 465,000 Salvadorans were in the United States. Salvadoran immigrants came through Los Angeles. MacArthur Park became the publicly open Underground Railroad for Salvadoran migrants. MacArthur Park at the time was the decomposing corpse of the American dream where Salvadorans looked for scraps in a time where all Salvadorans fleeing Central America felt insecurity. MacArthur Park bleeds the disparity and fear that propelled Salvadorans to seek out and establish their religious.

I cannot recall my age on that day, but I can remember my arm extending above my head when I held my mother's hand as we were shopping. A crowd had gathered near the market. My mother, being the inquisitive person that she is,

²¹⁸ See Leisy Abrego, *Sacrificing Families: Navigating Laws, Labor and Love Across Borders*, Susan Bibler Coutin, *Nation of Emigrants: Shifting Boundaries of Citizenship in El Salvador and the United States* and Cecilia Menjivar, *Fragmented Ties: Salvadoran Immigrant Networks in America*.

dragged me to the spectacle in the middle of the street. A man had been stabbed and the bright blood covered his face and torso. I will never forget the bright, almost synthetic red color drenching this young man's body. He struggled with each breath, as he inhaled and exhaled painfully. The crowd stood watching remotely, without making any attempt to help or comfort. I remember the crowd clearly, each person wearing dark colored pants in the shades of brown and grey with lighter colored button up shirts, in the simple style reminiscent of campesinos of Central America. And they all stood still, in their browns and greys, watching as the life slowly left this body. It looked like the photos one finds on El Salvador's civil war with people standing around bodies left in the middle of the road. We waited as the ambulance came and prepared him to take him on the gurney. The red ambulance with equally bright orange lights parked to the left of us and quickly transported him. To this day, my mother is surprised that I remember that Christmas red ribbon color. Seeing this man who was just stabbed and left to die in front of me is still fresh in my mind decades later. This is my earliest memory in life and my introduction to MacArthur Park.

MacArthur Park conveys a part of Los Angeles' living history that details the migration of Salvadorans.²¹⁹ It gathers narratives of exhaustion, fear, and milieu faith that began in El Salvador and uprooted to Los Angeles. This chapter begins here because this is my earliest memory. A memory that is rooted in the Salvadoran community in Los

²¹⁹ In 2007, half of the Salvadoran-American population was found in California. See Coutin, Susan Bibler. *Nation of Emigrants: Shifting Boundaries of Citizenship in El Salvador and the United States*. Cornell University Press, 2007. 7.

Angeles and one that deals with the violent and macabre realities that shape the religious lives of vulnerable immigrant communities as they seek to make sense of their place in the religious landscape of Los Angeles.

This chapter will discuss how Salvadoran Catholics have constructed their religious lives in the United States by centering Monsignor Romero in their devotional life. Romero created an expectation of a religious leader even as he was simultaneously denounced as a radical and elevated to the national leader of the Catholic faith. The role and impact that he left behind remains imbued with religious significance by those who felt that he made a difference in the lives of the average worshipping Catholic in El Salvador. By entering Catholic parishes in a new country, Salvadorans are creating a bi-national faith that seeks to connect their past to their present-day experience.

Salvadoran Catholics authenticate connections to their home-country's Catholic churches by positioning Romero at the center, thereby establishing a sense of religious authority and nationalism for Salvadoran Catholics to welcome other Salvadoran Catholics into their communities in Los Angeles. Bi-national faith is birthed out of necessity rather than desire. The El Salvador civil war ruptured the routines of Catholics by severing individuals from their Catholic churches and their families. As war progressed throughout El Salvador and Catholics began to endure deadly assaults, Salvadoran Catholics began migrating to the United States. By taking what they learned about Catholicism during Romero's tenure as archbishop, Salvadoran Catholics began to establish connections and communities in Los Angeles. In replicating the communities that were left behind, Salvadoran Catholics initiated a sequence of back-and-forth faith that influenced the

fever pertaining to Romero's beatification ceremony in El Salvador and in Los Angeles. It also helps to address and contextualize Salvadorans' experience of violent pasts and violent presents in the U.S. The experiences and narratives Salvadoran migrants bring to the parishes celebrate Romero as a Salvadoran icon that necessitates a place amongst a changing religious landscape inclusive of Salvadoran migrants. More than that, by centering their faith on Romero as a centered place where Salvadoran Catholics understand how to live their Catholic faith, it reaffirms nationality and belonging especially as Salvadorans return to El Salvador for visits and pilgrimages.²²⁰

This chapter is based on ethnographic work among Salvadorans in the surrounding downtown Los Angeles area. MacArthur Park was selected as the center because the park continues to be a place of secular and also religious importance to Salvadoran migrants who enjoyed the safety of a Salvadoran community within Los Angeles. It is understood by scholars to be the entry portal for migrant Salvadorans.²²¹ Expanding outward from MacArthur Park, this research looks at surrounding Catholic parishes, including the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, Saint Agnes, Saint Cecilia and Saint Thomas the Apostle. Central to the Salvadoran community of Los Angeles, these churches were also part of my own upbringing in the City of Angels. I attended

²²⁰ Sarat. Leah. *Fire in the Canyon*. New York University Press, 2013. 124.

²²¹ See "Remembering Through Cultural Interventions: Mapping Central Americans in L.A. Public Spaces" by Ester E. Hernandez and "Illegal Chickens: The Art of Branding Poultry in Central American Los Angeles" by Yajaira Padilla in *U.S. Central Americans: Reconstructing Memories, Struggles, and Communities of Resistance*, 2017.

masses in these communities honoring friends and family for baptisms, weddings, and funerals. I know the faded colors on the walls, and I know where to park when I am running late – which always seems to be the case as I get older. I recognize the bellowing sounds of their bells. Unfortunately, I remember most their toll bells. Each church has its own history of Salvadorans, and this dissertation does not intend to navigate it all in this chapter. Rather, this chapter will focus on the role that Romero has had on parishioners as they selected their parish and construct their ritual and religious lives. I communicated with the extended network of Salvadorans in Los Angeles, including kin, Catholic parishes, and Romero organizations to gather a larger pool of ideas and thoughts on the importance of Romero in their lives.

My thesis is that the importance of Romero in the lives of Salvadoran Catholics can be seen through the celebration and maintenance of his relics as devotees keep his memory alive and connect their experiences of violence. Through material religious practice, Salvadorans syncretize their faith with memories from their homeland and thereby develop a niche, a space for themselves in the already over-populated religious landscape of Latino Catholics in Los Angeles. Many Salvadorans willingly adapted to worshipping Mexican icons such as Santo Niño de Atoche or the Virgin of Guadalupe. Now, Salvadoran can add their saint to the catalog, the inventory, of material sacra in Los Angeles. Material religious culture lends credibility to their articulation of a particular form of Salvadoran Catholicism that is built on sacrifice and memories of war. It encompasses these ideas of faith through the image of Romero and making him truly theirs as he continues to be the only saint of El Salvador.

As Jennifer Scheper Hughes states, “religion is not only about belief and embodied practice but also about affect and emotion.”²²² This chapter seeks to understand how Romero affected Salvadoran migrants as they ventured into a new country. To see what they thought and felt about not knowing what would become of them, their country and their faith. The chapter also addresses the mirrored effect it would have in El Salvador since many routinely visit El Salvador in post-civil war era. Luis León makes the argument that the continuation of faith creates a back and forth between the borders, modifying each other as times passes.²²³ For example, just as the Virgin of Guadalupe transcends borders to connect and influence the worshipping faithful in Mexico and in the United States, the figure of Romero influences Salvadoran Catholics to transform him into their own version of what they want him to be in this bi-national scenario. Romero becomes a fluid symbol, imbued with what power and meaning that the faithful most need to attribute to him. And with it, comes the political and theological innuendos that surrounded Romero’s symbolic power.

The Periphery of MacArthur Park: Materiality of a Salvadoran Icon

To enter MacArthur Park is to enter a niche of past city planning that is now shaped and appropriated by the most recent needs of its immigrant occupants.²²⁴ Statues

²²² Hughes, Jennifer Scheper. *Biography of a Mexican Crucifix: Lived Religion and Local Faith from the Conquest to the Present*. Oxford University Press, 2010. 244.

²²³ Leon, Luis. *La Llorona’s Children: Religion, Life and Death in the U.S.-Mexican Borderlands*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004. 244.

²²⁴ In “What the MacArthur Park Project tells us about our time” by Galen Cranz in *How the Arts Made a Difference* (1989), Cranz details how MacArthur Park (then

of Prometheus, Civil War veteran Harrison Otis, and modernist statutes stand ignored and decaying as their history slowly shrinks in importance as the changing face of Los Angeles changes. This change is symbolically found at the opposite side of the park where the solemn statue of Monsignor Romero looks inward towards the interior of the park zone. The bronze statue was constructed in El Salvador and took over a decade to find an artist that could capture Romero. Once the statue was constructed and completed, he traveled by land across Central America and across the United States border before he was placed on the Southeast corner of MacArthur Park. Headed by the Salvadoran American Leadership and Educational Fund, the statue cost \$350,000 and was built in three months. Salvadoran artist Joaquin Serrano was commissioned to create the figure. Executive Director Carlos Vaquerano helped select Serrano because of his humbleness as an artist.²²⁵ Prior to its arrival in the United States, the statue visited the Hospital Divina Providencia Chapel, where Romero was assassinated. The statue would safely cross the border of San Diego where so many Salvadoran – and Central Americans in general – cross, risking their lives. The statue is surrounded by Romero’s quotes carved on blocks and volcanic rock from El Salvador, representing the mountainous terrain of El Salvador.

known as Westlake Park) was a product of urbanization that attempted to bring nature to cities. Overtime, recreation became a focal point thereby transforming the now renamed MacArthur Park once again. With the need to build Wilshire Blvd., and having to split the park into two, the sense of back to nature and recreation was lost.

²²⁵ Lopez, Robert. “Groundbreaking set for monument to slain Salvadoran archbishop.” *Los Angeles Times*. 21 June 2013. <<http://articles.latimes.com/2013/jun/21/local/la-me-ln-archbishop-oscar-romero-plaza-20130620>> Web. 1 April 2018 Accessed.

On the day the statue was revealed, Los Angeles Archbishop Jose Gomez blessed the image with holy water and asked that the community “keep working for human life, liberty and dignity. Let’s keep pressing for immigration reform – to keep our families together, to give rights to our workers, and to open the way to make new citizens for this great land of ours.” Mayor Garcetti stated, “this is a monument that salutes courage, humanitarianism and the rights of the poor.”²²⁶ However, as pomp and circumstance subsided and months and years pass since the installation of the statue, the ethnographic research shows a different narrative from the one given by the archbishop and the mayor.

On the days I visit the statue, I noticed that the statue garners little attention from the individuals waiting at the bus stop just a few feet away. Passerby and loiterers were sitting on the blocks with Monsignor Romero’s quotes as benches. The two individuals were wearing white shirts and black pants – the ubiquitous uniform of the service worker. They conversed for some time then left, giving no attention to or consideration of the quotes that were underneath them. A young man sat down and started to eat his lunch. Pigeons circled in hopes of getting crumbs as the exhaust and noise of buses and cars filled the air, all while local vendors blared Latin music at full capacity thereby making for a disruptive and chaotic scene. Out of curiosity, I left to the opposite side of the park to ask a police officer if he knew where the statue of Monsignor Romero was located. He did not know.²²⁷

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Diaz, Kristian. November 10, 2014. July 2, 2016.

The striking factor from these observations was the lack of historical importance that this statue denotes in such a highly Salvadoran-populated area. I had hoped to see some religious significance such as photographs, flowers or candles. It seemed to be another disregarded statue in MacArthur Park. And yet, this is not the case. This statue is a marker for immigrant rights rallies and causes that affect the Salvadoran communities.²²⁸ As late as 2017, Angelinos protested in denouncing the U.S. President and his anti-immigrant policies. Like Romero, the statue stands amidst the protests with calm dignity; transplanted and placed in the middle of Los Angeles. But it does not stand without its complexity.

