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Oscar Romero: Friend of Opus Dei

When Archbishop Oscar Romero is beatified sometime this year, it will not be because he is the “Liberation Theology” hero some have tried to make of him. Rather it will be because he was a man of God who proclaimed the gospel courageously, even at the cost of his life.

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Pope Francis has now unblocked his beatification process, which had

been held up for “prudential reasons” by the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, and a Vatican decree has declared that he was martyred in odium fidei, “out of hatred of the faith”. The beatification is expected sometime in 2015.

What many people do not know is how much spiritual support Archbishop Romero received from Opus Dei. Indeed, the day he was assassinated, he spent the morning at a recollection for priests organised by Opus Dei. Afterwards he was accompanied by Fernando Sáenz, a Spanish Opus Dei priest who was a close friend of his and who would later succeed him as archbishop, to the church where he was to celebrate Mass. Sáenz recalls: “They killed him during the offering of the bread and wine. It was, as it were, a marvellous external sign of his having offered his life for his people, for the poor, for justice, for peace.”

Opus Dei's founder, Saint Josemaría Escrivá, and Archbishop Romero had known each other since 1955. In 1974 Romero came to Rome and had several conversations with the future saint. Escrivá was concerned that the Archbishop should have the opportunity to rest during his stay in Rome, because he realised the tense situation he faced back in El Salvador.

After Escrivá's death, Romero was one of the first bishops to write a letter to the Holy See asking for his canonisation. In this letter he said that he was grateful for having known Msgr Escrivá personally “and for having received from him encouragement and strength to be faithful to the unchangeable doctrine of Christ and to serve the Holy Roman Church with apostolic zeal”.

And he continued: “Personally, I owe deep gratitude to the priests involved

with the Work [Opus Dei], to whom I have entrusted with much satisfaction the spiritual direction of my own life and that of other priests."

Sáenz says that Romero's spirituality was nourished by the spirituality of Josemaría Escrivá and that he read *The Way*, Escrivá's great spiritual classic, frequently.

In his Diary entry for 6 September 1979, Archbishop Romero wrote that Opus Dei "carries out a silent work of deep spirituality among professional people, university students and labourers... I think this is a mine of wealth for our Church—the holiness of the laity in their own profession."

On hearing the announcement of the beatification, the current head of Opus Dei, Bishop Javier Echevarría, declared in a public statement: "I am sure that Archbishop Oscar Romero is going to be a deeply beloved saint.

... He was a pious person, detached from his own interests and dedicated to his people. His struggle for sanctity was palpable."

The relationship between Romero and Opus Dei shows how empty "left" and "right" labels are when talking of spiritual realities, and particularly the Catholic Church. To depict Romero as a "left-wing" hero is to misunderstand profoundly the man and his mission. And such a "labelling" mentality would also misunderstand Opus Dei, whose members are as free as any other Catholic to follow whatever political option they consider best, as long as it does not contradict Church doctrine or moral teaching.

In a homily in 1978, he said: "Since Marxist materialism destroys the Church's transcendent meaning, a Marxist church would be not only self-destructive but senseless."

As Filip Mazurczak explained in a First Things article in 2013, "Romero avoided the blinkered anti-communism of Argentina's bishops and defended the vulnerable against military violence, seeing the hypocrisy of rulers who claim to be Christians yet persecute the people. At the same time, he understood the dangers of Marxism, condemning the Marxist guerrilla movement that terrorised El Salvador's ruling class. Ernesto Cardenal, the Trappist monk who in the 1980s was a minister in Nicaragua's Sandinista government, wrote that before becoming a Christian, one first must become a Marxist-Leninist. Romero rejected this: his personal hero was Pope Pius XI for resisting fascism and communism at the same time."

Thus the future Blessed Oscar Romero can inspire us to be active in standing up for social justice, while reminding us that our efforts must

be rooted in a deep relationship with Christ. To this end Romero found support from the spirit of Opus Dei, whose members will be among the first to seek his intercession in their own efforts to mould society according to Christian values.

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