

## Chapter 12

# “How Historical Are You Trying to Be?”

*Romero*

Kevin Coleman

*Romero (1989); produced by Ellwood Kieser; directed by John Duigan; written by John Sacret Young; color; 105 minutes; Paulist Pictures. Archbishop Oscar Romero (Raúl Julia) is transformed from a quiet ally of the oligarchy to an advocate for El Salvador's poor.*

The last three years of Oscar Romero's life, precisely the period covered by the Hollywood film *Romero* (1989), are abundantly documented. As Archbishop of San Salvador from 1977 to the moment he was assassinated in 1980, crucial moments of his life were recorded on audio cassette tapes, by television cameras, and in still photographs. His writings—four long pastoral letters and hundreds of homilies, bulletins, and press releases from the Office of the Archbishop—are published in seven volumes that add up to some 3,500 pages. His audio diaries, which he privately dictated into a tape recorder, narrate a nearly day-by-day account of his activities from March 1978 to four days before he was shot. His homilies, too, were recorded for posterity. During the last three years of his life, Romero had become one of the only trusted sources of information about what was going on in the country. El Salvador's wealthiest families owned the major press outlets and together with the military dictatorship, which had ruled since 1932, exercised extreme censorship. In the late 1970s, the newspapers and television stations created wall-to-wall coverage of “communist” priests, “terrorist” insurgents, and soldiers sacrificing

themselves for the fatherland. The makers of *Romero* had these sources—his audio diaries, the recordings of the homilies, the photographs, and the television interviews—available to them as they conducted research to write the script, design the scenes, and deliver their lines on camera. Romero, we might say, wrote the first draft of the history depicted in this movie.

Amidst the repression, Romero dedicated a substantial portion of his long Sunday homilies to reporting on the facts of the previous week. He provided details on who had been killed, including their names, ages, where they were murdered, and who the likely perpetrators were. He knew these details because he had established the Office of Legal Aid in the Archdiocese of San Salvador to investigate political violence. With no other place to turn for help, the families of people who had gone missing or whose bodies were found dismembered came to this office with photos of their loved ones. Romero's homilies were then broadcast across the country via the diocesan radio station, YSAX. Not only can we listen to the original audio recordings of those homilies; we can also read oral history interviews with some of the ordinary Salvadorans who relied on them to figure out what was going on in their country.

The final recording of Romero captured the moment he was killed. In his homily on March 24, 1980, in the small church at the Hospital of Divine Providence, where he lived, we can listen to Romero speak his very last words:

By Christian faith we know that at this moment the host of wheat becomes the body of the Lord who offered himself for the redemption of the world, and that the wine in this chalice is transformed into the blood that was the price of salvation. May this body that was immolated and this flesh that was sacrificed for humankind also nourish us so that we can give our bodies and our blood to suffering and pain, as Christ did, not for our own sake but to bring justice and peace to our people. Let us therefore join closely together in faith and hope at this moment of prayer for Doña Sarita and ourselves.

The assassin's shot rings out. Brief silence, then pandemonium. Moments later, a photographer snapped pictures of Romero lying dead on the altar, blood welling from his mouth, nose, and ears. Carmelite nuns in white habits are on their knees, some with their hands on him, others with their foreheads pressed to the polished stone floor. This scene is faithfully reconstructed in the final moments of *Romero*, the film.

Just four days after the sniper (whose name we still do not know) killed Romero with a single .22 caliber round to the chest, the Hollywood writer and director John Sacret Young cut out a news article on the assassination from the *Los Angeles Times* and sent it with a handwritten note to Father Ellwood

"Bud" Kieser: "This could make a fascinating movie of the week."<sup>1</sup> Upon receiving the note, Kieser called Young to say that he was intrigued. Would Young be interested in writing the script for a movie on Romero? The two had worked together on *Insight*, a half-hour television series that sought to convert nonbelievers and that Kieser directed for twenty-three years.

Each man already had the measure of the other. "John had an unconventional approach to the world of the spirit and a love-hate relationship with the Catholic Church," Kieser later wrote. "An Episcopalian by background, he had majored in religious studies at Princeton. Looking like the linebacker he once was, he liked to bait me, playing skeptic and cynic; but in talking to him, I got the feeling that was a cover for something much deeper. He snorted at the externals of religion but constantly wrestled with its inner core."<sup>2</sup> Young, in turn, recalled: "Bud was formidable, literally and figuratively a giant in my life, and not mine alone. He was six feet seven inches tall, looked young even when he wasn't with a 1950s brush/wave of light brown hair. He wore glasses and hearing aids, and was both literally and figuratively deaf. He heard only what he wanted to hear."<sup>3</sup>

Just a few months after receiving the movie-of-the-week suggestion from Young, Kieser discovered that a Jesuit named James Brockman was working on a biography of Romero. As editor in chief of *America*, a monthly magazine published by the Society of Jesus in the United States, Brockman was one of the key conduits between the Jesuits in San Salvador and the order's large community in North America. On the ground in El Salvador, this group of priests worked daily to commemorate the loss of Romero. Brockman's biography, and especially the contacts that he made in El Salvador while doing research for the book, became sources for the script that Young would write.

After much struggle, the film was released in 1989, not on broadcast television but in theaters. Paulist Pictures, which Father Kieser headed, produced the film with a budget of \$3,500,000, much of it raised from appeals to Catholic nonprofit organizations in the United States. *Romero* was filmed entirely on location in a village just outside of Cuernavaca, Mexico. The producers were from Hollywood; the director's team was Australian; the actors were Latino, white, and Mexican. The story was Salvadoran.