For this project, the statue is less a memorial to the archbishop's life, witness, and martyrdom but rather a window into the mythologies of Romero and individual religious lives that were exported to the United States. Roland Barthes discusses the participation of myth in society in what he calls a signifier. A signifier is a concept where meaning can be created, deconstructed, and change through a struggle of empty ambiguity and a fully understood back history. In discussing how myth is compounded by meaning, he describes a young black man in French uniform in the 1955 summer edition of *Paris-Match* magazine saluting the camera. Barthes argues that the picture is empty without its signifiers, but Barthes allows himself to have a clear and full understanding of the picture

²²⁸ Lopez, Robert. "Groundbreaking set for monument to slain Salvadoran archbishop." *Los Angeles Times*. 21 June 2013. <<http://articles.latimes.com/2013/jun/21/local/la-me-ln-archbishop-oscar-romero-plaza-20130620>> Web. 1 April 2018 Accessed.

in where the young black man connects to a tumultuous and colonial repression that supports the bourgeoisie.

“What is invested in the concept is less reality than a certain knowledge of reality; in passing from the meaning to the form, the image loses some knowledge: the better to receive the knowledge in the concept...it is a formless, unstable, nebulous condensation, whose unity and coherence are above all due to its function. In this sense, we can say that the fundamental character of the mythical concept is to be appropriated.”²²⁹

The statue of Romero, with an ambiguous historical understanding of who he was and what he did, can take on the various and individualistic histories that Salvadoran migrants attribute to Romero and ignore the life that he lived or the message that he sent that was specific to Salvadoran Catholics living in El Salvador during the civil war. But it runs the danger of supporting myths that are ahistorical and washes away the work that he attempted to accomplish during his lifetime. Interviewees in this dissertation take the step to connect their story to the mythologies of Romero by giving into the larger narratives that are supported by colloquial stories, theologians, and mass media outlets. One such mythology attributes Liberation Theology to Romero. Barthes goes on to argue in *Mythologies* that myth not only sanitizes history so that authoritative figures can erase their lucrative involvement in the past, myth has the potency to erase history. The statue is able to simultaneously ignore the colonial project that attempted to eradicate indigeneity but ignores the forced conversions of natives in the Americas. The statue is a European monument to colonial legacy in the Americas. It stands across from other

²²⁹ Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers, Hill and Wang, 1972. 119.

statues that salute individuals who were thought to be heroic men at the time. The Romero statue praises Romero but does so by imprinting itself in the style of European glorification. Although the Catholic church Indian camps that forced the construction of its structures may be gone, as Aimé Césaire argues,

“the political, economic, and cultural links established by colonial domination still remain with some alterations...colonial domination required a whole way of thinking, a discourse in which everything that is advanced, good, and civilized is defined and measured in European terms.”²³⁰

The statue is a monument to those who had the funds, good health, and ability to escape El Salvador; representative of those who championed forth. However, with the colonial project in place, and having a population that unknowingly have given into the social contract of being schooled in European appreciation, the statue draws upon emotions by migrants that seek the same fortunes of those who had the ability to champion the statues that sit alongside the statue of Romero in MacArthur Park. However, it is Barthes' argument of creating a type of ahistorical myth that engages Romero devotees and allows them the security to speak about their experience of crossing borders, both national borders and religious borders. Because devotees need not the exact details of Romero's life, they can attribute their pain and suffering to his. And since Romero is representative of church authority, it gives authenticity to their religious formation as it grew in Los Angeles.

²³⁰ Césaire, Aimé. *Discourse on Colonialism*. Translated by Joan Pinkham, Monthly Review Press, 2000. 7.

But to engage with the religious lives of Salvadorans that create and promote Romero's legacy, one must see beyond the periphery of MacArthur Park. The area that surrounds Westlake where MacArthur Park sits includes West Adams, the El Salvador Corridor, downtown Los Angeles, and South Central. Driving through these neighborhoods that once housed the elite Anglo-Saxons of Los Angeles in the 1930s, African American families in the 1970s, and Latino families (mostly Mexican and Mexican American) in the 1980s, the search for Romero is exhausting. His image is found throughout the neighborhoods if you look for him. A hand drawn painting of his head adorns the side of a small convenience store where Latin American goods can be bought on Beverly Boulevard. A somber mural of Monsignor Romero makes its home on the entire wall at the corner of the Salvadoran corridor on Pico Boulevard, reminding all patrons of the importance of this person to the Salvadoran community. Its dark brown and grey silhouette, along with its long black background evokes a dark past for Salvadorans. While on the other side of the corridor is a more vibrant mural where the image of Monsignor Romero sits behind the Metropolitan Cathedral of San Salvador where his funeral mass took place. Both Monsignor Romero and the cathedral are painted in black and white while vivid orange, red and yellows make up the backdrop to look like sunset in Los Angeles after long and heavy rains. These images create and maintain a space made out of necessity where marginalization continues to exist.²³¹ Rachel Heidenry

²³¹ In *From Patmos to the Barrio: Subverting Imperial Myths*, David Sanchez argues that images of the religious in public spaces where marginalized people congregate are used as counter narratives in order to empower themselves as they are left out from certain dominating or imperial histories.

has argued that Salvadoran “murals become part of [a community’s] historiography and perform layered extensions of an individual or community’s existence, identity and values.”²³² And while it may appear that the images of Romero are easily located, they are minute in comparison to more mainstream religious icons such as the Virgin of Guadalupe or the suffering Christ. Locating these images makes their space, style and interpretation a communicator as to the people who inhabit those particular buildings. It points to Salvadoran Catholics who witnessed the civil war in El Salvador or watched as family members fled to Los Angeles. Therefore, the statue of Monsignor Romero in MacArthur allows us the opportunity to start.

The statue is a hub like spokes on a wheel where they extend to the edges of Los Angeles, taking with it the migrants who left El Salvador and, in the process, transformed their own understanding of what it means to be Catholic from El Salvador.

The Catholics that lived through the civil war of El Salvador (1980-1992) is unlike previous and post-civil war Catholics. From pre-Vatican II to influential components of liberation theology, Salvadoran Catholics went through a tumultuous period that left at least 80,000 dead, including religious leaders.²³³ This was a period of

²³² Heidenry, Rachel. “The Murals of El Salvador: Reconstruction, Historical Memory and Whitewashing.” *Public Art Dialogue*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2014, pp123.<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21502552.2014.878486>

²³³ See *El Salvador’s Human Rights since Assassination of Archbishop Romero* by America’s Watch and *Paying the Price: Ignacio Ellacurí and the Murdered Jesuit Priests of El Salvador* by Teresa Whitfield.

public denouncement of Catholic priests. Posters that read, “be a patriot, kill a priest” resounded with those escaping for their lives. These types of pronouncement and public displays of hate molded the style of Catholicism that Salvadorans would expect once they arrived in Los Angeles. This style of Catholicism demanded a church that sought socio-economic justice through the gospels and public action which could nurture their faith to grow.²³⁴

The attraction to a particular type of Catholic Church and the exploding population of Salvadorans near downtown Los Angeles required that Churches in the neighborhoods of South Central, West Adams, downtown Los Angeles and Westlake transform themselves to meet the religious needs of incoming migrants. Salvadorans desired community through religious commonality that was found in El Salvador.²³⁵ Salvadorans would require a bi-national religious affiliation where they could praise without fear of retaliation, reflect on what they experienced in their home country and the freedom to express that tragedy with their countrymen and women. I will demonstrate that this was done through kinship, word of mouth and by material items that attract Salvadorans to a particular space – like a portrait or relic. The attractions to these churches are multiple but they all seek to continue the practices that interviewees

²³⁴ Peterson, Anna. *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion: Progressive Catholicism in El Salvador's Civil War*. New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997. 67.

²³⁵ Part of being part of the Catholic community in El Salvador was influenced by Romero's actions to celebrate one mass after Father Rutilio Grande's murder and his radio broadcasts that included his homilies so the country to hear his desire to end oppression.

remember in El Salvador. In some cases, churches changed because the attending population demanded it to change, and others sought out their own religious fulfillment.

Requiring More than a Space

I reached out to Ana in 2015 because of her devotion to her church and her frequent visits to El Salvador, particularly to celebrate the beatification mass of Romero. Her mother and sister are the only two left from her immediate family who live in El Salvador. Ana migrated to the United States after a non-violent student protest resulted in a police attack that resulted in complete chaos where students were shot down. It was the sight of a victim of that attack, a pregnant woman with her unborn child outside the womb that motivated her exodus. She traveled by bus to Los Angeles where she stayed with friends in the vicinity of downtown Los Angeles.²³⁶ For the past 30 years she has worked as a housekeeper in the Hollywood hills but spends most weeknights at her church that sits parallel to the Romero Square located on Vermont Avenue and Pico Boulevard. Her easygoing personality and candor are what attracted me to contact her for this project. To this day, she is the one yelling in the crowd in protest or in celebration. At about five feet tall, her distinct raspy voice can be heard from a distance.

When Ana arrived in Los Angeles in 1977, she immediately looked for a Catholic Church: setting her eyes on continuing the practices she had learned as a girl. She attended several churches in the vicinity of MacArthur Park where she had been living. Ana began to attend churches that she believed could replicate the type of Catholic

²³⁶ Interviewees, including Ana do not assign 1980 as the start of the civil war because they believe that the war was declared earlier than that.

Church she had been accustomed to attending in El Salvador – the vibrant gospels and the friendly homegrown priests. She decided on Saint Agnes near downtown Los Angeles (in the West Adams area) but admits that as much as she has made this church her home, the priests lack a certain fiery desire to speak to their flock.²³⁷ She even laments at times that she wished the Church would send Latin American priests because they understand her and other Salvadoran attendees.²³⁸ But it would not be until her children left home that she dedicated more time to church events, becoming a catechist and a leader in organizing church fundraisers. She attends the annual regional conference sponsored by the archdiocese of Los Angeles to better understand her faith through the eyes of Latin America and Latin American theologians. But she jokingly admits that she falls asleep halfway through most of the lectures.

But her desire to bring Latin American priests into her parish goes to the point of commonality or shared experience with individuals from El Salvador and Central America. She and several of the parishioners (as I overheard one conversation) desire to listen to priests who have and continue to witness injustices through the eyes of a native born. Perhaps not so much injustices as they said but perhaps witnessing the same situations that attract them to listen to someone who comes from a similar background.

²³⁷ Catholic Churches in the United States often lack the structures to help Spanish speaking parishes but attempt to do so with Spanish speaking priests. See “Reflections on South American Catholics in the United States, 1997” in *¡Present!* edited by Timothy Matovina and Gerald E. Poyo.

²³⁸ Catholic Churches that surround Saint Agnes are Saint Thomas the Apostle, Church of the Immaculate Conception, Saint Vincent de Paul, Saint Stephen, Saint Cecilia, Holy Cross, and Nativity Catholic church.

The parishioners believe these priests of Latin America bring an exuberant liveliness to the church in comparison to the nonchalant attitude that Ana attributes to United States born priests. Her connection to these Latin American priests signals a direct connection to her childhood and how she envisions priests to be. They meet the expectations of her childhood. In that sense, that is why Romero “was a grand Archbishop” to Ana.

Romero’s impression as the image of the Salvadoran priests allows Ana to reconnect to both a nostalgic past but also reflect on the troublesome times brought about by the civil war. She transports the experience of being in El Salvador to Los Angeles, crossing the cultural boundaries by bringing the woes of her country to the relative safety of the United States. This is done through the space she inhabits. A space where migrant families pin photos of their loved ones to a portrait of Jesus descending from heaven and the statue of Mary holding Jesus is polished from human hands touching it in reverence. But in Ana’s return to El Salvador to celebrate the beatification mass of Romero, she brings forth the gusto of coming full circle and celebrating what she thinks to be due justice. Her presence at the beatification mass, along with two cousins who also live in Los Angeles, gave her the opportunity to find that commonality in religious faith that she seldom encounters, only when a Latin American priest passes through the parish. It is the experiential that informs her faith and in finding ways to connect back to El Salvador. Her faith is homegrown, regardless of the nation she resides. But the connection to Romero becomes a point of reference rather than a derivative that influences her faith and theology.

