

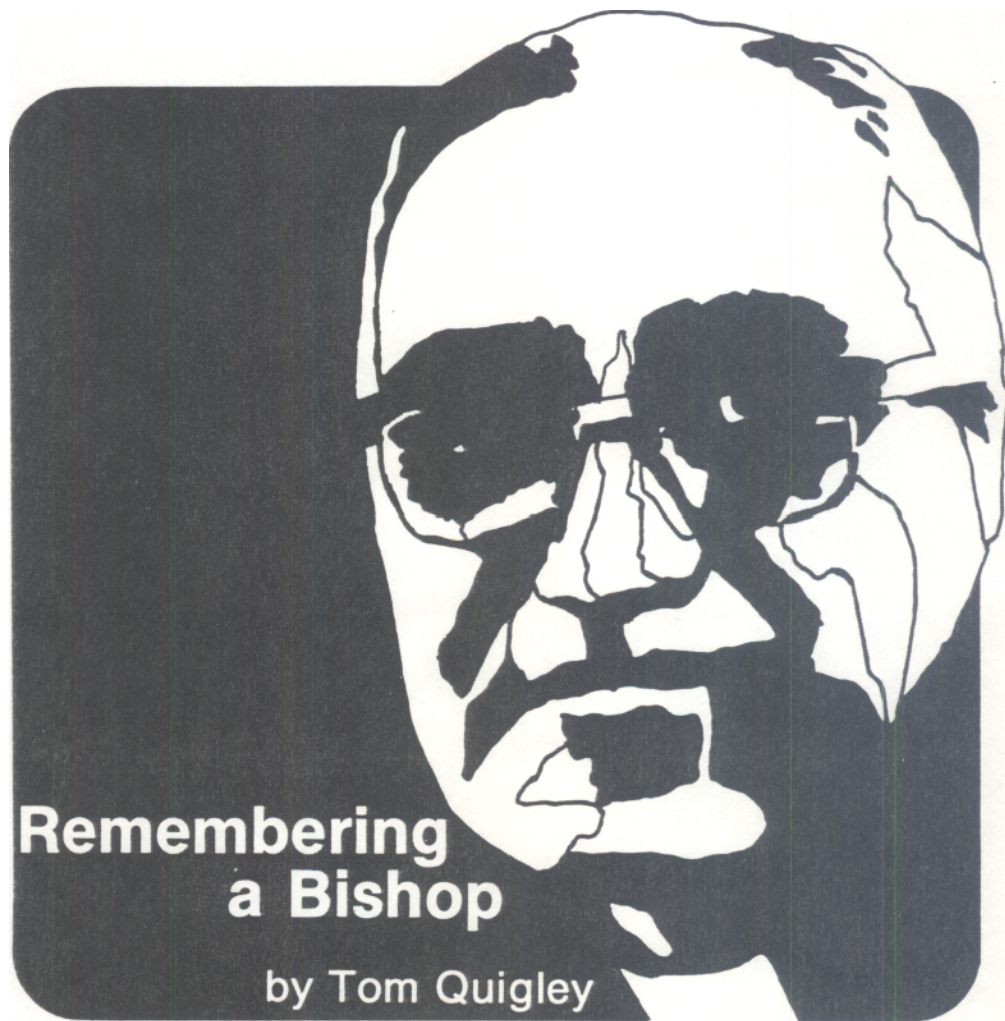
A more unassuming international figure one could hardly imagine. He was not just humble, though he was certainly that, but genuinely shy. The first time I met him in the spring of 1977 he had been archbishop of one of the world's most turbulent cities for less than half a year. Two of his priests, including one of his dearest friends, a former student of his, had recently been assassinated by government thugs. The entire Jesuit community in the country was under threat of extermination by the White Warriors Union. World attention was focused on El Salvador and on the new, surprisingly outspoken archbishop, Oscar Arnulfo Romero.

We entered a room in the section of the seminary that houses the offices of the archdiocese, Jorge Lara-Braud of the U.S. National Council of Churches and I, two foreigners come to see what we could do. Some 20 others sat around the big oval table with us, the recently formed Emergency Committee that was then meeting regularly to discuss the crisis in El Salvador. There were diocesan and Jesuit priests, sisters, lay men and women, the auxiliary bishop, Rivera y Damas and, somewhere among them, Monseñor.