*Romero* faithfully depicts the significant events and factors at play in late Cold War El Salvador: the conflict between Church and State; divisions within the Catholic Church; the alliance between the oligarchy and the military; stolen elections and brutal state-backed repression; the organizing work of priests and lay Christian leaders with peasant communities; occasions where ordinary citizens sought refuge from state repression by hiding in Catholic churches. The film accurately portrays these weighty historical moments. It gets other things right as well: garbage dumps and lava fields where death squads and soldiers left the mutilated bodies of those they



Figure 12.1: Original movie poster for Romero (1989). (Author's collection.)

suspected of subversion; the effort that ordinary people made to understand the root causes of poverty and exclusion in El Salvador; the kidnapping, carried out by left-wing insurgents, of a government minister from a wealthy family; the letter Romero sent to President Jimmy Carter, requesting that the United States stop providing military equipment and advisors to El Salvador; and the connection between anti-Indigenous racism and the refusal of the wealthiest Salvadoran families to support initiatives that would benefit the country as a whole. The movie is also good on the details. Romero did indeed have a close relationship with his driver, Salvador Barraza, a humble shoe salesman. He wore horn-rimmed glasses, which look like the pair that Raúl Julia wore on screen, and a red miter emblazoned with "*Sentir con la Iglesia.*" Black and white photographs of the disappeared, which appear on walls and in photo albums at several points in the film, were important to the work of Romero's Office of Legal Aid. As a film, *Romero* gets all of this history right, and masterfully so.

The movie is decidedly Catholic not only in its subject matter but also in its production. It was made by Paulist Priests, a Roman Catholic missionary order dedicated to evangelizing to non-Catholics. The Paulists produced it with \$288,000 in financial support from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and a \$100,000 loan from the Raskob Foundation.<sup>4</sup> *Romero* is what Hollywood would call "a bio-pic" and what historians of early Christianity would recognize as a martyrdom narrative.

The official movie poster, those artifacts of the late 1980s that measured 39 x 27 inches, has Romero (Raúl Julia) in his white alb and green stole, symbolizing that he is serving in his official liturgical function. He looks directly at the viewer and is set within the outline of a gold cross. Behind him are the faithful (we can make out the face of Barraza, the friend who drives him to Aguilares and who gave him a new pair of shoes after he was installed as archbishop). So Romero and his flock are on the cross, which makes this image a crucifix, explicitly associating Romero and other Salvadorans with Christ. Between the viewer and Romero, the barrels of two rifles diagonally intersect, giving us a visual shorthand for his persecutors: the state as represented by its military-grade weapons. Two captions attempt to secularize, to mute ever so slightly the overtly religious imagery: "In defense of the poor he fought with the only weapon he had . . . *the truth*" and "*ROMERO—A true story of a modern hero.*" But Romero's truth, the images on the poster insist, was Christian, and his heroism was that of Christian martyrs. Yet as historians of early Christianity remind us, the veracity of martyrdom stories is far outstripped by the intensity of belief in a myth of persecution that continues to mobilize white evangelicals in the United States.<sup>5</sup>

### ROOT CAUSES, 1932–1977

*Romero* starts with only a black screen and the thud-thud of a military helicopter. As the opening credits appear in a red typeface, the din of a crowd can be heard through the chopper's blades. Viewers are then located in a specific time and place: "EL SALVADOR. February, 1977." A man addresses the crowd—"It happened in 1932, *La Matanza*"—and then, a cut from the black screen to a close-up of the speaker, a clean-shaven political candidate in a sportscoat: "It happened in the election of 1945 and 1950. It happened in the *one candidate election of 1962*." The camera cuts from the speaker to the crowd supporting him in an urban center strung with political banners, then to armed soldiers and plainclothes intelligence operatives watching the assembly from balconies nearby. "It happened in the election when the winners kept changing even though the voting was long since completely done. And now, 1977, and this time, we will not stand for it anymore. We will occupy this plaza until there is a true election, a *free election*." The crowd chants "freedom, freedom." A colonel in dark sunglasses looks on and gives orders through a two-way radio. From the flat rooftop of an adjacent building, four men train telephoto lenses on the participants in the rally, putting them in the crosshairs of the camera's viewfinder. Soldiers protect the photographers as they click away. Rather than ensuring open political debate and the expansion of liberty, the repressive forces of the state are figured here as curtailing both.

This lesson in forty-five years of Salvadoran history is condensed into less than a minute of screen time—it is also historically accurate. The Salvadoran military ruled for nearly fifty years, from 1931–1979, longer than in any other country in Latin America or the Caribbean; moreover, El Salvador only began its transition to democracy after the signing of the Peace Accords in 1992.

Agrarian capitalism in El Salvador played an important role in the consolidation of conservative authoritarian rule. Up until the end of the nineteenth century, the country's Indigenous peasantry worked communal landholdings (*ejidos* and *tierras comunales*). But with the global coffee boom of the early twentieth century, large landholders began to change laws to "modernize" agriculture, ejecting subsistence farmers from land held in common and placing them onto small, privately owned plots. Those peasants, now without land to sustain themselves, became rural wage laborers on the expanding coffee estates, which by the late 1920s, brought in 90 percent of El Salvador's income from exports.<sup>6</sup>

By the early 1930s, rural workers had a long list of grievances. They could remember a time of prosperity, and they knew when they lost their land to the coffee elite. As the state repressed a growing leftist labor movement, militancy increased, setting in motion a dynamic of polarization that ended



catastrophically. In January 1932, despite being outmatched, the Salvadoran Communist Party reluctantly launched an insurrection. The insurgents controlled six towns and villages for just one day and killed less than twenty civilians, each of whom was a political target.<sup>7</sup> In response, the military regime of General Maximiliano Martínez sent soldiers on a two-week rampage through the countryside of western El Salvador, where they killed around 10,000 people, most of whom were Nahua Pipil. This is *La Matanza*, which the politician in the opening scene of the film is referring to.