She listens to the homilies and how they affect her rather than a superficial topic to be dismissed. It is based on foundation of interpretation of scripture and how it is interwoven into daily life.

Ana comes to envision the Romero that has been shaped by his homilies, biographers, and memories of him. Romero becomes the “voice for justice and the voice for Salvadoran Catholics through literature”. Monsignor Romero becomes acculturated and, in the process, becomes inseparable from his image as the “voice of the voiceless” rather than his theological influence on her faith. He becomes a national figure and his advocacy for social justice overshadows how faith drove his tenure as archbishop. It becomes nuanced in the sense that Romero is nationally and culturally driven than theologically influential.

Memorialization of Romero represents a risk for Salvadorans because they experienced anti-Catholicism. During this period, military soldiers pasted posters stating, “be a patriot, kill a priest.” To remember Romero is to remember all the tragedies that took place during the civil war. But to memorialize him is to paint his legacy in a certain fashion that runs the risk of diverting from who he was. For example, the film Romero, he is painted without the depth of his theological training. In *Revolutionary Saint: the Theological Legacy of Oscar Romero*, Michael Lee makes the claim that Monsignor Romero was a liberation theologian because he pursued the vision articulated at the Second Vatican Council (1962) and the subsequent conference of Bishops at Medellín in 1968. This required a redirection and reallocation of church priorities and placing emphasis on the materialistic and spiritual impoverishment. In chapter two, I have made

the case that Romero was not a liberation theologian. Whether a devotee may make the claim that Monsignor Romero was a liberation theologian or a traditionalist who excelled in following Vatican orders, Salvadorans look past that to connect with him. Ana does not need a technical theological term or concept to see Romero as a leader of the Salvadoran Catholic Church. Her focus on his homilies and literature are the necessary requirements to catapult him to center stage. Her desire to see that same intuition in Latin American priests are the interpretation she sees from Romero's influence. On the other hand, Salvadoran Catholicism can depend on Romero's call for justice through faith. If we are to turn to the material, we will see that faith is driven by the Catholic call to action.

Traveling Devotees and the Migration of Monsignor Romero: Microphones, Tapes and Posters

I received a text message while at work from a close friend asking if I was going to attend the relic display at the cathedral on July 1st of 2016. I responded with, "I didn't know that was in town. I'll see if I can go." I surprisingly had that day off and there I found myself again at the Cathedral in downtown Los Angeles – uninspired by the Cathedral's architecture and museum-like interior. Unlike the Metropolitan Cathedral of San Salvador that hosts the body of Romero that still has visible signs of earthquakes, gunshots and the dense smell of smoke coming from candles, the Cathedral of Los Angeles forces the individual to think over the celebration of mass and the presentation of relics. It departs from the Eurocentric art that is found in many Latin American churches. You enter a holy space that seems synthetic with its modern opulence but soon realize

that its focus is its people and their presence. To attend a tour of relics at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels is to redirect the mind on these objects and develop a personal conclusion to the importance of their presence. By physically being near these relics of Catholic heroes and martyrs, the uninspired becomes inspired.

I arrived late morning to the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in downtown Los Angeles to the sun sitting heavy on the sand-colored brickwork. Midday, the bricks soak up every bit of heat and makes the two-minute walk from the parking garage to the entry doorway a never-ending journey. You open the incredibly heavy glass doors and the cold air hits the visitor with the faint smell of burning candles and what can only be described as aging varnished wood. Mass was scheduled prior to the relic presentations which consisted of remains or belongings of Thomas Moore, John Fisher, Junipero Serra and Oscar Romero. I rarely attend mass and I found myself in company of a couple of hundred people. This was quite empty in comparison to the three thousand who attend during a regular Sunday morning mass.

This mass celebrated Junipero Serra. He had just been canonized as an official Catholic saint in September of 2015. I find the dichotomy strange considering that a few steps away were relics of Romero who attempted to bring an end to mass suffering in his home country. Junipero Serra transformed the California coast by forcefully converting native peoples and transforming practices to suit the explicit needs of Catholicism in its attempt to bring about social change to the Americas.²³⁹ The

²³⁹ Tinker, George. *Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide*. Fortress Press, 1993. 47.

changes he brought about continue to draw controversy from native peoples and activists, as Serra has become a centerpiece for the wrongs of Catholic colonialism. A controversial figure, Serra's legacy is marked err and his hagiography questioned. It has even sparked symbolic violence. For example, the Santa Barbara mission had its statue of Serra decapitated and red paint spilled over the neck. At Saint Lawrence Martyr in Redondo Beach, the statue was stolen twice from its courtyard. It is ironic that the decapitation and mysterious abduction of the statue is reminiscent of the people of El Salvador who were brutally killed or in some cases, disappeared without a trace. Yet, to place Serra's relic next to Monsignor Romero creates a dichotomy of two different personalities separated by their legacy. Serra is pictured as a tool of suppression by scholars, activists, and native peoples who still feel the harsh realities of colonialism left by his leadership. Church leaders see Serra as a fervent disciple of Christ – an individual driven by faith to spread the gospel to new lands and lost individuals. As Serra's legacy suffers, Monsignor Romero's grows stronger. Monsignor Romero's legacy was initially questionable, and he was thoroughly depicted as a rogue priest. He was labeled a communist, an instigator and a reckless archbishop who supported guerilla warfare. All these labels have since been proven wrong. His legacy is now seen as a life devoted to his suffering flock and his personal faith as he embodies the "voice of the voiceless" moniker. Serra's indoctrination into Catholicism on the California coasts demonstrates a legacy that has been readapted by Catholics from El Salvador who see another authority figure of the Catholic Church who was genuinely driven by his pursuit to help those who

suffered under structural violence of El Salvador's civil war. A clear dichotomy, but at that moment, churchgoers celebrated the saint and the soon-to-be saint of the Americas.

Mass finished and the curator of Thomas Moore and John Fisher's relics gave a quick academic style lecture on the items, giving the audience a short introduction to the men and their importance to Catholic history. It was professional but distant and cold. Somewhat reminiscent of what Ana felt with American priests' style of preaching.

The caretakers/guardians of Monsignor Romero's relics (Guillermo and Elga) approached the microphone and introduced themselves as "children of Monsignor Romero." Both personally knew Romero since the murder of Rutilio Grande. Elga and her husband had been in attendance with Romero at Father Rutilio Grande's funeral, at Romero's last Christmas mass and at his funeral at the cathedral in San Salvador. They had been invited to be part of this short tour of relics as owners of a relic – the microphone used by Romero during the celebration of mass at the cathedral in El Salvador. Elga recalls the chaos that erupted at the archbishop's funeral mass. The military had stationed themselves across and around the cathedral in anticipation for a shoot-out. Bunkered in the cathedral, Guillermo tucked the microphone into his shirt. The same microphone that Monsignor Romero used during his homilies and radio broadcasts, all while remembering that Romero had said to them in the past "you are the real microphones." Elga praised and thanked God for Romero as her husband Guillermo began to weep at the mention of Romero's name. Guillermo's voice quivered throughout the cathedral, echoing through its pews. He claimed that through Romero, Jesus Christ swept

through El Salvador. Pointing to the El Mozote Massacre²⁴⁰, Guillermo claims that such atrocities will give El Salvador more martyrs than any other country in Latin America.²⁴¹ Their fervent faith demonstrates a theology built around Romero who sought after socio-economic justice through the gospel.

I approached them in a very timid fashion after mass and kindly asked for an interview. We met a month later, near the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Exiting the 405 freeway, I notice the Los Angeles National Cemetery: all those perfectly placed and clean headstones are the complete opposite to the tattered dead bodies left to rot in the streets of El Salvador during the civil war. Here, these individuals are cherished for their service. In El Salvador, human life is less appreciated. Every individual I interviewed witnessed some sort of public violence and the uninspired disposal of human bodies on the side of roads and building during the civil war. Guillermo and Elga arrived with pamphlets on Romero's life to reassure me of Romero's significance. As I sat with them, they described how Romero was the light that sparked a generation to seek out justice. Guillermo was firm that Romero was predestined to change El Salvador. In some ways, it has. El Salvador momentarily became the center of attention with the beatification ceremony, but it also reopened old wounds, particularly of murdered priests, nuns and lay Catholics. As Guillermo stated, their sacrifice brought the needed attention to the injustices being committed in El Salvador. Guillermo went on to paint the massacre

²⁴⁰ See *The El Mozote Massacre: A compelling Story for everyone concerned with the lives of Third World Peoples* by Leigh Binford.

at El Mozote. The massacre of El Mozote took place in December of 1981 when military soldiers entered the town of El Mozote and detained closed to one thousand men, women and children. Soldiers separated the children from women and the men from everyone else. Each group was slowly murdered and quickly buried in an attempt to hide the number of victims.²⁴² While the Catholic Church has yet to establish a cause for sainthood for those murdered at Mozote, Guillermo's faith centers back to El Salvador and Romero. Guillermo continuously paints Romero as their version of a savior but only in the style Jesus Christ. For example, Guillermo compares Saint Peter's three denials to fellow bishops who worked and denied Romero during his struggles. He suggests that the final years of Romero's life was dedicated to preaching just as Jesus Christ did before the crucifixion. Guillermo comes to see Romero as a light for spiritual guidance for Salvadorans.

It was at that moment that I came to the realization that unlike scholars who interview individuals who claim interactions with saints from a different era through meditation or outer body experience, Elga and Guillermo interacted closely with Romero through physical interaction. They listened to him as a friend and mentor. His loss was as significant, if not more, than any other individual in their lives because they carried a spiritual communion with him. Here, stood a man of great power with the title of Archbishop of the Roman Catholic Church who gave his life as Jesus Christ did

²⁴² See Mark Danner's *The Massacre at El Mozote and America's Watch El Salvador's Decade of Terror: Human Rights since the Assassination of Archbishop Romero*.

and they were fortunate enough to share time with him. As such, I could not challenge how they perceive Romero to be the Salvadoran version of Christ.

For Guillermo and Elga, this is the paradigmatic Salvadoran Catholic: the individual who heroically sacrifices himself or herself in the name of God so that justice can be achieved. They take on this role of sacrifice as they recalled bullets flying next to them at the funeral mass as they reached for the microphone. They risked their lives so they could continue the works of Romero. To sacrifice oneself is to achieve martyr status. And as Romero told Elga, they are indeed the real microphones. In this sense, that is true as they go and tell parishioners of different backgrounds the works of Romero that caused his death.

Guillermo and Elga brought that faith and sense of sacrifice to Los Angeles. They have brought with them the physical evidence that reemphasizes what was lost in El Salvador in hopes of replicating that religious enthusiasm in Los Angeles. For Salvadoran migrants, like Italian migrants in Harlem, sacrifice is inescapable, necessary, and accepted as part of their identity. Robert Orsi has argued that Italian Catholic immigrants use the idea of personal sacrifice in relation to religious suffering, allowing “men and women to believe that they have some control over their destinies even when they fear that they are otherwise bound to severe social and economic constraints.”²⁴³ That control comes in the way of participating in festivals or donations, and in the case of Salvadoran Catholics, it is evangelizing Romero’s call to socio-economic injustices. But that sense of

²⁴³ Orsi, Robert. *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950*. 3rd ed., Yale University Press, 2010. 203

control is meaningless without individual and community sacrifice. To sacrifice – whether family or health – suffering must be part of that process. Salvadoran migrants speak of their suffering, such as enduring the injustices experienced during the Salvadoran civil war or the unknown dangers of traveling to Los Angeles. Suffering also includes the death of loved ones. Orsi captures this moment by simply stating that “suffering [becomes] the bridge between the living and the dead, between those present and those absent.”²⁴⁴ Romero becomes the link between the religious lives Salvadoran Catholics experienced in El Salvador and the religious lives they built in Los Angeles. Upon recognizing what they have given up, their suffering becomes part of their religious narrative as it is equated with religious sacrifice. It becomes attached to Romero’s life, weaving together a narrative that is shared amongst Salvadoran Catholics. However, unlike Orsi’s focus on the celebration of the Madonna in Harlem, Salvadoran Catholics struggled to find a home for Romero. Statues, portraits, and other religious symbols have only recently been added to local Catholic churches around Los Angeles. That slow process made Salvadoran Catholics suffer longer and making their presence less centralized. Such is the case for Guillermo and Elga who possess and routinely hide the microphone used by Romero, thereby making it less available for Salvadoran Catholics to witness and come together. However, as Salvadoran Catholics began the process of creating communities that authenticate their suffering,

²⁴⁴ Orsi, Robert. *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*. Princeton University Press, 2005. 141

Salvadoran Catholics began to emerge with narratives that relate to their religious experience via Romero's sacrifice.

