

THE INDEPENDENT

Pope Francis recognises El Salvador's slain Archbishop Oscar Romero as martyr and opens the way for beatification

[Andrew Buncombe](#) New York Wednesday 04 February 2015

On the evening of 24 March 1980, Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero turned to the congregation gathered for mass in El Salvador's Chapel of Divine Providence and talked about sacrifice.

“Those who surrender to the service of the poor through the love of Christ, will live like the grains of wheat that dies,” said the slight, bespectacled priest. “It only apparently dies. If it were not to die, it would remain a solitary grain. The harvest comes because of the grain that dies.”

Shortly after Mr Romero had completed his sermon, a single shot echoed in the chapel and the 63-year-old priest fell to the floor, blood seeping from a small hole in his chest. Outside, a bearded man armed with a .223 high-velocity weapon, sped from the scene in a red, four-door Volkswagen.



This week, 35 years later, Pope Francis declared that Archbishop Romero, an outspoken champion of the poor and an icon for the movement of liberation theology, was a martyr who had been killed because of his preaching, rather than because of his politics.

The [announcement](#) in Vatican City by the first Latin American pope opens the way for Mr Romero to be beatified, perhaps as early as this year.

It also represents a remarkable victory for his supporters; for many years efforts to have him recognised as a martyr and elevated to sainthood were blocked by conservatives within the Catholic church opposed to the teachings of liberation theology.

Under then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had launched a crackdown on liberation theology, fearing what were viewed by conservatives as its Marxist excesses, the *Associated Press* said.



Last summer, Pope Francis told reporters that Mr Romero's case had been "blocked out of prudence" by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, but that it had been unblocked now that there were no more doctrinal concerns.

Mr Romero had spoken out against repression by the army at the beginning of El Salvador's 1980-1992 civil war between the right-wing government, and leftist rebels. He also often criticised the US, which supported the government of El Salvador and those of other Latin American countries in their so-called dirty wars.

The day before his assassination, he had delivered a now famous speech in which he told the government's soldiers and police officers that they were not required to obey an order that was "against the law of God".

"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," he said.



His killing helped spark 12 years of violence that left more than 75,000 dead and which left the small, Central American nation with deep, lasting scars. At least 40 mourners were shot at his funeral by troops. A subsequent inquiry found most of the atrocities were committed by the troops of the El Salvador government and its death squads.

An investigation by a UN Truth Commission concluded in 1993 that Mr Romero's assassination had been ordered by the late Major Roberto D'Aubuisson, an El Salvador army officer who had studied at the notorious School of the Americas, a US military college in Fort Benning, Georgia, which was renamed in 2001 after a series of scandals. Mr D'Aubuisson had also been the founder of the El Salvador's right-wing Republican Nationalist Alliance party.

In 2004, a court in California found Mr D'Aubuisson's former right-hand man, Alvaro Rafael Saravia, a retired El Salvadoran air force captain, who had lived in the US for more than 20 years, responsible for organising the killing and ordered him to pay \$10m in damages.

The case, which relied on the 1991 Torture Victim Protection Act which allows suits to be brought against foreign nationals accused of summary killings and torture, was brought by the California-based Centre for San Francisco-based Centre for Justice and Accountability (CJA).



“The process and promise to canonise Archbishop Romero is much more than a religious decision, it is the recognition of a person who, like many of those killed and disappeared in El Salvador, demanded justice,” the CJA’s Almudena Bernabeu said this week. “This brings hope to the people of Latin America and the world.”

The *National Catholic Reporter* said the announcement of the Pope’s decision followed a finding last month by a team of Vatican theologians who formally declared that Archbishop Romero had been killed in odium fidei - in hatred of the faith.

Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, who spearheaded Mr Romero’s cause for many years , said it was fitting that the first Latin American pope had approved beatification for a man who had become such a heroic figure in the region.

He told *Vatican Radio*: “A church that is poor and for the poor, that’s what Romero lived for, even to the point of shedding his blood.”

On Wednesday, Jesus Delgado, who was Mr Romero's assistant when he was shot while saying Mass, said he hoped the beatification process would help people in his country heal their differences. According to *Reuters* he told a press conference at the Vatican, it could "inspire "all Salvadorans to overcome every political, social and economic division".

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/pope-francis-recognises-el-salvadors-slain-archbishop-oscar-romero-as-martyr-and-opens-the-way-for-beatification-10024009.html>