While the first wave of enclosures was precipitated by the coffee economy, the second, which began after World War II, was brought on by the expansion of the cotton, sugarcane, and cattle export industries. The privatization of communal lands resulting from coffee cultivation for foreign markets had been softened by placing subsistence farmers onto their own small parcels and by absorbing them into a new labor market, but this second wave of enclosures cut peasants off from their smallholdings without offering the safety valve of employment.<sup>8</sup> The military continued to enforce the interests of large-scale agrarian capitalists at the expense of the peasantry. Although junior officers occasionally promised economic reforms in bids to oust their superiors in the armed forces and to garner the support of the general population, such promises, including the major land reform proposal of Colonel Arturo Molina (1972–1977), were scuttled by landed elites, who called on the military to suppress mass movements that demanded free elections and concrete measures to address the problem of landlessness, and the grinding poverty and exploitation that resulted from it. As in the opening scene to *Romero*, the film emphasizes a lack of democracy without explicitly thematizing why the oligarchy and the military were intent on subverting the will of the Salvadoran people. Without an understanding of the underlying causes of poverty in El Salvador, principally a landless peasantry, the violence depicted may strike viewers as senseless.

### ROMERO'S CONVERSION AFTER THE DEATH OF RUTILIO?

The film depicts Romero undergoing a transformation, from "a mouse of a man" into a courageous hero. Early in the movie, a young priest (Tony Plana) who works with the poor, affectionately says to Rutilio Grande (Richard Jordan): "Tilio, you should be the one taking Archbishop Chávez's place." As they banter about who should be the next archbishop, one of the priests declares: "The worst would be Romero." Moments later, we get a contrasting view, as two conservative bishops delight that Romero was selected. "He's a good compromise choice—he'll make no waves," the military vicar says.

The point that these two scenes make—about the way that progressive clergy viewed Romero as a spiritualist who ran interference for the status quo and the church hierarchy who saw Romero as a safe bet in tumultuous times—is true to how he was perceived in early 1977. In both the film and in an influential, though hotly contested, body of scholarly literature, the impetus for a dramatic change in Romero was the assassination of his friend, the Jesuit Rutilio Grande.

In the early 1970s, Romero had a public conflict with the progressive wing of the church in El Salvador. The Jesuits there had begun to reshape their pedagogy in accord with the recommendations made by the Conference of Latin American Bishops at the 1968 meeting in Medellín, Colombia. At one of their high schools, teachers sent the students, most of whom hailed from the upper classes, into shantytowns to study the realities that those communities faced. In the diocesan newspaper *Orientación*, Romero denounced the Jesuits as “certain pedagogues” of “a false liberating education.” He railed against the “demagogy and Marxism” in “the pamphlets and literature, of known red origin, spread in a certain school.”<sup>9</sup> A couple years later, a study published in *Estudios Centroamericanos*, a social scientific journal run by the Jesuits, found that under Romero’s editorship, the diocesan periodical *Orientación* “criticizes injustice in the abstract but criticizes methods of liberation in the concrete.”<sup>10</sup> This pastoral rift between the native-born Romero and the Spanish-born Jesuits was suddenly overcome as each side mourned the loss of Grande. Like Romero, Grande was a Salvadoran priest who lived and worked where he was born; like the Basque Jesuits, Grande was himself a member of the Society of Jesus and a liberationist.

The cinematic rendering of the murder of Grande adheres to the historical record. On March 12, 1977, Grande was accompanied by seventy-two-year-old Manuel Solorzano and sixteen-year-old Nelson Lemus in his Volkswagen Safari. As they were leaving town, they stopped to pick up three children. Minutes later, the group was ambushed by gunmen waiting on banks alongside the road and a small pickup truck that had been following them since they left Aguilares. They put twelve bullets into Father Grande, penetrating his jaw, neck, skull, pelvis, and lower back. The three children in the back were spared and later recounted what they had seen.<sup>11</sup>

In the film, when Romero arrives at the wake for Grande and his companions, he sees their bloodied bodies and turns inward. As he processes their deaths, he overhears the two priests who had doubted him emphatically say: “the archbishop must speak.” At that point, Romero decides that the church will mourn them in a single Mass of unity at the cathedral. This decision to cancel parish masses angered a few of his fellow bishops, who tell Romero, “you cannot do that, force everyone to go to the same Mass.” In the on-screen funeral homily, Romero addresses those gathered at the cathedral steps, as



well as those huddled around their radios listening to a Mass broadcast across the country: “This is a moment to gather from these deaths, for all of us who remain on pilgrimage . . . the liberation that Father Grande preached was a liberation rooted in faith. And because it is so often misunderstood, for it, Father Rutilio Grande died.”

In fact, the clergy of San Salvador, and not Romero, requested the single Mass, known as the *misa única*, to be concelebrated by the priests of the archdiocese in the cathedral. This daylong meeting took place immediately after Grande’s funeral. Those in favor of a single Mass argued that one sector of the church was being persecuted because of its fidelity to Vatican II and that the rest of the church needed to publicly gather in solidarity around these priests and their bishop. Those opposed claimed that a single Mass would be interpreted as a political provocation and would prevent some of the faithful from receiving holy communion.<sup>12</sup> Romero was initially wary of the idea. He faced intense resistance not only from within his divided conference of bishops but also from Papal Nuncio Emmanuel Gerada, who demanded that Romero reverse the decision.<sup>13</sup> Romero resented that his local pastoral authority was being undermined by the Vatican’s ambassador, and against the nuncio’s wishes, the Single Mass was successfully celebrated. One hundred thousand people were there to mourn in community.

