

Catholic church in El Salvador endorses move to beatify Bishop Romero

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

San Salvador, El Salvador--The Roman Catholic church of El Salvador has endorsed a movement to beatify Archbishop Arnulfo Romero. The church approved the plan to mark 15 years since his assassination at the hands of right-wing extremists.

Romero was killed by a bullet through his heart on March 24, 1980 while officiating at a mass in the chapel of a cancer hospital.

The process of canonization of the archbishop, known in El Salvador as the voice of the voiceless for his untiring work for the oppressed, began in 1990 and has entered its second phase which involved approval by the diocese. "If God wills, one day he will be part of the official list of church saints," said Diocesan Administrator Gregorio Rosa Chavez.

The church and other Catholic groups want to call Romero "San Romero de America" (Saint Romero of America).

Thousands of pilgrims have paid homage at Romero's tomb, and memorial masses were scheduled throughout El Salvador to mark the anniversary of his assassination. Activities included an international forum on Romero involving 150 religious workers from Latin America and Europe. The week concluded with a mass and a march through the capital.

Archbishop Samuel Ruiz from San Cristobal de Las Casas in Mexico who has mediated the conflict in Chiapas state spoke to the forum, surrounded by security guards because he feared an attempt on his life. Ruiz said he considers Romero to be "a martyr of justice, a martyr of the truth."

In the first phase of the canonization process, the church reviewed all of Romero's writings and sermons, and formed an ecclesiastical tribunal to hear 33 witnesses who testified about his work. In addition, a commission of historical experts presented documents and writings testifying to his social, economic, political and ecclesiastical influence during his term of service as archbishop.

Father Rafael Urrutia who has worked to promote the cause of Romero said that the church will publish its findings, and obtain new testimony from other church institutions in Latin America and the Vatican.

"We are walking a good path, convinced that we are doing a work faithful to Jesus Christ, the truth of the Gospel and the fidelity of the Church," Urrutia said.

However the priest said that while Romero was a good pastor, there will be obstacles in the road to beatification. He said the

process will be slow because there are those who do not give Romero credit for his work, and he "is not loved in the Vatican."

"His image has been very politicized because there are those who saw him as a strong political leader rather than a pastor of the church."

Romero was born May 15, 1927 in a poor home located in a small town in the east of El Salvador. From childhood he demonstrated a musical ability, but decided early on to enter the priesthood.

His father died when he was 17. He was ordained in Rome during World War II. He served as a parish priest for 20 years in San Miguel, developing a concern for the poor, the oppressed and the sinner.

Romero served as auxiliary bishop to Monsignor Luis Chavez, and later was named as archbishop over objections by younger priests and liberal church members.

While beginning his ministry as a conservative archbishop, the assassination in 1977 of Jesuit priest Rutilio Grande changed his position, in what some have called a conversion.

With his continual statements against repression. Romero gained admirers, but at the same time many enemies who approved of his assassination when the civil war began. That war claimed 75,000 lives.

His killers have never been discovered, however many have charged Major Roberto D'Aubuisson of being behind the act. The Truth Commission which investigated atrocities during the war determined that D'Aubuisson had given instructions for the killing. That charge was rejected by the government.

However the present government has praised Romero as one who tried to stop the escalating violence and searched for a negotiated end to the conflict.

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