Everybody called him just that — Monseñor. Not a title really, more an affectionate, deeply loving nickname. Dad. Poppa. Monseñor. Even though every bishop in Spanish America is called that, in El Salvador when they say "Monseñor always did this" and "Monseñor said that," now even after his death, they mean only Oscar Romero.

Everybody spoke at the meeting; people had reports, analyses, conclusions. Jorge and I had our pieces to say. But the little man,

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indistinguishable from the rest except for his cassock and simple pectoral cross, listened, smiled gently, and only at the end said a few words. Mostly words of gratitude for our coming, of hope we would have a fruitful visit and, finally, of regret that he could not then — though he would like eventually to do so — accept our invitation to visit the United States. He said he had to stay with his people.

Two years later he did accept and plans were set for him to address the Governing Board of the NCC and meet with U.S. Catholic bishops; but the October coup intervened and he had to cancel. He never left El Salvador. He is still with his people.

Much is made of the "conversion" of Oscar Romero, and I believe he did go through extraordinary changes in his

last three years. But it was not Saul on the Damascus road. He was a good and holy priest, conservative and traditional, as was typical both of the clerical training of the time and, more importantly, of his humble roots. When the truly ancient Archbishop Chávez y González finally retired in 1976 (he's still serving as a parish priest in Suchitoto) all the progressives wanted the bright young auxiliary of San Salvador, Arturo Rivera y Dámas, to succeed and were crushed when Rome named Oscar Romero to the post. "It's all over," a Central American Jesuit told me then; "the Vatican doesn't know what's happening here."

But he was not Saul, nor was he a mossback; he was a humble man of the people and nobody's fool. The U.S. Ambassador, I suppose meaning no harm, told a group in Washington last April that the Jesuits "gave the archbishop one of their crash courses." A simple *curé de*

campagne in the hands of the wily Jesuits, filling him with political theories coated with the sugar of liberation theology.

An even less sensitive and intelligent former ambassador, who represented Richard Nixon's government during the massively fraudulent elections in 1972 when Napoleon Duarte won the presidency but was prevented by the military from wearing the sash, recently wrote that the archbishop's "character was as good as his judgment was bad."

The typical State Department line: Put down what you don't understand; deny what doesn't conform to your pet theory. They never did understand him, or his people. They still don't.

Monseñor was bright by anybody's standards; he was sent to Rome for advanced studies, taught in seminary, read widely, made bishop in a system that prized intelligence if not always creativity and courage. But far more, he was a leader that merited the term brilliant, a brilliant leader of the kind that calls to mind John XXIII, representative of the people who knew that leadership has to do with evoking, calling forth the wisdom that is in the people.

Although we corresponded in the intervening years (he was an extraordinary correspondent, communicating with scores, maybe hundreds of people all over the Americas and Europe) we didn't meet again until Sunday, March 23. Five of us from the U.S. churches had gone on a hastily formed ecumenical visit to El Salvador, seeking to express the solidarity of the U.S. religious community with him and the people of his country and to learn what we could of the current, rapidly changing situation.

We were seated, Quaker, Episcopalian, Methodist and Catholic,

in the sanctuary of the old ramshackle, tin-roofed wooden Basilica of the Sacred Heart. The huge, cavernous poured-concrete cathedral 10 blocks down the street, left unfinished by the previous archbishop who said "we must stop building cathedrals and start building the Church," was unavailable; one of the popular movements had taken it over some weeks before. The basilica was packed, mostly with simple working people, families, kids on their fathers' shoulders. The entrance hymn began and with it, applause starting at the rear and undulating up to the front as the archbishop and the priests and seminarians, vested in brilliantly colored stoles over their albs, moved joyfully up the aisle.

How describe a triumphal procession when there wasn't a trace of triumphalism anywhere? The applause was thunderous, shaking the corrugated roof, teasing tears out of the most non-liturgical of our company; it was simply a pastor receiving the loving embrace of a people who saw themselves, their suffering and their hopes, embodied in this humble figure.