While there is no doubt that Romero changed after Rutilio Grande was murdered, the nature of that change, and whether it was sudden or gradual, is disputed. By tracking how the filmmakers committed to the interpretation of a radical religious conversion, we will see how this became the accepted account of Romero, even though it is at odds with what Romero himself regarded as an evolution in his pastoral approach. The “Road to Damascus” interpretation, we will also see, conflicts with the historical record and a new wave of scholarship on Romero.

Three years after Romero was killed, Father Bud Kieser, the “deaf Don Quixote,” and John Sacret Young, the future writer and director of *China Beach*, sat next to each other on a plane from Los Angeles to San Salvador. They had secured press credentials from a Catholic magazine and *Rolling Stone*, and their trip was timed to coincide with the pastoral visit of Pope John Paul II.<sup>14</sup> Over several days, the two moviemakers interviewed the key historical protagonists: U.S. Ambassador Deane Hinton; the Jesuits at the Central American University (UCA); military leaders; bishops; priests; and the family of Salvador Barraza, Romero’s friend and driver. Romero’s first biographer, James Brockman, had given them this list of people to visit and the local office of Catholic Relief Services set up their appointments.<sup>15</sup> At night, Young struck up friendships with photojournalists, including Susan Meiselas, whose forehead was lanced by camera equipment after the army stopped their bus en route to see John Paul II, and John Hoagland, a

*Newsweek* photographer who was deliberately shot by a Salvadoran soldier with an M-60 machine gun supplied by the United States.<sup>16</sup> (The last six frames in Hoagland's camera, photojournalists later discovered, recorded the moment he was killed.) On March 10, they attended a cocktail party at the Sheraton Hotel in San Salvador; the theme for the evening was "Analysis of the latest political events in El Salvador and their impact on private enterprise."<sup>17</sup> The guest of honor was Major Roberto D'Aubuisson, the intellectual author of the assassination of Romero.

A few days before the gala at the Sheraton, Kieser and Young ate breakfast with Ignacio Ellacuría, a Jesuit theologian of historical reality at the UCA. Young's handwritten notes from the meeting are revealing: "R. fearful of *communism*, when R. accused them [the Jesuits] already dangerous."<sup>18</sup> Kieser and Young then met with theologian Jon Sobrino and the Jesuit Provincial, César Jerez. Young took note of the appearance of the two priests. Sobrino, he scrawled in his notebook, "brown pants + shirt, double-knit blue shirt, pen in pocket, smokes, heavy-rimmed glasses, ½ open zipper, seam gone on pocket, 2" black belt." Jerez, Young observed, was "balding slightly, grey hair, tinted glasses, fresh white shirt, blue seersucker, black shoes, silver computer watch. Uptown." The two priests described Romero as a "very concrete man." Jerez then recounted to Kieser and Young a private conversation that he had with Romero when the two of them were in Rome together after the assassination of Rutilio Grande.

As they were walking along the Via della Conciliazione, Jerez recalled prompting Romero to open up to him: "Tell me how you've changed."<sup>19</sup> According to Young's shorthand notes, Jerez recalled Romero's response:

Remember I am the son of a poor family (proud of that) and I went to seminary & I was separated from my roots & then I came back & worked as a parish priest. Then I was made bishop & I was told to get back in touch with people but I was still scared & still [afraid] of Apostasy. Children dying from—poisoned—what they drinking & Apostasy doing nothing about it & then I become archbishop & then Rutilio killed (& his face illuminates) & then I saw my way had [to be] the way of Rutilio.<sup>20</sup>

The narrative arc is complete. Romero went from a scared priest who had forgotten his roots to a man who was converted by the sight of poor children and the murder of his friend Rutilio Grande.<sup>21</sup> He then had the courage to stand with the poor and courageously defy the oligarchy that exploited them and the military and paramilitary forces that terrorized them. This was the story that Kieser and Young would tell.

In late April 1985, Kieser wrote to Brockman: "At long last, we have completed the screenplay on Archbishop Romero." "I would very much like you

to read it over," Kieser requested, "and give me your feelings on the truthfulness of our portrayal of the Archbishop and the changes he went through."<sup>22</sup> These, then, are the basic standards toward which Kieser and Young aspired: a truthful portrayal of Romero and his conversion from traditionalist to embattled archbishop defending the poor and persecuted.

Brockman's initial reply to Kieser was a brief acknowledgment that he had received the screenplay. In the week since it had arrived, Brockman had "looked it over once." But he was uncomfortable with it—"the first reading is rather jarring for me"—and asked one question: "how historical are you trying to be?"<sup>23</sup> It wasn't that Brockman required a strictly historical account of Romero, but rather he wanted to know where the producer and writer drew the line between accurately representing Romero and creating a character in a Hollywood film.

Six days later, Brockman was back at his typewriter, composing a three-page letter with his evaluation of the 1985 screenplay by John Sacret Young. In his response to the screenplay, Brockman flagged four issues: the portrayal of the Jesuits, Romero's conversion, Romero as a bookworm, and the need to convey that this is not a "rigidly historical" account. There remained, however, a bigger issue: "Does the spiritual depth of Romero come through?" That, he wrote, "is my chief concern."

