
OSCAR ROMERO

A MAN FOR OUR TIMES

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INTRODUCTION

Rarely is a biographer given the chance to examine the life of a person of heroic proportions from the standpoint of his close contemporaries and direct personal knowledge. I was graciously afforded this opportunity when I undertook the task of writing this psychobiography of martyred archbishop Oscar Romero.

This work is an attempt to understand and uncover the humanity of one of the most important religious figures of the twentieth century. In my research, I found out that it is quite remarkable how quickly a person—Romero in this case—can become a myth and be elevated to a supernatural realm. Prophets and saints are usually confined to a special kind of Olympus, but they were also ordinary human beings. New Testament scholars have labored for centuries to find the “historical” Jesus, a task that has turned out to be quite difficult due to the time separating us from him, along with the myriad factors in between. However, because of the proximity of Romero’s existence, I was in a much better position to approach the humanity of a saint, as he was proclaimed by the Salvadoran people long before he was canonized by the Roman Catholic Church. I hope to look at the *historical* Romero as

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a model for emulation, and to appreciate the quality of his achievement and its significance for our time.

This psychobiography was based on primary and secondary sources. I met Romero when he was still an auxiliary bishop. I was a lay member of JEC (Christian Student Youth). Ironically, in retrospect, he was one of the organizers of a crusade aimed at persuading families to pray the Roman Catholic Rosary. It was around 1970, and a devastating civil war was brewing in El Salvador. At first sight, Romero was simply a pious and quiet clergyman; in fact, he appeared to be rather shy and spoke very little. I don't remember anything he said. His presence at JEC was mainly to support our efforts. He was just there. Romero was not known as a people's advocate, but as a conservative bishop, and a staunch one at that, which made his change of course—some would say conversion—even more spectacular. Twenty years after his death, I traveled to El Salvador four times between September 2000 and August 2004 to conduct interviews that became my primary sources. I interviewed all of Romero's surviving relatives, friends, and coworkers—mainly clergy. Being a Salvadoran-born American and a priest greatly helped in opening doors and facilitating the interviews. Most people I interviewed appeared interested in the project and were open and candid; I was a *padre* and they trusted me. For the most part they did not conceal their biases in their evaluation of Romero and the admiration, awe, or even deadly hatred that he inspired in them. They shared a great deal of their time, sometimes an entire day, to help my research.

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My interviews were free-floating and informal. I simply took notes and refrained from using a tape recorder to respect the wishes of the interviewees and foster their spontaneity. I began by explaining that I was trying to understand Romero as a human being—not a religious public figure but a flesh and blood person—in order to bring him closer to us. My questions loosely followed the order below, with variations to allow for the flow of the interviewee's associations:

- When did you meet Monsignor Romero?
- What was your relationship to him, and how long did it last?
- What kind of person was Monsignor Romero? How would you describe him? (Often I had to prompt people on this point to talk of Romero as a human individual, setting aside the religious *transference*.¹)
- What do you remember the most about Monsignor Romero? Tell me a story. (In the case of people who knew him as a child or as a young man I would ask more pointed questions about his upbringing and education.)
- Anything else you would like to tell me about him? (This last part was usually the longest, since I allowed ample time for free associations.)

My interviews covered a wide range of people including his three surviving brothers, his sister, clergy and lay associates, as well as his closest friend, a traveling salesman with whom I

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traveled for days at a time. I will refer to them specifically and describe them in detail as they appear in the narrative.

To speak of psychoanalysis as a biographical tool may elicit misgivings about the so-called imperialistic role of psychoanalysis when it purported to be an all-encompassing way of understanding humanity and society. We have come a long way since Professor William Langer's famous challenge to the American Historical Association in 1957, when he advocated the use of psychoanalysis as a tool for furthering our understanding of history. The role of psychoanalysis is now understood as more modest but still essential. Robert Jay Lifton writes:

There is a real paradox here, important to keep in mind particularly in historical and cultural studies: without psychoanalysis, we don't have a psychology worthy of address to history and society or culture. But at the same time, if we employ psychoanalysis in its most pristine form, we run the risk of eliminating history in the name of studying it. . . . [M]ost of history is eliminated in the name of individual psychopathology. . . . Erik Erikson is a key figure in what might be called a new wave of psychohistory. . . . What Erikson managed to do was to hold psychoanalytic depth while immersing himself in the historical era being studied and then relating those currents to that figure.²

Erik Erikson's seminal work on Luther was one of the main inspirations for this work. He did a masterly analysis of the relationship between personality, historical context, and social and theological impact in the life of the religious genius of the

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Reformation. He created the model of *the great individual in history*,³ a model in which the person under study is placed in their concrete historical context and the influences of the latter on their personality and actions are thoroughly considered. We must, however, leave room for *the irreducible*,⁴ that which cannot be explained by any theory, psychological or otherwise, that which is beyond words, and can only, perhaps, be half-way described, as the action of the divine Spirit.