And like Italian Catholics of Harlem who pilgrimage to the statue of Madonna and saints during Italian festivals, the microphone travels to the Salvadoran community [in Los Angeles] – developing its own migratory story. It symbolically carries the narratives of not only Guillermo and Elga but also the narratives of those sacrificed. It brings about an idea of justice and humanity but also awareness of those who continue to struggle from adversity. It allows for the recognition of a community in a foreign country who have sacrificed and left the dangers in El Salvador for the dangers and instability of the United States. As Orsi has argued, “” sacrifice means triumph – it was what was required of the immigrant if they would prevail in their struggle against adversity in their new home.”²⁴⁵ For Guillermo and Elga, sacrifice of oneself is necessary to get closer to the divine, especially as it attempts to replicate the religious landscape of the home country. The microphone allows them to get closer to the divine through their shared memory of Romero but also signals the reasons why they left for the United States. It combines their faith that was planted in El Salvador and the faith that is fostered in the churches near downtown Los Angeles. Guillermo and Elga's testimonies in the Cathedral simultaneously reveal an acceptance from the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church has entrusted them to speak on their experiences of war and unflinching certainty in their faith in church and Romero.

²⁴⁵ Orsi, Robert. *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950 3rd edition*. New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2010. 223.

Space, Memory, and Images within the Walls of the Church

While Ana has yet to find a suitable priest to replicate the fervor that characterizes Romero at her church, individuals like Guillermo and Elga are quite content in traveling from church to church in Los Angeles seeking out new devotees. These personal expectations and devotional tours are representative of the continually growing Salvadoran Catholic population in Los Angeles. While it will not change the predominately Mexican and Mexican American iconographies that have shaped the Los Angeles Catholic landscape, Romero's legacy is helping reshape parishes near downtown Los Angeles that once excluded Latinos. At Saint Thomas the Apostle Church, impoverished Central Americans now predominantly populate every mass and church committee. The church was built in 1903 for the upper class that populated the area. Since then, the parishioners have changed the feel and look of the church. On the day I arrived at Saint Thomas, Cardinal Roger Mahoney performed confirmation mass, thus demonstrating his continual support for the immigrant community after his retirement from public office.²⁴⁶ A few steps from center of the church is Romero's beatification portrait that hangs in full view of the church. A committee dedicated to Romero organizes the annual masses that celebrate him as the growing Salvadoran population flock to this welcoming church.

²⁴⁶ I approached Cardinal Mahoney for an interview concerning Salvadorans and their role in shaping the community. He instantly said no. However, I have become acquaintances with his deacon who resides in the upper-class neighborhood of Manhattan Beach's American Martyrs Catholic Church. While the deacon has offered to reach out to Cardinal Mahoney for an interview on my behalf, I am inclined to pass on the invitation.

Unlike the churches in the surrounding areas, Saint Thomas rests on an incredibly dense and busy street. The buildings that surround it are filled with people bustling with endless foot traffic. You can smell the bakery's warm fresh bread from across the street while being bombarded with the sound of cars honking and coming to a squeaky brake at the red light. The buildings are old with dilapidating brick with peeling paint of long-lost businesses. You can smell the damp water that runs down them into the sewer. The cars that slowly make their way on Pico Boulevard seem to be at least ten to twenty years older. The streets are littered with trash, but I witnessed parishioners picking trash on church property. Latinos with burnt faces from the sun and dirty uniforms scramble to catch their bus but not without making the sign of the cross as they run in front of the church. People sit in front of the church much as I witnessed at churches in El Salvador. They sit and say nothing – they just wait until they decide to leave. Others walk into the church, bless themselves with holy water and immediately walk out. And the church parking lot is filled to the brim. For parishioners, it is another day of spiritual business. This small and seemingly quiet church has functions that run until 10pm. I witnessed a rosary prayer group, a mass and a youth group meeting. Simply put, this church is a workhorse. It is a community.

I was scheduled to meet Edgardo around 630pm. He arrived an hour late and decisively parked in the parking lot that holds less than ten cars. Edgardo came in an ill-fitted suit, wearing a golden cross around his neck and joyed to be there. In his late 50s, he began to explain that he started the Romero Committee in 2010 to celebrate the murdered Archbishop and the Salvadoran community at Saint Thomas that he nicknamed

“small El Salvador.” He recalls celebrating his Catholicism as a young man in El Salvador, declaring that he “did nothing wrong by celebrating his faith.” Nonetheless, he understood the potential death sentence by being openly Catholic. About halfway through the civil war, he decided to leave El Salvador and reunite with his brother who was living in Los Angeles. Edgardo recalls that he left a good job and entered the United States with only his labor to sell. But more importantly than leaving a well-paying job, Edgardo left his church. When he arrived and felt “alone,” his brother repeatedly invited Edgardo to join him at the Saint Thomas Catholic church but Edgardo claims that he did not feel like the churches in the area could match the enthusiasm he had accustomed himself to in El Salvador. With some hesitation, Edgardo relented. Edgardo would eventually absorb himself in church services, serving as a catechist and leading various church functions that would invariably make Saint Thomas “little El Salvador.” He wanted, as he describes the “Salvadoran church” in Los Angeles. The “Salvadoran church” is a composite of a small-town church mixed with a sense of nationalism that would make familiarity a priority. Edgardo’s desire to replicate this type of church was echoed in 75% of the responses from 12 qualitative interviewees in this project. This is a common thread is present in previous research on immigrants in new church communities, such as the one found in Manual Vásquez’s research on Salvadoran and Peruvian Pentecostal immigrants in New Jersey. Vasquez argues that religion allows immigrants to “re-order and re-inscribe national identity and cultural roots in an alien milieu,” while facing a

downward social status.²⁴⁷ The religious community also serves as a buffer as immigrants attempt to navigate their new surroundings. Edgardo's response to taking a leadership role came at a time when he was going through personal tragedies. The church thus served as a buffer. The church insulated him from the outside world by keeping his focus on faith and family.

Salvadorans are entrenched with some form of tragedy²⁴⁸ and at some point tragedy becomes the focal point from where their religious belief will reflect back. But as Robert Orsi has stated, religious beliefs are built from context. "Religions arise from and refer back to discrete social and cultural worlds and they are inevitably shaped by the structures and limits of these worlds as they engage with them."²⁴⁹ For Edgardo, tragedies influence his religious faith. He reflected on these and explained how his losses and times of trouble were eased and miraculously answered through prayers to Romero. His cries for help were answered. Edgardo's faith has enabled him to communicate and ask Romero for resolutions. And by personally accepting that Romero is communicating to him or at the least quietly answering his prayers, Edgardo's faith has become enriched during times of crisis and has allowed him to deepen his faith through what he believes to

²⁴⁷ Vásquez, Manuel. "Pentecostalism, Collective Identity, and Transnationalism among Salvadorans and Peruvians in the U.S." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 67, no. 3, 1999, pp. 632.

²⁴⁸ For first-hand accounts, see *El Salvador: Testament of Terror* by Joe Fish and Cristina Sganga and *Witness to War: An American Doctor in El Salvador* by Charles Clements.

²⁴⁹ Orsi, Robert. *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*. Princeton University Press, 2005. 171.

be small miracles. One such example was his desire to attend the Vatican canonization of Romero. Financially unable to attend, a radio station soon offered flight and hotel after Edgardo prayed to Romero to help him on his pilgrimage. Edgardo is convinced that Romero was listening and wanted him to attend. As we spoke inside the church of Saint Thomas, he continually looked up to the portrait of Romero on the side of the church wall, only occasionally looking back to me and finishing his sentence. The near sight of the soon-to-be saint allowed him to express his devotion and faith in Romero. During the interview process, he was open and candid about his tragedies, struggles and the community he calls home. But he was distracted and nearly teary-eyed when in close proximity to the portrait of Romero. The near sight of this portrait made him rethink every sentence and recast the role that this simple portrait could do to a devotee. The portrait brought out emotions of a man who prayed to Romero and had his prayers answered.

And soon after my interview at Saint Thomas, another academic friend brought my attention to another Salvadoran icon in South Central, Los Angeles. Nearby at Saint Cecelia, the parishioners from mostly Central America pray to an assortment of important religious icons. Guatemalan parishioners have welcomed a copy of the Cristo Negro.²⁵⁰ It welcomes them and allows them to reconnect to the festivals and pilgrimages in

²⁵⁰ Rivas, Carlos. "El Cristo Mojado" Central American Immigration and Transnational Devotion of the Black Christ of Esquipulas, Guatemala in Los Angeles, California." Objects of Devotion Conference, 13 December 2014. Culver Center of the Arts, Riverside, CA and Douglass Sullivan-Gonzalez, *The Black Christ of Esquipulas: Religion and Identity in Guatemala*.

Esquipulas, Guatemala. Likewise, the growing Salvadorans population at Saint Cecilia attained a duplicate of the Salvador del Mundo statue for their church. The monument located in the capital of El Salvador that overlooked the beatification mass in El Salvador now has a miniature twin in Saint Cecelia. A religious icon for Salvadorans that points to their nationality, the copy represents both pride and heartache as the monument in El Salvador saw the country deteriorate from war.²⁵¹ This comes at an important point for Salvadoran Catholics as El Salvador is going through a gang war and Salvadorans in the United States become more removed from their experiences of the civil war. The Salvadoran icon becomes a political act to recall events that have and continue to occur. This has led to parishioners to petition for a statue of Romero to be placed in their church. Just as the statue of Romero in MacArthur Park stirs pro-immigrant rights and sanctuary debates, a statue located within the walls of a Catholic Church has the potential to bring about discussions over Romero's intentions – whether political or religious.

It will undoubtedly “possess a power and potency that their devotees often feel they lack in an increasingly tenuous political and economic climate.”²⁵² As migrant families are having children taken away from them at the United States and Mexican

²⁵¹ See *Performing Piety: Making Space Sacred with the Virgin of Guadalupe* by Elaine Peña for an in depth look at bi-national devotion to the statue of Guadalupe in Mexico and in the United States.

²⁵² Hughes, Jennifer Scheper and Daisy Vargas. “Traveling Image of the Holy Child of Atocha (Santo Niño de Atocha), Plateros, Mexico.” *Conversations: An Online Journal of the Center for the Study of Material and Visual Cultures of Religion*. 2014. Accessed 27 August 2018.

border and placed into different detention centers while unaccompanied children flee El Salvador because of the escalating problems with gangs,²⁵³ a statue would speak to/represent/articulate their political woes. By having a statue, they can worship side by side with Romero or pray to him as the symbol of their political and religious grief – a three-dimensional representation to see and hold. As Alyshia Gálvez argues, devotional practices are themselves political acts since they attempt to claim rights.²⁵⁴ Salvadorans would create an openly political move that gives them back their sense of humanity. They seek a better life. The ability to be seen and heard but also understood. Particularly at Saint Cecilia where the parish has made great efforts to invite migrant worshippers to attend and become part of the multi-ethnic community. It will assure the attendance of the faithful, like Dina and her family.