Highest on Brockman's list of "other difficulties with the script as it is now" was the prominence accorded to the Jesuits:

The Jesuits of Central America have suffered much from stereotyping and defamation. One of the canards is that they manipulated or exerted undue influence on Romero. I'm afraid that the position given to the Jesuit provincial in the script furthers that misconception, to neither Romero's nor their benefit. No Jesuit was as close to Romero as Villez is made to be. His closest advisers were Msgr. Urioste, Fabian Amaya, and Jesus Delgado, all diocesan priests. I can see the dramatic reasons for emphasizing the character of Rutilio Grande, but his prominence in the film calls for de-emphasizing other Jesuits, lest Romero appear surrounded and dominated by Jesuits.<sup>24</sup>

Brockman was presciently attuned to the dangers that the Jesuits were facing in Central America. Four years after he wrote this letter, an elite group within the U.S.-backed military would assassinate Ellacuría, along with five other Jesuits who taught at the Central American University. To eliminate witnesses, the soldiers also killed their cook and her daughter. (Sobrino happened to be at a meeting in Thailand and thus escaped the fate of his colleagues.) Brockman concluded his critique of the screenplay's depiction with a request: "Please don't add to the problems of the Central American Jesuits."

As a historian by training, Brockman had gone through the available primary source documents and disagreed with his Jesuit brothers who were trained as theologians. He doubted that Romero had undergone a radical conversion but felt that for dramatic reasons, that could be part of the movie. In his letter to Kieser, Brockman cast doubt on the conversion narrative: “He refused the gift of a fine house when he became archbishop; this was before Rutilio’s death and before his supposed change of life.”<sup>25</sup>

Rather than interpreting Romero’s transformation as a sudden spiritual transformation, recent scholarship emphasizes the way that he was in constant conversion, seeking at every step to discern what he should do in light of the church’s authoritative teachings—the Gospel, Ambrose of Milan, *Rerum Novarum* (1891), *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), *Populorum Progressio* (1967), and John Paul II’s 1979 address to the Latin American bishops in Puebla, Mexico.<sup>26</sup> Romero repeatedly drew upon these texts in his homilies and pastoral letters. One historian has even argued that the popular understanding of Romero as a reactionary priest who suddenly became the voice of the Salvadoran people is a myth, one initially propagated by the Jesuits Ellacuría and Sobrino, as they struggled to understand how the bishop who had once denounced them as “communists” unexpectedly shifted to working with them.<sup>27</sup> Between 1977 and 1980, Romero found himself as the head of a church whose progressive elements were being systematically and brutally murdered. In response to the new political dynamic of a country hurtling toward civil war and with the increased pastoral responsibility that came with being the archbishop, Romero gradually summoned the courage to denounce wrongs and to work for a more just distribution of created goods.

## DESTRUCTION OF THE TABERNACLE IN AGUILARES

In the film, the military rolls into the town of Aguilares, brutalizes the townspeople, and sets up barracks inside the local church. Romero arrives in Aguilares and walks (with Salvador Barraza trailing behind him) into the church and tells the soldiers: “We are here to remove the Blessed Sacrament while the town is occupied.” A soldier replies, “This is a barracks.” Romero insists, “We are here to take care of the Eucharist.” A blond, pock-faced soldier then turns his back on Romero and opens fire on the altarpiece, blowing the crucified Jesus’s plaster head off. The tabernacle is destroyed. The tabernacle is an ornate box that holds the wafers that have been transformed during Mass into the consecrated Eucharist, which Catholics believe is not a mere symbol of the body of Christ but his actual flesh and bones. Thus, within Catholic theology, to shoot the tabernacle is to shoot Christ. With that, the soldier turns around, points his gun at Romero, and orders him to get out.

Romero leaves the church, gets to his car, and hesitates, looking at the poor gathered in the plaza. He steels himself and reenters the church, walking past the soldiers. He goes down on his hands and knees and begins picking up the hosts scattered behind the table of the altar. The soldiers put their boots on his back, pushing him to the ground. Romero gets back on his feet and walks out with the hosts clasped in his hands.

Moments later, Romero dons his liturgical garments, then walks toward the church. Local priests and parishioners join him in procession. He addresses the reassembled congregation, with armed soldiers among them, from the altar: "We are here today to retake possession of this church building and to strengthen all those who the enemies of the church have trampled down." Soldiers hang their heads. "You should know that you have not suffered alone, for you are the church, you are the people of God, you are Jesus in the here and now." Among the parishioners, the camera finds Lucia (Lucy Reina) listening devoutly. The two priests with whom she works in Aguilares are also listening; later in the film, one of these priests will be tortured and killed, and the other will take up arms in frustration with the ways that their nonviolent attempts at change have been brutally repressed. In a subsequent scene, Lucia will be snatched from her bed in the middle of the night and brutally murdered. Romero continues to address the people assembled in the reclaimed church: "He is crucified in you, just as surely as he was crucified 2,000 years ago on that hill outside of Jerusalem. And you should know that your pain and suffering, like his, will contribute to El Salvador's liberation and redemption."

The filmmakers went to great trouble to get this scene right. In January 1988, Father Kieser traveled to El Salvador with John Duigan, the director of the film, and Roger Ford, the production designer. The three visited several churches, marketplaces, and political rallies and went out at night in San Salvador. They went to the chapel at the hospital for cancer patients where Romero was assassinated and to the cathedral where his body was entombed. Ford took photographs in El Salvador and used them to design the set for the scene in which the soldier destroys the tabernacle.