Psychohistory is an essential tool for historians because it adds a new dimension to the interpretation of history. In addition to the social, political, and narrative aspects, the clinical art of psychoanalysis can shed light on the emotional forces that propelled individuals to act in response to their historical context. Instead of appealing to the common-sense explanation, or leaving great lacunae as far as the emotional motivations of the person under study are concerned, psychohistory allows the researcher to add a new layer of interpretation and prediction to their task.

The psychoanalytic method places the observer in a particular mix of identification and detachment. The subjective aspect is a novel contribution in the sense of bringing our own feelings and responses, attitudes, behaviors, fantasies, attractions, and aversions into play through the phenomena of transference and counter-transference,⁵ which then becomes an added tool and asset for understanding. The psycho-biographer strives to empathize fully with the individual and period and establish an emotional interpretive communication that is as immediate as possible with regard to the past. The psycho-biographer

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must allow their “evenly suspended” attention to become a more precise focus on the resonant themes and facts that lead to interpretation. The psycho-biographer does not disregard the forces of aggression, libido, fantasies, slips, passions, and peculiarities that may be overlooked by a classical historian.

Unlike Freud, who suggested that the human personality was largely determined by age five, Erikson saw human development taking place throughout the entire life of the individual in eight stages, which he called epigenetics, after the scientific term related to the doctrine that the entity that will develop into a viable system is acted upon and depends on both the conditions in its environment and its internal coding. In Erickson’s view the same holds true in terms of personality development. The human individual is equipped to continue to grow, given the right conditions, until life comes to an end. The method for applying psychoanalytic theory to Archbishop Romero’s historical material was carried out in three stages: *reading* primary and secondary materials in a comprehensive way; *noting* words or incidents that appear most relevant; and *analyzing* the materials selected to better understand the individual’s motivations and behavior patterns. Romero’s diaries and sermons, along with the firsthand witnesses’ interviews, constitute the primary material. Other works cited constitute the secondary materials and are listed in this book’s bibliography.

The interviews were carried out in Spanish and I relied on my translation of them to incorporate them into the corpus of the entire work. The interviews turned out to be the richest and

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most novel materials because they are eyewitness accounts registered solely by me. Thus, I was able to capture the emotional texture of the stories and statements. The secondary materials, were, for the most part, originally written in Spanish. I compared my own translation with the authorized translation of the materials, when available, and will point out any significant differences.

I had to choose portions or incidents in the materials that stood out as revealing of a particular psychological or historical influence in the archbishop's life. I have also included an explanation of my choices of particular factors and events. This approach must necessarily be reductive, but not reductionistic. By reductive I mean I had to single out some elements from the entire corpus and exclude others. I wanted to analyze all the relevant factors until I arrived at a plausible unified view of the interface between psychological and historical factors and their impact on Romero's life. I summarize my responses in a postscript. I do not attempt to use my own responses to prove a particular point, but they are helpful and revealing in terms of the effect Romero had on other people.

To date no *psycho-biographical* study of Archbishop Romero has been attempted. This work aims at becoming a novel and welcome contribution to the growing field of Romero studies. A fledgling center has been erected for this purpose at the Jesuit university in San Salvador, Central American University (known as UCA El Salvador). The Jesuit fathers graciously allowed me to have access to the wealth of books and documents contained there, as well as to the adjacent museum

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where I could see the relics, the bloody cassock with a bullet hole being the most striking element on display.

As a native of El Salvador, a Jesuit alumnus, and a clergyman, I believe I was particularly well suited to undertake this project. I was brought up in the same cultural and religious environment as the archbishop and, before I became an Episcopalian, I attended the same Roman Catholic seminary as Romero. There, I became intimately familiar with the religious ideology and training prevalent in Romero's time. I also lived through several dictatorships and was acquainted with the prevalent climate of repression and human rights violations. My aim is to contribute to the understanding of how Romero's radical transformation came about while emphasizing the human traits that make him more accessible to us, as an inspiration in our struggle for human rights and the gestation of a prophetic spirituality for our times.