It didn't occur to me then but it has often since, that that day, the eve of his martyrdom, was as vivid a re-creation as I could imagine of the palm-strewn path into Jerusalem.

His homily on that occasion is now famous, translated and published around the world. He told soldiers, simple peasants themselves for the most part, that they are not bound by unjust orders to kill; standard textbook theology but if applied in the concrete, usually considered treasonous. It was so described in the Monday morning paper by an Army spokesman.

The most quoted line of all was heard in its entirety only by the score of us nearest to him in the sanctuary. When he said, addressing the government, the military, the security forces, "I ask you, I beg you" the applause was already deafening; "I order you . . ." and it was

an explosion, blocking out the words everyone knew would follow: "in the name of God, stop the repression!"

But the military heard. Indeed, all of Central America did, since on that day the archdiocesan radio station, YSAX, went back on the air for the first time in weeks after having been bombed out of commission. Monseñor's sermons were the most widely listened to program in the entire country, and his broadcast that day, the first in weeks and the last forever, was no exception.

As we recessed out of the basilica, receiving applause and smiles and handshakes we knew we had done nothing to merit, we North Americans wondered among ourselves how long it would be before some response would be made to this holy man. The radio station had been bombed immediately after the Feb. 17 homily in which he read the letter he wished to send — if the congregation would approve it — to President Carter. The tin roof shook with approval on Sunday and YSAX was bombed on Monday.

But we know now that his assassination was not directly tied to the content of that March homily. Documents which almost certainly link former high officials of the military and international right-wing terrorist groups to the killing, including a Nicaraguan hit man, show that it had been in the works for some time. The date was probably chosen because it was known in advance that the archbishop would be celebrating a sparsely-attended memorial Mass in the hospital chapel at Divine Providence on March 24, the first anniversary of the death of Sara Meárdi de Pinto, mother of the editor of opposition newspaper *El Independiente*. (Not incidentally, the paper has since been bombed and Jorge Pinto, the editor, machine-gunned in his car, but both survive and are continuing. Brave people, these Salvadoreans.)

In a more profound sense, though, I

believe that sermon was the symbolic occasion for his death. He is stirring up people; he has blasphemed against the idols of the state; it is better that one man die; what need have we of further witnesses? And Caesar, too, strutted upon this stage, unwitting and unwilling, perhaps, but present nonetheless. If you let this man go, thou art no friend of the United States. He is spoiling the Grand Design, playing into the hands of the Marxists, the “bloodthirsty terrorists” and the “Pol Pot Left,” as the State Department, with its penchant for one-liner analysis, likes to characterize the massive campesino and worker movements. He must be stopped.

The U.S. didn’t pull the trigger but it helped provide the ammunition. It sought, in unprecedented ways, to pressure Monseñor, to lecture him as one might an errant schoolboy, to seek Vatican intervention to have him quieted, to put out the word — in an act of almost criminally stupid arrogance

— that the information flowing daily into the *Arzobispado* from eyewitnesses all across the country was somehow less to be trusted than the intelligence gathered by the U.S Embassy, locked behind its fortress walls and in effective communication only with the Salvadorean government. It beggars belief, especially when successive ambassadors and State Department officials have privately acknowledged that “our intelligence on El Salvador is not very good.”

Monseñor had a simple proposition. The military and their masters, the oligarchy, had failed for half a century to bring justice and prosperity to the people; the government that took power last October only increased the repression while constructing a facade of long-overdue but, under the circumstances, impossible reforms, refusing all the while to deal with the undeniable reality of popular awakening and organization. It was time, he said, to give the people a

chance, to let the now developed people’s movements, democratic and-revolutionary, join with all others of good will to create a new and just society.

He had no fear of the church being snuffed out in the process, any more than the *campesinado* or the urban workers or the teachers would be; they are all the co-makers of the nation they are struggling to build. A profoundly Christian sense informs the whole process, not because some of the popular movements were in fact organized by priests, but because the people’s revolutionary consciousness has grown up hand in glove with their Biblical awareness that they are a holy people called to freedom.

It may take a special grace for them eventually to forgive their persecutors, especially the bungling policy-makers of the United States, but they will never forget their martyrs. El Salvador will never forget Oscar Romero. Nor should we. ■

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