When it came time to shoot the film, Ford found a church in a small town outside Cuernavaca. The church had a big arch near the altar. He recalls, "I thought that what we could do—because we weren't going to shoot up the altar—was to put a flat behind the arch, in front of the altar, and build our own altar. That way, we could have two or three altars; we could shoot the thing up without harming the real church." A member of Ford's design team then managed to get a crucifix and unconsecrated hosts. They built the glass cabinetry with "sugar glass," which looks like real glass. The special effects people planted explosive charges, "bullet hits," all over the place. During the take, they let off the mini-explosives so that they punched holes in the plaster

work. From there, the camera cut to the guy shooting the gun. Ford explains, “It all comes together in a perfectly safe way, where no one gets harmed and no sacrilege occurs.”<sup>28</sup>

Is this scene historically accurate? Yes, largely so. In the late 1970s, the military shot up the Catholic church in Aguilares and riddled the tabernacle with bullets. The screenwriter and producer relied on Brockman’s account, which was based on contemporaneous information published by the Archdiocese of San Salvador in a bulletin and Romero’s May 23, 1977, letter to Colonel Arturo Molina (1972–1977). Brockman himself “saw the bullet-riddled tabernacle a year later and spoke with parishioners.”<sup>29</sup> From these distinct sources, he reconstructed what happened:

Romero tried to go to Aguilares himself to see the situation and to remove the Blessed Sacrament from the church, which the soldiers were using as a barracks. The army would not let him pass, and he then sent the chaplain of the Guardia Nacional. The guardsmen arrested the chaplain and kept him prisoner for an hour. Soldiers shot open the tabernacle and strewed the hosts on the floor.<sup>30</sup>

The movie simplifies actual events without changing their basic contours. In the film, Romero gets through the military checkpoint and personally witnesses the desecration, which he works to repair. In historical fact, soldiers really were using the church in Aguilares as a barracks, and they did shoot up the tabernacle. Romero attempted to get to the town, but the military stopped him.<sup>31</sup>

Beyond Brockman’s account, other reports of the events in Aguilares were also available to the scriptwriter. In July 1977, the U.S. Congress House Subcommittee on International Organizations held hearings on religious persecution in El Salvador. Thomas E. Quigley of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops testified:

On Sunday, June 12, together with several thousand others I participated in a solemn mass of reparation in the Metropolitan Cathedral in San Salvador. The service of reparation, not the first of its kind, was held to atone for the sacrileges committed by the security forces when they raided Aguilares May 19 and 20, broke open the tabernacle of the church and strewed the consecrated hosts over the floor.

Quigley noted that this act of symbolic reparation, timed as it was for the feast of Corpus Christi, focused on both “the wanton desecration of the sacrament in Aguilares” and on “the sacredness of the human person, the men, women, and children of Aguilares.”<sup>32</sup>

Romero’s words are also the basis for this distinctively Catholic moment in cinema. In the actual homily of June 19, 1977, in Aguilares, Romero began:



"It is my job to gather up the assaults, the bodies, and all that the persecution of the church leaves in its wake. Today I have come to gather up in this church and in this profaned convent a destroyed tabernacle and above all else a people that has been disgracefully humiliated and sacrificed."<sup>33</sup> In the historical Romero's reading of the military's siege of Aguilares and the desecration of its church, an image of liberation emerges. He tells those who had not yet fled the region: "You are the image of the Divine One who has been pierced, the one of whom the first reading speaks in prophetic, mysterious language. That figure representing Christ nailed on the cross and pierced by the lance is the image of all those people who, like Aguilares, have been pierced and violated."<sup>34</sup> The theology of this image is clear: God made humankind in His own image. As the military persecutes the poor of Aguilares, it is killing God and His creation. The repression worked—within a few years, most of the Catholics of Aguilares had fled and less restive converts to evangelical Protestantism had moved in.

### ROMERO AND THE GENRE OF CHRISTIAN MARTYRDOM

Toward the end of the film, Romero is alone in the bleak landscape where Rutilio Grande was killed. Wandering in the desert, Romero is depicted on-screen as speaking to God: "I can't. . . . You must. . . . I'm yours. . . . Show me the way." Between "I can't" and "You must," there seems to have been an epiphany about what he must do. In uttering "I'm yours" and "Show me the way" at precisely the place where Grande, Solorzano, and Lemus were gunned down (three crosses on the shoulder of the road mark the spot), Romero accepts that he may be killed. The plot is thus the culmination of God's will intertwined with Romero's choices.

It was scenes such as this that made movie critics hostile to *Romero*. "The end of the movie is rife with parallels to Christ's martyrdom," a reviewer in the *Chicago Tribune* wrote, "Romero turning card-playing soldiers out of a church, asking God's guidance in a Gethsemane-like cemetery, assuring his flock that 'If they kill me, I shall arise in the Salvadoran people.' *Romero* is film as veneration and that, more than anything else, stifles it."<sup>35</sup> Variations on this line of critique—that *Romero* is not a good film because it is not art and is, instead, what scholars of early Christianity would call a "martyrdom narrative"—were made by a least a dozen reviewers, including Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel.<sup>36</sup>

As a devout Christian who sought to be faithful to church teachings, Romero modeled himself on the one he regarded as his savior, Jesus Christ. There is thus a generic aspect to both Romero's life and to the film upon

which it is based. Romero was imitating other Christian martyrs, and so *Romero*, as a film, repeats the conventions of Christian martyrdom stories. Nevertheless, Romero the historical figure and *Romero* the movie deviate from this genre. In the prototype, the “victorious victim” always dies at the hands of non-Christian tyrants.<sup>37</sup> But the story of Romero is historically significant precisely because it strays from this convention. In the early 1980s, nearly every Salvadoran was a practicing Christian. The members of the oligarchy and the military were devout Catholics, and prominent bishops continued to publicly oppose Romero even as their priests were being killed. The most historically significant fact about the assassination of Romero was that he was killed by his fellow Christians for following, as carefully as he could, the principles of Christianity. It was this faith that led him not only to denounce direct violence but also to advocate for land reform.