Dina and her family attend Saint Cecilia every Sunday. The Salvadoran population makes her feel more at home since leaving El Salvador. While she withheld from leaving El Salvador during the war, she left once her children migrated to the United States. Being amongst countrymen and women, she reflects about her experience as a Catholic. During the war, Dina buried tape recordings of Romero. She feared that if the tapes were found in her home, she and her family could fall victim to the disappearances that plagued El Salvador. The tapes were treasured items that connected

²⁵³ See Susan Bibler Coutin, *Exiled Home: Salvadoran Transnational Youth in the Aftermath of Violence*.

²⁵⁴ Gálvez, Alyshia. *Guadalupe in New York: Devotion and the Struggle for Citizenship Rights among Mexican Immigrants*. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2010.187.

her to Romero. The act of hearing Romero places her alongside the many who understood his call to justice while also being sanctioned by the government in an attempt at seeking that justice. When Romero was murdered, she waited in line in what appeared to be miles in order to view the casket of Romero. When gunshots were heard, she and her friend raced to the sanctuary of the Cathedral where she saw individuals cover Romero's casket with their own bodies. She was able to leave but quivers as she remembers having to go back after the gunshots ended to see "mountains" of bodies in the plaza. On the steps of the Cathedral, she discovered her friend had been trampled to death. Returning to El Salvador for the beatification mass, she never realized that Romero "continues to fight" for Salvadorans from the socio-economic hardships. It was being in the crowd of followers that she began to see him as more than an image and more than voice on tapes and on the radio. She sees him as a helper. She explained a situation where she had to convince embassy officials why she wanted to leave El Salvador. She prayed to Romero so she could find the words to convince the embassy officials. She found solace when her visa was approved without further question and praises Romero as the primary cause for that help. She says that she does not need other saints when she has him as he is her saint. For Dina, Romero is her go-to symbol in her Catholic faith which ultimately distinguishes Salvadoran Catholicism from other Latin American countries. Here, Romero helped his people and continues to help people by bringing them closer to their faith. For Dina, there is no doubt that Romero was with her that day, and continues to be with her everyday. Just as the statue at her church would help alleviate any sense of

uneasiness, the idea of his ongoing presence in the spiritual and physical (statue) would build on the already existing community established by Salvadoran migrants.

Defining Their Own Faith

The shared memories of Romero shape the Salvadoran migrant's religiosities in Los Angeles. Whether physically interacting with him in El Salvador or entrusting his homilies with the Catholic spirit of faith and justice. By continually uplifting him as their saint of choice, he has become part of their religious identity. To see Romero as their centered religiosity is to understand and witness the Salvadoran plight. His image is cemented alongside the memories of struggle in El Salvador but also in Los Angeles as migrants continue to fight to find a place for themselves. The outgrowth of MacArthur Park to central Los Angeles is a testament to Salvadoran migrants' unwillingness to depart from Catholicism and their steadfast willingness to make a community. Some aspects require space, such as Saint Cecilia's statue or Saint Thomas' portrait, but these material items are only part of the ongoing negotiations to bring Romero to the spotlight. Placing him in the center legitimizes their worries as new challenges arise. It also challenges the role that parishes must undertake to growing community. Just as Italian immigrants in Harlem celebrated traditions of their Madonna in their new neighborhoods, and as pilgrimages are duplicated in Des Plaines for Mexican migrants to embrace the Virgin of Guadalupe's love for them and theirs for her,²⁵⁵ Salvadoran Catholics are beginning the process to reshaping their own celebration for

²⁵⁵ See *Performing Piety: Making Space Sacred with the Virgin of Guadalupe* by Elaine Peña.

Romero through lived religion. It is neither a boisterous celebration nor a spectacle of color but one of determined search for justice for their countrymen and women.

Chapter Four: The Periphery of Celebration: Reevaluating Romero's Legacy as "Voice of the Voiceless"

When entering the capital, San Salvador, one is struck by the intense poverty that marks the city. The hillsides that surround the city's outskirts are the illegal dominion of squatters who have nowhere to go and few options to escape. Poorly constructed homes are made of mud, aluminum roofing, sheet, and cardboard. These hamlets are well known by the people of El Salvador. The government periodically removes these dwellings under cover of darkness but to no avail, as new settlers quickly rebuild the encampments. The city center is just as cruel to its homeless and poor. Outside the Catedral Metropolitana de San Salvador, where Romero is buried, sits a man with misshapen feet. He wears a dirty shirt, torn pants, and is shoeless. Unable to speak more than a sentence, he asks "¿tiene cambio?" Do you have change? El Salvador is a country that lacks the financial or governmental capacity and will to care for its impoverished, disabled, and marginalized residents. Laborers also live precarious existences. Young Salvadorans frequently complain that they would not know what to do once they reach 35 years of age; companies in El Salvador are publicly known for dismissing even middle-aged laborers in favor of 25- to 30-year-olds who will work for lower wages.²⁵⁶

²⁵⁶ Armando. Personal Interview. 23 May 2015.

Additionally, El Salvador relies so heavily on remittances from the United States that the government has officially adopted U.S. currency as their own.

All these struggles seemed to subside temporarily in the local consciousness on May 19, 2015, the day of Romero's formal beatification. At least 250,000 people filled the city center in celebration, about as many who had gathered there to mourn the martyred saint at his funeral mass thirty-five years earlier in March of 1980. Some declared Romero's funeral to be the largest protest in Latin American history.²⁵⁷ Even the grim tragedy of Romero's death, the circumstances of U.S. participation in the cycles of violence that led to his murder, and the deaths of tens of thousands of Salvadorans seemed to be erased in the ebullience of the beatification celebration. This chapter considers the beatification of Oscar Romero in San Salvador to show that the ritual attempted, and ultimately failed, to resolve the pain and violence of El Salvador's history. The beatification ceremony did this, in part, by denying the struggles and suffering that continued in the present day because of El Salvador's violent history in relation to U.S. imperialism. The beatification of Romero attempted to erase the legacy of violence by offering a false resolution. I pay special attention to those who were at the margins of the beatification events, or who expressed skepticism about their purpose—particularly the impoverished, those clearly still suffering from legacies and cycles of violence and trauma. These groups and individuals are the new “voiceless” of El Salvador— those

²⁵⁷ Watson, Katy. “Oscar Romero beatification draws huge El Salvador crowds.” *BBC*, 23 May 2015. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-32859627.html>. Accessed 16 June 2021.

who were rendered invisible in the beatification ceremony. I attended the ceremony engaged in participant observation and interviewed more than two dozen Salvadorans over the course of more than the one-week celebration. These open-ended interviews, impromptu or prearranged, brief, or more than an hour in length, form the basis of this chapter.

I sought out both those who attended the beatification ceremony and those who did not. At the beginning of my research, my questions about Romero often resulted in familiar, seemingly rehearsed, almost eerie “ready-to-go” answers. This discourse reflected with what would become the normative narrative of Romero as the “voice of the voiceless,” and calls of justice due for his murder. Within the first two days, I began to shift my focus and to look to the peripheries of Salvadoran religious communities to gain a more candid and perhaps less “canned” understanding of Romero’s call to help the “voiceless.” I center the individuals who embody the impoverished condition that Romero attempted to support. As a result, Salvadorans at the periphery of the ceremony distinctly anchor this chapter even as I also consider those that were included or welcomed to participate in the ceremony.

Participants and Methods

This chapter juxtaposes individuals who attended the beatification ceremony of Romero in May of 2015 and individuals at the periphery who did not celebrate in the ceremony. Throughout the course of this research, the “voiceless” of El Salvador never left but rather shifted from victims of political differences to victims of gang warfare and migration. Scholars, newscasters, and lay people have taken the title “voiceless” as theirs

and created their own understanding of it. And while referenced on occasion, individuals who participated in the celebration but were ignored as side characters emerge at the forefront of this research as they create a fuller and more complex approach to how this celebration has changed the religious landscape who see themselves as the “voiceless.”

The research for this chapter began to capture the power and enthusiasm surrounding Romero’s beatification mass. However, after I returned to the United States, and over the course of several subsequent months, I transitioned from participant observer to interpretative analysis and began to realize that my interactions with individuals on the celebration’s margins were as valuable to this project as its mainstream observers. The former served as an important corrective to the easy ebullience of the celebration. I fall back on Gayatri Spivak’s notion of “sanctioned ignorance” whereby institutions and particular populations are purposefully ignored to create an alternative narrative.²⁵⁸ The creation and execution of an alternative narrative by an invading institution seeks to destroy or coerce existing structures of power to dismiss the legitimacy of its predecessor so it may exploit regional resources. This strategy has a long genealogy within the Latin American context, particularly Central America. From the uprisings of native peoples over low wages which led newspapers and government officials of the 1930s in El Salvador to label union-labor organizers as communists to more recent troubles within the Catholic church, the threat to power structures have continued to haunt El Salvador. The desire to rearticulate power

²⁵⁸ Spivak, Gayatri. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Harvard University Press, 1999.

structures continued through Romero's time. Catholic bishops in El Salvador sought to displace Romero's power during his tenure as archbishop. The Catholic church, although thought of as an inclusive institution by Romero, demonstrated a strong tendency to displace power when the church was inhibited from serving the oligarchy.²⁵⁹ When Romero developed into the archbishop that scholars and students of history think of today, Bishops Alvarez, Aparicio and Barrera attempted to legitimize their power by attempting to sabotage Romero through misleading narratives that sought to boycott Romero's homilies, public writings, and visits.²⁶⁰ The bishops' goal was meant to legitimize their concerns so they could take power from Romero and regain it for the service of the oligarchy and conservative government officials. In doing so, it would ease future uprisings and continue the exploitation of low-waged workers. In other words, it would keep the subaltern complacent.

Early interpreters of subaltern groups have misrepresented marginalized groups in order to propel Eurocentrism by focusing on literature or other structures that justify or seek to exclude people on the periphery of El Salvador's Catholic population.²⁶¹ This

²⁵⁹ Schwaller, John Frederick. *The History of the Catholic Church in Latin America: From Conquest to Revolution and Beyond*. New York University Press, 2011. 250-254.

²⁶⁰ Della Rocca, Roberto Morozzo. *Oscar Romero: Prophet of Hope*. Darton, Longman and Todd, 2015. 156-160.

²⁶¹ See Sam Gill's *Mother Gill* (1991) and Ward Churchill's "Sam Gill's *Mother Earth*: Colonialism, Genocide and the Expropriation of Indigenous Spiritual Tradition in Contemporary Academia" in *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 1988, Vol. 12, No. 3 pp. 49-67.

chapter attempts to include the perspectives of both groups of people who I would consider mainstream celebrants, such as those serving the church or those who were able to travel to the beatification ceremony, and those on the periphery. Being at the periphery of the celebration means having had one's agency taken away and replaced with narratives that dismiss or ignores their existence, denying them accessibility to speak or participate in the beatification ceremony. During his time as archbishop, Romero spoke out against the military industrial complex and the immense poverty that brought his attention to the marginalized. Stating, that the

“church has...to denounce what has rightly been called ‘structural sin:’ those social, economic, cultural, and political structures that effectively drive the majority of our people onto the margins of society. When the church hears the cry of the oppressed it cannot but denounce the social structures that give rise to and perpetuate the misery from which the cry arises.”²⁶²

Today, the new subalterns appear less vocal and less visible but are still being born through the same structural powers that allow poverty to continue while erupting new violence brought on by gangs. While poverty levels have fallen from 50% to 25% since Romero's assassination,²⁶³ the new wave of violence by gangs torments its citizens. This violence has seen a rate of 72 homicides per 100,000 in 2009 versus the 11 per 100,000

²⁶² “The Church: Called to repentance, called to prophecy.” *U.S. Catholic: Faith in Real Life*, 25 Feb. 2009, <https://uscatholic.org/articles/200902/the-church-called-to-repentance-called-to-prophecy/>. Accessed 28 June 2021.

