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THE WORLD

Assassinated Archbishop to Join Beatification Path

The Vatican says it will open the process for Oscar Arnulfo Romero, who spoke out against the death squads in El Salvador's civil war.

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ROME — Twenty-five years after Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero was cut down by an assassin's bullet, Vatican officials plan to announce that they will open the beatification process for the prelate, a move that would put him closer to sainthood.

Church officials in Rome and El Salvador confirmed that the announcement would be made at a news conference Saturday in the San Salvador cathedral crypt containing Romero's remains. Beatification is a step before sainthood.

The announcement will come during 25th anniversary observances in El Salvador of the March 24, 1980, assassination of Romero. The 60-year-old priest was killed as he celebrated Mass in a chapel at a hospital dedicated to terminally ill cancer patients. His killer, a sniper thought to be a member of a government-sanctioned death squad, has never been brought to trial.

"We are receiving a very special blessing from God that will reverberate throughout the El Salvador that the monsignor loved so much," said Maria Julia Hernandez, legal protection director for the Archbishopric of San Salvador and a former associate of Romero's.

The assassination came at the height of El Salvador's civil war and brought international outrage.

In his homilies, Romero had pushed for an end to killings carried out by government-sponsored death squads and for a nonviolent resolution to the war, which dragged on until 1992.

One of half a dozen priests killed in El Salvador during the conflict, Romero inspired a Hollywood film, tributes in many countries and, within a decade, calls for his elevation to sainthood.

Admirers said Romero's homilies were worthy of the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. The Vatican has been reviewing Romero's life and work since the early 1990s.

Vatican sources said there had been strong resistance from some church officials, including senior Latin American clerics, to making Romero a saint because they considered him a leftist. They made the argument, the sources said, that the archbishop was killed for his political beliefs and not because he was a priest.

Romero was killed about a year and a half after John Paul II became pope. The pontiff cracked down on liberation theology, socially progressive churches and pro-Marxist priests throughout Latin America in the 1980s. He appointed cardinals and bishops who shared his politically conservative views.

In an interview near Rome on Tuesday, Msgr. Vincenzo Paglia, the Vatican prelate who is Romero's postulator, or advocate in the beatification case, said a review of thousands of documents confirmed that Romero's teachings were religious in nature. He said Romero had been exonerated of claims that he leaned toward Marxism.

"He was not inspired by the right or left. He obeyed the church's rules and teachings, and it was his evangelism that pushed him to speak out in favor of the people," Paglia said.

The beatification process could take years.

Under rules streamlined by John Paul II in 1983, a miracle must be attributed to a person for him or her to be beatified, and a second miracle is required for sainthood.

Miracles usually involve an inexplicable recovery from a medical problem after someone prays to the candidate.

For martyrs, however, no miracle is required for beatification; one miracle is required for sainthood.

The Rev. Peter Gumpel, a senior official in the Vatican's Congregation for the Causes of Saints, said significant hurdles had been surmounted to beatify Romero.

Gumpel, who is not directly involved in the Romero case but who has handled hundreds of other petitions, said congregation officials would make the final determination.

"In the dioceses, they believe it was a real martyrdom, but it will have to be seen whether they have proven it," Gumpel said. "It is premature to say. We will have to wait and see."

Hernandez said Romero, who became archbishop of San Salvador in 1977, spoke out forcefully in his weekly homilies against the death squads who roamed the country looking for leftist guerrillas and their impoverished sympathizers.

"It was a crime to defend the poor. Anyone who did so was accused of being a communist," Hernandez said.

Romero's homilies were broadcast throughout the nation and achieved the highest ratings of any radio show except for World Cup soccer games, said Leonel Gomez, a former Salvadoran agrarian reform ministry official and now a political consultant.

But the archbishop's popularity made him a threat to the country's military junta.

"Romero was no Kennedy as an orator, but he was more believable. He had a way of saying things from the heart," said Gomez, who was a friend of Romero's. "He knew he was putting his life on the line, knew the risks he was taking."

Decades of civil war ended with the so-called Chapultepec Peace Accords signed in Mexico in 1992. But the violence sent hundreds of thousands of Salvadorans into exile. An estimated 1 million Salvadorans live in Southern California.

Church officials in El Salvador expressed satisfaction with the Vatican's decision but said they remained frustrated by the failure of the state to bring to justice those responsible for Romero's killing.

Despite calls from the United Nations and the Organization of American States to reopen the investigation, Romero's killers have not been prosecuted, largely because of the disappearance of witnesses, the alleged complicity of government and business leaders, and a blanket amnesty granted after the peace accords.

Although the bishop was killed by a single sniper, Gomez said law enforcement officials believed the plot involved 20 to 30 members of a death squad.

The archdiocese in 2003 enlisted the help of a San Francisco public-interest law firm to file a civil suit against former Salvadoran air force Capt. Alvaro Saravia Merino in a Fresno court, alleging Saravia was the mastermind of the assassination. Saravia, then thought to be living in Modesto, soon fled, and his whereabouts are unknown, Hernandez said.

Kraul reported from Mexico City and Wilkinson from Rome. Special correspondent Alex Renderos in San Salvador contributed to this report.

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