A recurrent theme in Romero’s diary was the attacks that he and other clergy suffered from their fellow prelates. On September 13, 1979, Romero spoke the following words into his cassette recorder:

The morning newspapers, *Diario de Hoy* and *La Prensa*, carried a full-page text of the homily of Bishop Aparicio gave in San Vicente last Sunday. It is a strong condemnation of his priests. He says that he cannot defend them and almost accuses them himself, exposing them to possible assassination. He says that the priests who have been killed were purged by the left and that there are priests committed to the left who cannot pull back without the left killing them. We have met with other priests who are very angry about such dangerous accusations.<sup>38</sup>

Months earlier, Bishop Pedro Aparicio had attacked the Jesuits and Romero while they were in Puebla at the Conference of Latin American Bishops. Newspapers, he said in his diary, “published a statement by Bishop Aparicio in which he blames the Jesuits for the violence in El Salvador and accuses them of having come to Puebla to defend the archbishop’s position.”<sup>39</sup> Romero skipped a press conference in Puebla because Aparicio’s statements were creating public division. The Jesuits, meanwhile, sent a letter to Aparicio asking him to cease and desist.<sup>40</sup> Through his false claims against those within the church who were accompanying El Salvador’s poor, Aparicio put their lives in danger.

But direct violence is only part of the story, the part that grabs attention. The other part, the part that the movie *Romero* only gives us glimpses of, is the structural violence of poverty. At the heart of Romero’s preaching, theologian Matthew Philipp Whelan has argued, was the belief that “creation is a gift given for common use.”<sup>41</sup> In 1975, for instance, Romero detailed the plight of coffee harvesters in a weekly periodical published by the Archdiocese of

San Salvador; as he advocated for seasonal laborers on coffee farms, Romero quoted from the Pastoral Constitution of the Catholic Church: “‘Whatever the forms of property may be, . . . attention must always be paid to this universal destination of earthly goods’ (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 69).”<sup>42</sup> This same axiom about creation would lead him to challenge large landholders not to hoard what God gave to be shared in common. In a country where the vast majority of the population was Catholic, the military and the oligarchy selectively targeted those who worked closely with the oppressed to claim their share of what was already theirs. As part of a strategy of counterinsurgency, the United States made modest proposals to modify land tenure systems that had concentrated vast tracts of fertile land in the hands of very few families. Yet the Salvadoran oligarchy characterized even these limited reforms as communist assaults on private property, liberty, and free enterprise. Romero, to quote Whelan, was “not arguing for the abolition of private property, as communism did, but rather for justice in the distribution of land.”<sup>43</sup> Romero was killed during the rollout of land reform. The former president of the National Association of Private Enterprise (ANEP), which led the charge against agrarian reform, allegedly paid the sniper about \$200.

Romero was killed by his fellow Christians as part of a struggle for access to land that stretched back to the late nineteenth century and was violently punctuated by the massacre of 1932 and the civil war that erupted in the wake of his death. By adhering closely to church teachings, Romero exposed contradictions within his own society and within the church he served. The principles that he espoused led to his death at the hands of his coreligionists. That’s the scandal. The film succeeds—as a historical biography and at least according to its critics, as cinematic art—to the degree that it resists inscribing Romero within a standard narrative of martyrdom and instead grapples with the ways that he defied the genre.

## NOTES

1. Ellwood E. Kieser, *Hollywood Priest: A Spiritual Struggle* (New York: Doubleday, 1991): 302.

2. Kieser, *Hollywood Priest*, 303.

3. John Sacret Young, “The Pope of Pacific Palisades,” 1 (draft manuscript, cited with permission), Private archives of John Sacret Young.

4. Kieser, *Hollywood Priest*, 108.

5. Kyle Smith, *Collectors of the Dead* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, forthcoming); and Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom* (New York: HarperOne, 2013).

6. For an overview of the modern history of El Salvador and the key historiographical debates, see Erik Ching, “El Salvador,” *The Oxford Handbook of Central American History*, June 2020, 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190928360.013.20.

7. For a recent study of the 1932 massacre, see Jeffrey L. Gould and Aldo A. Lauria-Santiago, *To Rise in Darkness: Revolution, Repression, and Memory in El Salvador, 1920–1932* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

8. Matthew Philipp Whelan, *Blood in the Fields*, 57–58.

9. Brockman, *Romero: A Life*, 48.

10. Brockman, *Romero: A Life*, 49.

11. Thomas M. Kelly, *When the Gospel Grows Feet: Rutilio Grande, SJ, and the Church of El Salvador: An Ecclesiology in Context* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), xiii–xiv.

12. Brockman, *Romero: A Life*, 13.

13. Archbishop Oscar Romero, *A Shepherd's Diary* (London: Catholic Fund for Overseas Development, 1993), 23–24.

14. Kieser, *Hollywood Priest*, 303; John Sacret Young, “The Pope of Pacific Palisades,” 3; for “deaf Don Quixote,” see Young, 8.

15. Kieser, *Hollywood Priest*, 303.

16. Young, “Pope of Pacific Palisades,” 4.

17. Invitation from the “Asociación Salvadoreña de Egresados de Master de INCAE,” March 10, 1983. Private archives of John Sacret Young.