²⁶³ “El Salvador Poverty Rate 1989-2021.” *Macrotrends*, 2021, El Salvador Poverty Rate 1989-2021. www.macrotrends.net. Retrieved 2021-06-29. Accessed 29 June 2021.

in Costa Rica or the 13 per 100,000 in Nicaragua.²⁶⁴ The new subaltern is not only hidden in plain sight, they are crucial to demonstrating the multiplicity of the beatification ceremony.

If I had observed and concentrated on mainstream individuals who came to celebrate the beatification ceremony, the overall dissertation would suffer as they indeed created a consensus concerning the life of Romero and his legacy but would not question the existing issues that plague El Salvador's "voiceless" of today that are comparable to those at the time of the civil war. By juxtaposing those celebrating to what Spivak calls the subaltern—groups who are not allowed to speak or be spoken to, one can bring a balanced theoretical framework that allows the reader to see the dichotomy of this celebration.

I conducted research in El Salvador, mainly in the capital city of San Salvador, in May of 2015. Most interviews occurred in San Salvador during the week of the beatification ceremony. I conducted impromptu, on-the-ground interviews with attendees, attempting to document immediate reactions from those visiting Romero's crypt and those attending the beatification mass. I had hoped to capture immediate, unmediated answers that might reflect the emotions of the event. A third of my interviews were conducted away from the immediacy of the celebration, in the city of Santa Ana and Izalco, approximately 30 miles from the cathedral and city center. The

²⁶⁴ Programa de Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo. *Informe sobre Desarrollo humano para America Central 2009-2010*. Programa de Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo, 2001.

majority of my interviewees lived or did business in the state of Santa Ana but at some time lived in San Salvador during their youth and witnessed the civil war first-hand.²⁶⁵

My first step was to drive to the cathedral of San Salvador and see what would unfold at the site on the days leading to the beatification ceremony. On the surface, conducting ethnographic research on this topic in El Salvador was not difficult: most of the celebrants who I interviewed were easy going, trusting, and friendly. At the same time, I did not always receive direct answers to my questions: it seemed that every Romero-related topic I introduced was an opportunity to speak about a different subject. People often shift interview responses but shared in the process a fuller perspective on El Salvador's current difficult state, including views on the country's politics, economy, and the religious landscape.

At the Center

The periphery only functions in contrast to the center. In terms of this project, the center is the formulated narrative of Romero as “voice of the voiceless.” The surrounding perimeter is a narrative that closely resembles the ongoing story of survival that scholars of the Salvadoran civil war have documented. The center is dense with perfectly formulated beliefs on who Romero was and what he represented to the Catholic people of El Salvador. This belief denotes a similar vein to Anderson's “imagined community” where people from throughout a nation can formulate a certain train of thought or a certain narrative which makes the population distinct from other neighboring groups. For

²⁶⁵ Due to time constraints, I was not able to travel to the city of Ciudad Barrios – where Romero originates.

Anderson, this thread was represented by literature. In the case of El Salvador and my project, it was Romero's ability to transcend political power to bring about the changes necessary to end senseless murders and fix the socio-economic inequalities that challenged El Salvador.

The center denotes power and privilege. It is far removed from the edge or peripheral in which the bulk of social and economic misfortunes exist. The beatification mass is the center of the social and cultural culmination of what appears to be due justice for Romero and those murdered during the civil war. Those who did not attend or were not invited to the celebration are at the fringe. This is a product of decades-long transformation of a people who witnessed the civil war in their backyards. As times lapses and the population that claimed to be the "voiceless" moved to the center and created a time capsule, I question the role of power in creating narratives specific to Romero's significance in the interviewee's lives. It seems that everyone had a connection with him, although few people personally knew the man. While some interviewees may have dined with him on occasion or attended mass where they felt a direct connection with him. That connection to Romero through their narratives create an authoritative line to discuss their grievances with the unjust way Romero was taken from their lives. By publicly stating their grievance, they cease to be "voiceless," but rather impose a self-authoritative role in directing a particular narrative that is digestible and marketable. This is in sharp contrast to individuals who did not attend the ceremony and do not have the basic needs to sustain their livelihood. The evidence that Romero's call to everyone to care for those at the edge of society continues to go unheard is in the experience of those

on the periphery. I therefore argue that the center has always existed in some form, but through struggle against the socio-economic injustices of the 1980s and 1990s, the “voiceless” have formed an irrefutable hold onto Romero’s legacy as they have become leaders within their parishes or have personal devotion to Romero. Romero’s death did not shift their relationship to him, but rather enforced it with his pending sainthood status— giving them more power to harness his narrative. Yet, this did little to change the plight of their and poor and destitute neighbors.

During the beatification mass, the center became a physical place. It was a center where Catholics gathered to lament the loss of Romero and rejoice in the celebration of their unofficial saint.

I met Beatrice just after the beatification mass. I had entered a restaurant to take in a light lunch and saw her sitting by herself, watching the televised beatification event that was taking place just outside the restaurant doors. She was waiting for her husband who went to purchase food from the cafeteria-style line. In her 60s, Beatrice was tanned, had perfectly manicured brown hair, and dressed in matching light linen colors with light-colored jewelry— distinguishing herself from those at the poverty line in El Salvador who wear heavy-duty uniform clothes and no jewelry. She swirled her café con leche with a spoon and a tear was running down her face. I politely asked if I could quickly ask her a few questions and she agreed. I genuinely questioned what she thought of the day and how it would change Romero’s role in El Salvador. She continued to swirl her coffee as she wiped her tears and said that this was a long day coming. She was very proud of the people of El Salvador and that this was, in some part, justice for Romero. Beatrice

would only look at me once or twice. She was fixated on the television set as though the beatification mass was in some remote place where only a select few were invited. I asked if she was from the city, and she stated that she was within walking distance. Beatrice wanted to partake in the celebration but from the safety of her own table at the restaurant. The restaurant was very lit and its brown tabletops with dark grey folding chairs were in near mint condition. The air conditioner was set high and the customers who were wearing tee shirts, shorts and summer dresses were shivering—a complete contrast to outside where the Central American sun barreled down on the ceremony attendees.

In contrast, Carmen attended the beatification alongside the thousands of celebrants. She gleefully relished at the opportunity to express her respect for Romero at such a historical event in El Salvador. When I conversed with her just a week after the mass, she explained that her connection to Romero was nurtured by his homilies and desire to better the lives of Salvadorans. She lived through the chaos of the war and saw her entire family leave El Salvador. Carmen remained with her mother in the middle of the capital, San Salvador, and witnessed many friends disappear or leave the country. She routinely went to the cathedral to attend mass while Romero proctored and recalled the advice he would give to his fellow Catholics. When I asked her about the day he was murdered, she recalled the fireworks being shot off in the wealthy areas of the city. This would not be the first or the last time that someone would tell me about the celebration that occurred at the death of Romero. Carmen understood the relevance of his death but did not know what consequences his murder entailed. She said, “I do not know what

would occur.” She further explained that any turn of events could occur. People could rise up against the government or the government would gain more control and become a larger dominating force. Neither happened to an extreme degree but the consequences of the civil war, murder of Romero and mass migration had already begun to crack the fabric of El Salvador’s population.

Since the end of the war and the death of Romero, Carmen has routinely prayed to him. Her prayers fall into the same narrative that remains amongst devotees I interviewed throughout the course of this research trip. She prayed for a better country— one where gangs do not roam freely. In this sense, her prayers for a better country and pinpointing to the new troubles that El Salvador encounters allowed her to enter the inner circle of the periphery. Carmen was able to engage in a conversation that did not revolve around scripture, theology, or belief but rather a discussion of the current social issues that existed. Absent from this conversation is the faith-based devotion to Romero. Carmen expressed a full-hearted desire to bring Romero into her religious life but by rerouting her devotion to social issues, she moved closer to the inner circle whereby the normative and well accepted narrative of Romero continues to exist. The narrative entails knowing Romero and attempts to make the devotee argue to change, even though prayer. In addition, the normative narrative revolves around the past victimization of individuals with the hope that it will cease to exist through prayer. The individual was personally victimized with the death of Romero and now it is the individual’s duty to do something about it.

Carmen contributes to the narrative that is common amongst Salvadorans. As such, she plays an important role in the continuity and growth of the inner circle within the periphery to make the “voice of the voiceless” moniker relevant to a new generation and to the history of Catholic El Salvador. This cemented narrative should be treated with caution to prevent a misinformed or non-critical perspective on the narrative that has been well groomed for mass consumption. By engaging in the repeated narrative, Carmen can connect with fellow Catholics who attend her parish and the attendees at the beatification mass. Witnessing Romero’s bloodied clothing at the alter during the beatification ceremony, her mind is transported to the day when she heard about his assassination, which only heightens her connection to Romero. Attending alongside thousands of other celebratory Catholics, she entrusted her senses and gave into the narrative. In doing so, the standardized story of Romero being the “voice of the voiceless” is heightened and entrusted by those who witnessed the celebration. She became part of the inner circle without knowing it.

Immediately after the ceremony, as people filed out, I approached a young mother and her son to ask about their emotional state. The young mother was well dressed, and her son sported clean American clothing. This was not odd but differentiated them from the lower classes that seem to be absent from the crowd. She was gracious and asked what university I was attending and hoped that one day she could read my dissertation. But as were talking about the ceremony, her father interrupted. He was tall, perhaps six feet, and had a much lighter complexion than darker-skinned Latin Americans I encountered during this research trip. He pointed his finger at me and said, “Young man,

what we saw today was a miracle.” He was referring to the circular rainbow that appeared the second that Romero was beatified. I must admit that moment caught everyone off guard, including all the representatives of the church and several visiting countries. It was odd, but a natural phenomenon that everyone I spoke with interpreted as a miracle. The father’s interruption was part of the ongoing trend that I encountered where male interpretation and input is at the center. The daughter stopped speaking and simply nodded in agreement with her father. In a slight demonstration of power, her father came to speak on behalf of his daughter and family. He spoke of Romero’s worldly influence and how everyone is now looking at Romero. He did not mean that the world was viewing the beatification mass, but rather that his personal interpretation brought attention to the significance of Romero in his own life. Again, we see a personal connection to Romero. The father continued the trend of connecting himself to narrative that shared by most individuals who attended the beatification mass.

On the Periphery of Being “Voiceless”

The emotional crowd that partook in the beatification mass understood the ceremony as pomp and circumstance for a figure that was already accepted as a popular saint. Their attendance was not necessary but rather demonstrated their physical acceptance of the Church’s institutional process of sainthood.

My drive to the Cathedral where Romero is buried delivered an unexpected turn of events that reveal the true character of El Salvador’s tumultuous and continual hardships. The day started with my driver taking me through parts of the city of Santa Ana during which I pointed out an old Spanish colonial-era building that had fallen into

decay in one of the city's central plazas. It seemed to have been constructed in or around the time El Salvador achieved its independence from Spain. I tried my best to find some fact about the decaying structure, but I was unable to do so. The ruin's interior showed its bare and delicate infrastructure: rooms and staircases that once stood are now filled with green plants and trees. The outside had seen better days with its large arched windows and iron works perfectly placed in front of every window. The once brilliant coats of white paint that demonstrated a growing country's sophistication and achievement through architecture had since faded with exposed brick and green moss growing from the years of neglect. While impressive for its macabre beauty, it showed a composite of neglect and abandonment synonymous with El Salvador. The past showing itself in plain sight.

We turned left and came to a halt as traffic was redirected by local police who had MS-13 gang members handcuffed and sitting on the bed of their police truck. The gang members wore oversized tee shirts, had shaved heads, and were tattooed on their arms and face. Perhaps in their mid-twenties, their eyes remained downcast. As we passed them, the driver said, "Look at all that hatred in their faces." And indeed, looks of tiredness, defeat, anger, and humiliation were present as they were perched on display for passersby to see and judge them. In a split second, these young men were no longer citizens or even human beings, they were society's parasites. It is a fair assessment to say that these young men had no formal or social invitation to the beatification ceremony nor would be welcomed to any national celebration of Romero. My driver moved on, and the scene faded behind us. Two different versions of El Salvador were made plain.

