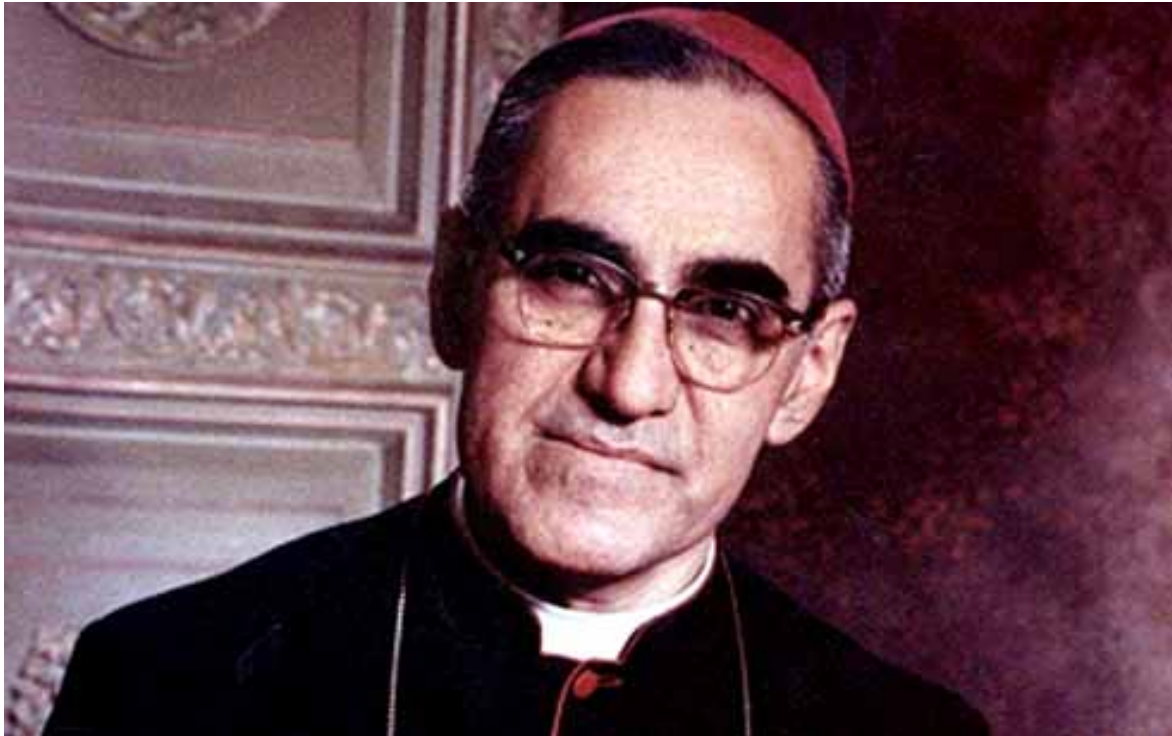


# The courage to pay attention

Fr Andrew Hamilton SJ | 08 March 2021



**The month of March belongs to the little nation of El Salvador.**

In this month we remember the deaths of the Salvadorean martyrs Rutilio Grande (12 March) and St Oscar Romero (24 March). The United Nations has also dedicated 24 March, in memory of Archbishop Romero, as [the International Day for the Right to the Truth Concerning Gross Human Rights Violations and for the Dignity of Victims](#).

The lives of Grande and Romero also bear reflection in faith-based organisations, which work with people who suffer from disadvantage. These men display the best of the tradition they inherit. Their journeys took them from conventional ministry within the parish structures of the Catholic Church to accompany the poorest and most exploited of their people. That movement involved overcoming self-doubt and hesitation. In that, they represented the best of the tradition inherited by faith-based organisations and also the challenge posed by that tradition to all who inherit it, whether religious or not, to be courageous and attentive to the world of the people they serve. For both, that path eventually led to their deaths.

Both men were acquainted with poverty: Romero's father was a carpenter; Grande was orphaned early in life. The Catholic Church was sewn into their lives and world. The public holidays were religious feasts, and in the towns the church shared the square with the local government office, the police station and the army barracks. Each place had its own sphere of responsibility, the church for the faith and spiritual life of the people. Both men took that responsibility seriously – Romero studied in Rome and wrote a study on a Spanish spiritual writer – and were for a time engaged in forming future priests. They met in a seminary and formed a friendship there. Grande struggled with mental illness that left him full of self-doubt. Romero became a Bishop and Grande a Jesuit priest.

Their paths changed when they began to attend to the lives of people who were disadvantaged. Grande was inspired by the Vatican Council vision of a church in which lay people took responsibility. This brought priests out of the town square and into the homes and living conditions of the poor. As they reflected together on the Gospel, they began to see how unjust were the conditions under which they worked. Grande accompanied the poor coffee workers of his church on this path. It led to reprisals and killings and eventually to his own murder and two of his congregation.

Romero, who had hitherto sought to be a unifying figure in a divided nation, was moved by Grande's death to denounce the killing of the poor and to stand with them in their cry for justice. He called the army and government to account. The United Nations Day honours him for disclosing the truth about human rights violations. He in turn was shot during a church service, falling to the ground appropriately on the people's side of the altar.

That depth of commitment to people who are disadvantaged, the steadfastness in companioning them, and that courage represent the best of the tradition that Rutilio Grande and Oscar Romero inherited, and the challenge they leave to us. It is to build communities of justice that are courageous, hospitable and discerning in their inner life and in their response to governments.

*Image: Portrait of Archbishop Oscar Romero on a visit to Rome in 1978. WikiCommons*

Taken from "Australian Catholics"