18. John Sacret Young, “Notes on meeting with Ignacio Ellacuría,” March 7, 1983. Private archives of John Sacret Young.

19. Young, “Notes on meeting with Jon Sobrino and César Jerez.”

20. Young, “Notes on meeting with Jon Sobrino and César Jerez.” A decade later, the story of this conversation between Jerez and Romero would be published by María López Vigil, *Piezas para un retrato* (San Salvador: UCA Editores, 1993), 164–65.

21. For an early scholarly version of this argument, see Ignacio Martín-Baró, “El liderazgo de Monseñor Romero (un análisis psico-social),” *Venue of publication unknown* 36, no. 389 (1981): 152–72, accessed July 1, 2021, <https://www.uca.edu.sv/coleccion-digital-IMB/articulo/el-liderazgo-de-monsenor-romero-un-analisis-psicosocial/>.

22. Kieser to Brockman, April 29, 1985, DePaul University Special Collections and Archives: Rev. James Brockman, S.J. papers, box 32.

23. Brockman to Kieser, May 7, 1985, Brockman papers, box 32.

24. Brockman to Kieser, May 13, 1985, Brockman papers, box 32.

25. Brockman to Kieser, May 13, 1985, Brockman papers, box 32.

26. In *Blood in the Fields*, Whelan traces how Romero’s commitment to land reform in El Salvador emerged from his fidelity to Catholic social teaching and further demonstrates how that commitment occasioned Romero’s martyrdom.

27. Roberto Morozzo della Rocca, *Primero Dios: Vida de Monseñor Romero*, trans. David Salas Mezquita (Buenos Aires: Edhasa, 2010), 185–95.

28. Oral history interview with Roger Ford, May 19, 2020.

29. Brockman, *Romero: A Life*, 31. For Brockman’s sources on the desecration in Aguilares, see p. 259, endnotes 107 and 108. For a similar case, see Romero’s

comments: “In the village of La Junta, there had been a sacrilegious robbery of the Blessed Sacrament, and we went to celebrate an act of atonement,” *Shepherd’s Diary*, 120.

30. Brockman, *Romero: A Life*, 31.

31. Further corroboration of these events can be found in a letter Romero wrote on December 27, 1977, to Cardinal Eduardo Francisco Pironio, describing the profanation of the tabernacle in Aguilares; see Morozzo della Rocca, *Primerio Dios*, 200.

32. *Religious Persecution in El Salvador: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on International Organizations of the Committee on International Relations*, House of Representatives, July 21 and 29, 1977 (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977), [https://books.google.ca/books?id=2DROAAAAMAAJ&pg=PA4&lpg=PA4&dq=aguilares+desecrations&source=bl&ots=UayPj\\_Z-a9&sig=ACfU3U2Wsm8XXAQ949GxFP-KLR6aPQAkLg&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiw-4fj9tjoAhUKCc0KHxO8DBgQ6AEwAHoECAsQKA#v=onepage&q=aguilares%20desecrations&f=false](https://books.google.ca/books?id=2DROAAAAMAAJ&pg=PA4&lpg=PA4&dq=aguilares+desecrations&source=bl&ots=UayPj_Z-a9&sig=ACfU3U2Wsm8XXAQ949GxFP-KLR6aPQAkLg&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiw-4fj9tjoAhUKCc0KHxO8DBgQ6AEwAHoECAsQKA#v=onepage&q=aguilares%20desecrations&f=false).

33. *Homilias: Monseñor Óscar A. Romero*, Tomo I, 149; and Romero, “A Torch Raised on High,” June 19, 1977, Archbishop Romero Trust, accessed June 28, 2021, <http://www.romerotruster.org.uk/homilies-and-writings/homilies/torch-raised-high>.

34. *Homilias*, Tomo I, 150. For another firsthand account of these events, see Jon Sobrino’s reflections on accompanying Romero that day in Aguilares; *Archbishop Romero: Memories and Reflections* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 26.

35. Steinmetz, Johanna. “Veneration Stifles Story of the Man in Romero,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 8, 1989.

36. Roger Ebert, “Romero,” movie review and film summary, September 8, 1989, accessed October 9, 2019, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/romero-1989>; Gene Siskel, “Romero’s Heart in Right Place, but Drama Missing,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 8, 1989.

37. Michal Beth Dinkler, “Genre Analysis and Early Christian Martyrdom Narratives: A Proposal,” in *Sibyls, Scriptures, and Scrolls*, ed. Joel Baden, Hindy Najman, and Eibert Tigchelaar (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 327.

38. Romero, *Shepherd’s Diary*, 328.

39. Romero, *Shepherd’s Diary*, 146.

40. Romero, *Shepherd’s Diary*, 149. Reuters, “Three Bishops Walk Out,” *New York Times*, February 14, 1979, A4.

41. Whelan, *Blood in the Fields*, 36.

42. Quoted by Whelan, *Blood in the Fields*, 69.

43. Whelan, *Blood in the Fields*, 4.

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## Primary Sources

An online collection of primary source materials on Romero can be found at the Archbishop Romero Trust (<http://www.romerotrue.org.uk>). This website features ~~digitalized~~ versions of the original analog audio recordings of his homilies and audio diaries, as well as English translations of his work, galleries of photographs and videos, and a comprehensive (though somewhat dated) list of the secondary theological and historical literature.

Romero, Óscar A. *Homilias Monseñor Óscar A. Romero*. 7 volumes. Edited by Miguel Cavada Diez. San Salvador: UCA Editores, 2005–2009.

Cut this reference. The editors of this volume still have not gotten the collection through peer review, as far as I know. It's been three years!

replace "digitalized" with "digitized"