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Archbishop Romero's Last Hours on Earth

With Archbishop Oscar Romero's cause of canonization moving forward, we offer an article by Fernando Saenz, with his memories of March 24, 1980, the day Romero was assassinated.

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While it's true that a picture is worth a thousand words, an anecdote is also sometimes worth more than a

thousand speeches. So even though I don't know how to put down in words the memory I preserve of Archbishop Romero, I think the small details of his final day on earth, although not exhausting his rich personality, can be an eloquent testimony that transcends the limits of my words.

In El Salvador, the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross organizes every month a gathering for priests. Archbishop Romero used to attend these quite frequently. I was then delegate vicar of Opus Dei in El Salvador (which I ceased being when the Pope named me auxiliary bishop of Santa Ana a few years later).

About 10.30 that morning I went to pick him up at the Archbishop's offices, then located in the present minor seminary. Before leaving, Archbishop Romero suggested that we could take advantage of that

meeting with priests to study a document on the formation of seminarians. We went by car to San Diego beach, where a house had been lent to us for the activity with priests. Due to a misunderstanding, unfortunately the house was locked when we arrived.

So the priests who had arrived had to sit on the grass in the small garden attached to the house. There, sitting under the shade of some palm trees, we read and discussed the document Archbishop Romero had brought with him. Afterwards we put down a table cloth on the ground and enjoyed a pleasant meal and conversation. After some time, the caretaker arrived and apologized for the confusion; he brought out some chairs for us, which we heartily thanked him for.

We continued our get-together, and I remember, among other things, that

Archbishop Romero pointed out to the pastor of the San Salvador cathedral that the liturgical vestments used there, which were quite old and of great historical value, were at risk from the urban guerilla squads that frequently entered the church. He suggested to him that, while the unrest in the country continued, it might be a good idea to transfer them somewhere else for safe-keeping.

Archbishop Romero, who many only know through his bold weekly commentaries (after his homily on Sundays) about the dramatic events then afflicting the life of our country, was a good and simple bishop, and his life of piety was obvious both in the rich spiritual content of his preaching and in such material details as concern for the vestments and objects used for God's worship.

I also recall that during that brief gathering, Archbishop Romero spoke with the parish priest of San Jose de Guayabel about the possibility of planting corn and beans in the land around his parish to provide food for those studying at the seminary. The conversation with the priests touched on many topics, including Padre Pro and the Mexican "cristeros."

About 3 in the afternoon, he suggested that it might be good to end our gathering. He wanted to return right away to the city, since he had a commitment there. I dropped him off at the Divine Providence Hospital about 3:30 or 4. Soon afterwards, during the Offertory of the Mass he was celebrating, he was shot with an explosive bullet.

Whenever I remember that day, what stands out in my memory are the less well-known virtues of Archbishop

Romero: his concern for priests, his sincere piety, his simplicity. These are qualities I often had a chance to observe in him, also in that last meeting in his life when no one knew he would soon be meeting with death.

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