An hour later, my driver dropped me off in front of the national cathedral and I slowly made my way to its side entrance. Here, nestled in the building's shade was an older man in his 50s. He was distinctive with his yellowed teeth, disheveled hair, an orange with brown-striped shirt only half buttoned, and no shoes. His feet were misshapen—they twisted to the side, and one could hear the helplessness in his voice. It appeared that his disability would prevent him from wearing shoes. This gentleman would clearly have a near impossible task of finding work for a living. The scrapped sides of his feet where he drags himself from place to place were clearly visible. The cracked toenails and the thick-skinned bottom of his feet that have withstood every spring, summer, fall and winter. He was overly tanned from ongoing exposure to the sun and held a cup, begging for any change. My Catholic guilt soon hit me, and I couldn't help but to hand him a five-dollar bill. He breathed heavily and one could hear the anguish in his voice as he asked for "cambio." He was there when I entered the cathedral, and he was there when I left. Patrons entering the cathedral had to decide whether to help the poor and needy that sat to the side of them or hand that donation to the church. A new sense of guilt struck me at that moment as people ignored him as though this crippled man is normative in a country that has seen dead bodies of men, women and children laying on the ground just a few feet away thirty years ago. I imagine on most days; this man is ignored by most. Those that have come to celebrate Romero and who hark the "voice of the voiceless" have inevitably made this man into the new voiceless. For him, there is no beatification celebration, just another day outside the cathedral, begging for change.

I entered the Cathedral and, like many spectators, sought pictures, information, and uplift by the overall fervor of being a part of such a historical event. I sat near the back pews to look at the ceiling and contemplated how much this cathedral had endured since its construction. Grandmothers sat near the back exits just in case they had to quickly escort their grandchildren. One of my interviewees remembered how one Sunday morning in the late 1990s, gang members decapitated a young man as he knelt praying in the pews of the cathedral, recalling how gang members dismiss the sacredness of the church and how violence continues in El Salvador— even within sacred spaces. And as I turned behind me, I saw a couple and their child. The young father was wearing a dark blue polo shirt and looking down, most likely praying. He was tall and husky but made no effort to look up. The mother was holding a sleeping toddler and wearing a neon green tank top commonly seen in a lower end fashion store. Her hair was black, somewhat frazzled, and tied back. Her skin was burnt from the sun, and she looked at me with what I can only describe as bewilderment. I saw a priest walk by and I quickly raced to ask him if there was someone I could question about Romero’s tomb and history of the church. He responded, “No, not really.” I returned several minutes later and the small family that had sat behind me was gone.

The family reminds me of the narratives from my interviewees of the forgotten individuals who have been chastised or even criminalized for being different and/or poor. Built on the ontologies of structural violence, imperialism and classism, Gayatri Spivak questioned the roles these individuals take on as subaltern peoples with opinions and

expressions. Spivak poses the question, “Can the subaltern speak?”²⁶⁶ The simple answer is no. These individuals are subjugated to non-existent bodies that do not contribute to the celebrations but rather detract from the joy of being a patriotic Salvadoran. They have not been equipped with the proper imperial education to appreciate Catholicism in its triumphant collaboration with the government that once sought to destroy it. These individuals are the abject population: the ones no one cares about. Julia Kristeva explores the notion of abjection and describes the concept as a being that has been mentally separated from oneself due to ongoing social impairments created by structural powers and caused by the sheer weight of exploitation, neglect, and terror: an object without agency. The abject “lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter’s rules of the game. And yet from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease to challenge its master.”²⁶⁷ The individuals I described are meaningless and voiceless bodies that unintentionally interrupt the sanitized vision the celebration constructed for tourists and Catholics living in El Salvador. With its emptiness, the abandoned colonial-era ‘ building forced me to rethink how the celebration would go on without the above-described individuals as it also reflects the injustices that seem to be normalized and accepted by the Catholic faithful, Romero devotees, tourists, and Salvadorans who came to beatify Romero. The crippled man, the family in the back of the cathedral and the

²⁶⁶ Spivak, Gayatri. “Can the subaltern speak.” *Reflections on the History of an Idea: Can the Subaltern Speak?* Edited by Rosalind Morris, 2010. Pp. 21-80.

²⁶⁷ Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Columbia University Press, 1941. 2.

people living in tent camps alongside the city boundaries are voiceless human beings that are not factored into the celebration equation but are instead remnants of a history that is being swept under the rug as the country moves forward with its attempt to sanitize the civil war.

However, as the focus of anthropologists and other social scientists tends to be placed on those of the extreme social spectrum, such as gangs in El Salvador, divided families, and detention centers that separate children from parents, this dissertation focuses on those who are not invited to the celebration and those who refuse to attend. When I sat down with Tony, a long-time journalist in El Salvador, he decried those who were about to partake in the beatification ceremony. He repeatedly called all politicians and religious affiliates “sinvergüenzas.”²⁶⁸

Tony worked as a conservative journalist during the civil war years. I met him through a family member who thought that his first-hand experience would enrich my research. He unveiled a different side of the duration and post-civil war era in El Salvador’s history that would bring any conversation to a standstill.

Speaking with him about church and politics, Tony had a complete disdain for both but believed that the conservative party (ARENA) should be in power. He was a hearty man for his age (70s) and walked easily in and out of a room. He had a raspy voice from years of smoking and held his coffee on his right hand, constantly looking straight ahead as he gathered his thoughts when I asked him about the war and Romero. He had a

²⁶⁸ Sinvergüenza is Salvadoran slang for people without shame or proper etiquette.

fairer complexion than most Salvadorians but remained tanned from being out in the Central American sun. Unlike the campesino's dress, he wore well-ironed grey pants and a starched shirt. Sporting a sign of his stature and former occupation, he wore Oxford shoes, an odd choice of footwear considering the rocky pavement.

Tony began our interview by explaining the war and the terrible consequences that awaited those who challenged the government. Tony personally witnessing the atrocities in the streets, he blamed both political parties as equal partners in the crimes committed during the civil war. He remarked on the likelihood of priests who took up arms and contributed to the chaos of the war (often a statement made by evangelicals I spoke with). On several occasions, Salvadoran evangelicals living in the United States and in the capital of San Salvador accused Catholic priests of being guerrilla militants, whether substantiated by facts or not. Tony claims to have seen priests fighting as guerillas soldiers first-hand and simply moves on to chastise the conservative government in power at the time. However, unlike the shared experience of Salvadorans who speak about the physical horrors they saw on the streets, Tony did not venture into giving details. He simply looked up as though he was still standing during it. When he seemed to trail off into a tangent on the political scandals, I attempted to press him about Romero. "That was a good man. You don't find that anymore." He redirected the conversation and said that all politicians and new religious authorities are "sinverguenzas." For Salvadorans, this is a colloquialism for a person who lacks any kind

of shame, a person who does what he/she pleases without the consequences of judgement. At that moment, I realized that his historical viewpoint was based on intense critique and was an indictment of a new generation.

He quickly pointed to the evangelical pastor who impregnated a young woman who was not his wife and the young boy who was killed by local police because he possessed a small amount of marijuana. Tony connected the corrupt government powers of the 1980s and 1990s to today's continual oppression of people living within El Salvador's conservative societal norms. Believing that judges are corrupt, and laws are loose and voluntary, he asserted that one's experiences with such power and authority depended on having the money and power to persuade those very judges. He argued, "I have no faith in this government. We have accustomed ourselves to the corrupt." He saw corruption at evangelical churches as he claimed pastors preferred to ask for money or goods rather than preach. When I asked if these injustices could be changed, he heartily said, "No." When I asked him about the current situation within the Catholic church in El Salvador, he retorted, "Tradition is what is holding the Catholic church. Nothing else." During our interview he claimed that today's priests enjoyed the life of a modern individual, and that the solemn life of a priest was gone. He fondly remembered the abundance of attendees and the common phrase "it's almost time for church" amongst neighbors on Sunday mornings. And perhaps, he was right. When I traveled to El Salvador, region and parish separated the ceremony. There was cooperation but no sense of community. Perhaps the size of such an event would not reveal this side of community, but the chaos and vulgar language that I witnessed from attendees and

merchants selling their wears took away from that sense of belonging. Tony mentioned a pre-Vatican II assembly of churches where ceremonies included the entire village (90%+ were considered Catholic) and European style celebrations could take place.

Tony's opinions are not popular. Any person belonging to those groups would quickly come to defend them but being on the periphery allowed him to see how affiliations often changed hands, but the power dynamics remained the same.

The aftermath of the celebration revealed a different social perspective from the joy, chaos, and respect that was granted to the beatification ceremony of Romero. The enormous amount of people that lined the streets had left having scattered back to buses, nearby hotels and some simply walked home. The streets were littered with paper, soda cans, candy wrappers. A few tee shirt vendors stayed behind in the attempt to sell their "Romero Vive" shirts. All businesses, minus restaurants, were closed. Dark offices lined the streets with their gates and bars covering their front doors. It was an eerie sight since the noise that erupted no less than two hours previously was now overtaken by the sounds of city workers cleaning. I lingered around out of curiosity, hoping to capture a few last attendees' perspectives on the ceremony. I found a solemn and tearful gathering at the altar where people gathered in awe of the event that just occurred. During the celebration, the front of the stage had been lined with flowers and palms, and chairs were perfectly placed for then current church dignitaries, including the cathedra, who performed the beatification ceremony. Those who remained during the post-ceremony gathering included individuals taking flowers for souvenirs. The palm leaves had been snapped off by people brushing up against them as they rushed out of the square. People had also

started taking pictures of them sitting in the cathedra. It was strangely quiet and only a few people were roaming close to the altar. Still, the power of seeing these individuals was stunning. The stragglers were not well-to-do but campesinos. Campesinos dressed in brown pants, cheap shoes, and long sleeve shirts to block the sun. These campesinos were older and included women could barely walk but made the effort to reach the front of the altar to make the sign of the cross.

When I was child and my grandparents could still attend church, I remember my grandmother (a campesina without formal education) never crossing that step that divided the altar from the flock. In a moment, I remember my grandmother making the sign of the cross in front of the altar and crucifix. Those grandmothers at the front of the altar reminded me of the ongoing and well-formulated narrative of Romero. The grandmothers were the “voiceless” in a society that forced them to sacrifice their families to migration or war. They have become preachers of a specific narrative that attempts to continue the good deeds of Romero and evoke a memory of grandmothers being pillars of the community and matriarchs of family faith. But these grandmothers who sat in the background and had to raise children and grandchildren quietly and patiently waited their turn to partake in the celebration— even if it meant approaching the altar after the ceremony.

The thousands who crowded the square, through determination and good health, withstood heat and physically crushing weight. But individuals like my grandmother who never had the formal education or means to challenge any kind of authority waited their turn to see if anything remained at the end of the ceremony to take back home. For them,

they were issued the last servings at the table. They collected their few flowers and slowly walked away.²⁶⁹ For a moment, I envisioned my grandmother in seeing these old women. They, along with other unnoticed individuals, came to show their appreciation even if they didn't raise the eyebrow of a journalist, scholar, or spectator.

After an hour of walking back and forth on the altar, I ventured into the backstage area where all the dignitaries and media outlets were allotted space. The back section consisted of cubicles formed by white sheets. Strangely, nothing was in any of the cubicles but perhaps one or two empty bottles of water. Not a chair, not a table, not even a sign of having hosted a human in the past day could be found. Serving in place of walls, all the white sheets that draped the backstage were still and unguarded. I passed through several of these cubicles and ended up at the back of the monument that faced the cross streets. It was a surreal moment; hundreds of thousands of people once stood there in the most holy of ceremonies and now, almost like something out of the Twilight Zone, not a person was in sight. It was a moment where one could easily feel displaced, lost, and voiceless. And with the streets blocked off to traffic and nearly all businesses closed for the celebration, it reminded me of all the videos I have seen of the civil war: once the gun shots stopped, everything was a still and the quiet landscape spoke for itself.

