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A spectrum of sanctity

Latin America's new martyrs.

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AS THE story will be told, something very simple happened yesterday in the world of Catholicism. A brave archbishop from El Salvador who was killed by right-wing death squads finally received the recognition he deserved. This eventually happened despite the best efforts of diehard conservatives, including the previous two popes, to hold up that recognition and hence

repress the ideal of liberation theology for which the slain cleric stood.

Actually, the real story is not so straightforward. But there is the kernel of truth, and it's an important kernel. Archbishop Oscar Romero was shot dead while serving mass in San Salvador in March 1980, a time when his country was engulfed in a ghastly civil war. A UN fact-finding commission determined that his killers were ultra-rightist paramilitaries; this confirmed what most people assumed. A day before his death, he had said that soldiers and police should defy their superiors if they were ordered to commit atrocities. Moves towards his "beatification" (in other words, his proclamation as blessed, a stage towards sainthood) were blocked by the Vatican bureaucracy, until Pope Francis restarted the process. Yesterday, the Pope confirmed that

Romero had died a martyr's death at the hands of people acting "in hatred of faith". This clears the way for beatification without having to wait (as would otherwise be needed) for signs of a miracle occurring thanks to the dead man's prayers.

Will all this add to Pope Francis's credentials as a "left-wing" pope, correcting the conservatism of his predecessors? Perhaps it will, but some context is needed.

First, Romero was not the only slain cleric who was proclaimed a martyr yesterday. Asimilar status was accorded to three priests (two Poles and an Italian) who were killed in Peru in 1991 by the ultra-leftist guerrillas known as *Sendero Luminoso*, or Shining Path. This was a time when huge courage was needed to work as a priest in the highland areas where the guerrillas were running amok, pressing local

villagers into their service and assassinating anybody, including members of rival Marxist factions, who stood in their way. You could say there was a certain symmetry about yesterday's announcements: Romero died while protecting people who were at risk mainly (but not only) from right-wing forces; the victims in Peru were trying to shield people from murderous leftists.

Second, Romero wasn't a liberation theologian of the Marxist kind. Like many Latin American clerics of his generation, he was much influenced by a bishops' conference in Medellín, Colombia in 1968 that pledged to give priority to the poor. But as Austen Ivereigh shows in his biography of Pope Francis, some clergy (like Jorge Bergoglio, the future pontiff) took the message of Medellín in a spirit that was suspicious of the colonial "north" and in a good sense populist but eschewed class war; others veered

towards dogmatic Marxism. Romero certainly wasn't in the latter camp. He criticised left-wing guerrillas as well as right-wing ones.

Moreover, Romero took spiritual direction from Father Josemaría Escrivá, the Spanish founder of Opus Dei, a deeply conservative order of priests and lay-people. After his mentor's death in 1975, Romero was among those who argued for his elevation to sainthood. Nor is it true to say that Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI were hostile to Romero's cause; both spoke warmly of him and the Polish pope prayed twice at his grave. There was indeed opposition, but it came more from conservative Latin American prelates who feared that honouring Romero would be too big a gift to the political left.

If anybody challenges Pope Francis about the consistency of elevating

one victim of right-wing brutality and three victims of the leftist kind, he will doubtless retort that all four died for a belief that refuses to accept any earthly ideology as a perfect solution. The Argentine pope doesn't fit neatly inside any ideological box, and he believes the same to be true of his religion.

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