The crippled man, the forgotten family in the back of the cathedral, the population living in makeshift tent camps and the grandmothers waiting their turn are indeed part of

²⁶⁹ For oral accounts about education, marriage and the civil war in El Salvador, see Michael Gorkin, Marta Pineda and Gloria Leal's *from Grandmother to Granddaughter: Salvadoran Women's Stories*, 2000.

the religious population in El Salvador. They go unnoticed or purposefully ignored. I am reminded of my trip to the Santa Ana cathedral in the state of Santa Ana. I again had the driver circle the premises so I could decide where to start my research for that day. On the side of the whitewashed cathedral wall read, “la religion mata.” (Religion kills) This short but poignant phrase questions the very purpose of religion, which is especially important as the beatification ceremony took place while its main attendees ignored those who need kindness, support, spiritual fulfillment, or even just basic acknowledgement of their existence.

I acknowledged these individuals and attempted to closely make the connections as to why society has mislabeled or created them into city dwelling villains. For example, in Robert Brenneman’s *Homes and Hermanos* and Edward Orozco Flores’s *God’s Gangs*, we see the reverse side of joining a gang and the subjects’ attempts at leaving a gang by becoming born again Christians to devote their lives and service to their church.²⁷⁰ Gang members in El Salvador are marked with their tattooed that symbolize their association with the gang, and almost unable to rejoin society. As Brenneman has observed, the average Central American is cautious and doubtful when allowing former gang members back into the greater society while gang members are doubly suspicious of their conversion and commitment to Christianity.²⁷¹ Such factors make it impossible to

²⁷⁰ Also see Gregory Boyle’s *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*, 2011.

²⁷¹ Brenneman, Robert. *Homes and Hermanos: God and Gangs in Central America*. Oxford University Press, 2012.

include such an array of experiences into this project. Yet, the individuals I observed appeared to have a common denominator aside from becoming an abject from society: they continued to reach out to the church. And it appears, if only through my lens, that the church does not extend its hand back.

Placement outside the Center

The mother in the cathedral, with her untidy hair and sleeping child in hand, is and always will be lodged in my mind. Her stare made me realize my first world luxuries and inability to handle unprecedented tragedies that have struck El Salvador. She reminds me of a mother of a fellow classmate in grammar school. He and his brother tirelessly created chaos in school. Even at home, these two brothers would lock her out of the house. I saw her praying on her knees in church one day and my mother explained to me that the mother of these two adolescent boys begged God to help her and her sons. Her oldest son was later sent to prison for life because of gang involvement. My classmate was forced to settle down once his brother's gang threatened him and his mother to keep any secrets as secrets. I do not know if her prayers were answered, or she simply settled with her given lot. I am not attempting to make these two mothers have the same story nor am I implying that they will ever reach the same amount of grief or religious disappointment, but I question the purpose of the study of religion when we seek answers from those who we know are religiously involved in a church community that shies from those who seek God's help. As the ethnographer, I attempted to draw lines between the Salvadoran community I see in Los Angeles and that of the greater Catholic community in El Salvador. I see the same tragedies, but the peripheries are different. We have "first

world problems” that seek to destroy the immigrant and we have “sanctioned ignorance” in El Salvador that ignores the mother and her small family. When I press lay people or priests who I feel comfortable enough to be candid with about the topic of people on the periphery, words are insufficient as no one has the right answer. But during the beatification week, attendees spoke as though there were no peripheries, and any such existence would surely be cured.

Romero’s devotees feel an ambition and right to speak on behalf of those being mistreated but seldom does that become an academic inquiry. My hesitation to ask these individuals about their socio-economic and spiritual stems in part from personal safety concerns but more important, I do not wish to exploit their lives and add them into an academic project. As Luís León and Gloria Anzaldúa have both put it, these are the bastard children of colonialism that continue to be shunned— neither wanted by country or church. As an insider, I could not gather any more visceral explanations than the ones I have witnessed and been told by my community. The individuals I observed will most likely never rise in the socio-economic ladder that will place them in the center but rather be relegated to the qualifications of the abject. As Beatrice Horseman in the animated show *Jack Horseman* said, “broken is your birthright.” That last chance to walk again from crippled feet, the fleeting moment to convert and give oneself to God, to recover what parents may never recover from and the last chance to feel the beauty of a socio-economic mobility, is gone. No academic or project is prepared for that. Projects such as Jason DeLeon’s *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail* attempt to bring to life these last-ditch efforts. However, in the same vein as his

interpretations of those who attempt crossing the Mexican-US border, I too must interpret how these individuals attempt to live in their environment. But unlike DeLeon's explanation of the physical challenges the human body undergoes through such treacherous and deadly terrain in the Arizona desert, I attempt to make it clear that the periphery is too far to reach. Still, I have attempted to bring the reader a taste of it so that we can begin the process to break that "sanctioned ignorance."

Different Ends

The individuals who I would distinguish as being in the center and those chastised to the periphery are archetypes of the beatification mass attendees. Here, devotion is a byproduct of the narrative that has been groomed for decades following Romero's assassination. The narrative has moved alongside individuals who have felt a personal connection to Romero, whether it is a search for socio-economic justices or faith base. By juxtaposing the two groups, we see how Romero's desire to act in a Christian fashion has been morphed into a generation and socio-economic opportunity that follows many of the colonial male-driven authoritative modes that continue to ignore those at the very edge of El Salvador's population. In doing so, we are left with the question: Has anything changed?

Chapter Five: Conclusion

This dissertation has examined the religious interpretations of Catholic Salvadorans and Salvadoran immigrants who position Oscar Romero as a major pillar of their faith. I have worked to communicate the memories and feelings of those who cherished their time with Monsignor Romero—whether listening to him over the radio or speaking with him about a lost family member. Here, we witnessed how devotees theologized Romero and how they portrayed him as a socio-economic justice leader. Using the devotees’ memories as the foundation for analysis of Salvadoran Catholic belief, this project has challenged the oversimplified appellation, “voice of the voiceless,” fleshing out the nuances and complexity of devotees’ understanding of their patron saint. By connecting devotee’s faith to their construction of self and identity at the margins of Salvadoran society, the project delves into the role Romero played in individual spiritual growth. I have not attempted to construct a theology of Romero. Rather, the focus has been on the people who have adapted and changed in response to a shifting climate as Romero progressed from unofficial to official Catholic saint.

Romero is thus engaged here as a catapult for newly reimagined communities in the United States and the reconstruction of existing ones in El Salvador. In forming these communities and reinventing a vision of Romero, a trend appeared: interviewees expressed a desire to be heard to give their own interpretation of life as a Catholic living

in the United States or in El Salvador after the assassination of Romero. Romero's proclamations to speak on behalf of the marginalized enabled people to speak freely, in turn—whether they were able to remain in El Salvador or forced to migrate to the United States. This project captured the firm beliefs that Romero continues to inspire and his sustained influence on the marginalized. Some Romero devotees view him as a revolutionary example of grit and perseverance but also as an individual who used his communication abilities to bring about change. Interviewees for this project were eager to tell their narratives about the war and how faith allowed the wounds of war to slowly heal. Devotees continue to look to Romero to assist them on their religious journeys and in their day-to-day lives.

The project is centered around the beatification of Romero largely because the celebration brought together all walks of life and allowed for a multitude of attitudes to be expressed and witnessed as El Salvador undergoes varying, yet profound, religious, and social transformations. The beatification mass should have been a time of jubilation, but presence of the visibly marginalized created an opportunity for further exploration that did not exist at the inception of this project. Having encountered this second layer of marginalization enriched this project and created a desire for more research on the topic.

Reflection

Over forty years have passed since the assassination of Romero and in those decades younger generations of Salvadoran have blossomed with an eagerness to adopt Romero as their personal saint. Romero has become an icon for Salvadorans around the world and a symbol for those suffering. Gone are the tanks and national police pointing

guns at Salvadorans; these have become the days of ever-present border patrol officials, drug cartels hiding along national borders, and a lack of available fair-wage work. The daily suffering of El Salvador is immense, from the makeshift homes that are built because of desperate poverty to the gangs who torment the streets with violence. Salvadoran, non-Salvadoran scholars, and popular writers of Central America explore such physical and spiritual poverty in the attempt to bring more attention to El Salvador's ongoing problems. While suffering is immense and gang violence is rampant, El Salvador celebrates and acknowledges its past. It does not shy away from its problems and although they appear almost impossible to overcome, interviewees are overwhelmingly hopeful that justice will come to light. Their devotion to their faith is not a weekly obligation of prayer or an occasional remembrance but rather one that is performed daily with the memory of those lost during the civil war, and the subsequent decades. Whether within the walls of a church in El Salvador or the United States or while protesting anti-immigrant laws, the motivation that Romero planted amongst his devotees is ever present in the Salvadoran Catholic communities.

In August of 2017, Archbishop Gomez celebrated alongside Salvadorans during commemorative events of Monsignor Romero's 100th birthday. He proclaimed, "Our brother, Blessed Oscar, had a vision for a new society—the society that God wants—a society in which God's gifts are shared by everyone, and not only the few...we want to carry that vision forward in our own times, and in our own society."²⁷² Here, Archbishop

²⁷² "Archbishop Gomez: Make Oscar Romero's mission your own." *Catholic News Agency* 16 August 2017. Web. 12 April 2018.

Gomez is drawing from Romero's vision of justice that attempts to treat the ills of society. But more so, Archbishop Gomez is addressing an audience whose members continue to perceive themselves as displaced. Archbishop Gomez's acknowledgment brought credibility to the plight of Salvadoran migrants who continue to struggle with legal statuses in the United States and those who endure gang violence back in El Salvador.

What is being witnessed at the Cathedral in Los Angeles is a legitimization of their struggles as not only migrants but also as Catholics: Catholics who have witnessed priests take up arms or be subjected to those rumors, Salvadoran Catholics are having to address distinct concerns about how they are challenged to evaluate the role of priests. Devotees interpretate Romero as a vessel for socio-economic and spiritual change. These ripples that stretch across boundaries (spiritual and national borders) are segments of Romero's narrative. It is a narrative that is both built by his carefully crafted legacy and the desires of devotees to continue their socio-economic fight for justice through a Catholic lens. These combined factors allowed the church to gain a stronger sense of community as devotees continued to attend and entrust their faith in Romero.

As Romero was officially transformed into Saint Oscar Romero on October 14 of 2018, the localized ownership of his sacrifice is now open to the religious marketplace. Romero's immense impact on Salvadoran Catholicism has birthed and continues to generate critical discussion over the role that the catholic church must undertake when challenged by visceral injustice. The catholic church that Romero obeyed and studied under is not the church that we see today. Pope Francis has refocused his efforts,

prioritizing socio-economic justice and peace. The catholic church that we see today is a newer version of the church that Romero conceptualized existing but not the one he lived and died under. As Romero's name shuffles through the worldwide spectrum of saints to choose from, Salvadoran Catholics continue to chart a course that will make Romero decisively theirs through their calls for socio-economic justice and peace.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

1. Religious identity

Probes

- a. What is your religious background?
- b. Have you changed your religious identity since the civil war?

2. Relationship to Catholic church

Probes

- a. Do you attend a particular church?
- b. How long have you attended that church?
- c. Why have you decided to stay or change affiliations?

3. Relationship to Romero

Probes

- a. When was the first time you heard/saw Romero?
- b. How did he influence you throughout the civil war years?
- c. What was your reaction to the news of his death?

4. War and Immigration

Probes

- a. How do you remember war?
- b. Did you or someone you knew migrated to the United States?
- c. Do you believe faith traveled with you or the people that migrated to the United States?

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

1. Celebrant at Romero beatification ceremony

Probes

- a. What brought you here?
- b. Where are you from?
- c. What is today's significance for you?
- d. What is today's significance for Salvadorans?
- e. What is today's significance for Catholics?
- f. What did you witness today?
- g. Is there anything that stood out to you?