

SELECTION 7

MEET A SALVADORAN PEACEMAKER

OBJECTIVE

To introduce children to the life and testimony of Monsignor Oscar Arnulfo Romero, a Salvadoran peacemaker.

INPUT

El Salvador is predominantly a Roman Catholic nation. The Catholic Church in El Salvador is divided into eight dioceses, or geographical regions. Each diocese has various parishes, or districts, each with one or more churches. The priest responsible for an entire diocese is called a bishop. In the diocese of the capital city, an archbishop is named to oversee the bishops. The Catholic Church considers the archbishop of San Salvador to be its official representative in El Salvador. The archbishop is referred to as "Monsignor," a title of reverence.

Monsignor Oscar Romero served as archbishop of San Salvador during three years, from 1977 to 1980. He played an important role in the Catholic Church and Salvadoran society. He became a voice for poor people as he increasingly spoke out against the injustices he witnessed. Read through the information sheets about him, pages 27 to 28. (Romero, a movie with Raul Julia, is also another good source of information for teacher preparation. Because of the violence it depicts, the movie is not appropriate for use with students under 18, however.)

CONNECTING ACTIVITIES

1. Share the photo of Monsignor Romero (from resource box) with the students, and explain who he was. Ask them what the title "monsignor" means.
2. Read the information sheet "Monsignor Romero," pages 27 to 28, with the students. (Photocopies may be made.)

Discuss the following.

- What kind of person was Monsignor Romero?
- Do you think he was ever afraid?
- What gave Monsignor Romero strength to speak out against the injustices he witnessed?
- What did Monsignor Romero mean when he said, "If they kill me, I will rise again in the Salvadoran people"?
- Do you know someone who died for his or her beliefs?

3. María Teresa Tula is a woman who worked with Monsignor Romero. She shares the following about him in her book, "Hear My Testimony: María Teresa Tula, Human Rights Activist of El Salvador," translated and edited by Lynn Stephen:

**"He was a very humble man. He was extremely sincere. He truly believed that there was no difference between the poorest peasant child and the richest city child. We**

**were all equal in his eyes. He gave us this love and his way of looking at human beings with affection, love and understanding. When someone gives you this insight into human life, you come to care about them a great deal. That is how we felt about him. A lot of us grew up without people understanding us or truly being able to love us. He gave that to us; we were like family. When someone offers you this kind of love and then they are gone, it's very hard."**

Discuss the following:

- Why did María respect Monsignor Romero?
- Why was she sad when he died?
- Who is someone you respect? Why?

4. Dilemmas

Monsignor Romero made controversial decisions during the three years he served as archbishop. Several times he knew his decisions could bring dangerous repercussions. He was jailed several times and received many death threats, yet he persisted in his call to speak truth and justice. How would you feel faced with a seemingly difficult decision?

Divide the students into two groups. Give each group one (or both, if time permits) of the situations presented below. Each small group should read the context together, discuss the questions that follow, and choose how they would respond to the situation. Each group should present their situation as a role-play, acting out the situation and their response.

**Situation A** Juan just moved into your neighborhood. He doesn't speak much English, but several times he has played basketball with you and your friends on the neighborhood court. It is the second week of school and during lunch recess you notice some of the basketball team making fun of Juan because he doesn't understand what they are saying to him. They see you and call you over.

Discuss:

- Why do the students find it funny that Juan doesn't understand them?
- What will you say to the other students? Why?
- How would you feel if you were Juan?
- What will you say to Juan when you next see him in your neighborhood?

**Situation B** Last week in science class your teacher handed out lab partner assignments for the following two weeks. Rebecca is your new partner. You know Rebecca by sight but have never really talked with her because you don't think you'd share much in common. As your names were read, several other classmates started talking among themselves. Rebecca's family lives in a part of town you've never been to. They are a poor family with five children.

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After the first week of working together, Rebecca invites you to her house after school. You are a little reluctant at first, but after meeting her family and spending the afternoon together you're glad you accepted. Three days later, Rebecca invites you to a community festival her street is sponsoring on Saturday. You like the idea and tell her you'll go.

That evening, some of your other friends invite you to the mall to go shopping—at the same time as the festival. You have not told anyone that you visited Rebecca's house and are now embarrassed to tell them she invited you to a festival. You can't think of any other reasons to tell them why you can't go to the mall.

Discuss:

- Why are you embarrassed about your friendship with Rebecca?
- Why do your other friends make fun of Rebecca?
- How has Rebecca become your friend?

- What are your options? Would Rebecca like to come shopping with you? Would your other friends like to go to the festival? Other possibilities?

#### 5. Collages—Peacemaking or Peace-breaking

Have on hand several magazines and newspapers. (You may want to browse through them first and remove inappropriate or distracting ads.) Ask students to cut out pictures, phrases, or symbols that contribute to peace. Provide paper for them to make a collage. On a separate piece of paper ask them to paste pictures, phrases, or symbols that prohibit or hinder peace. Ask the students to present their collages.

Discuss the following:

- What messages does society give us to encourage us to be peace-builders?
- In what ways do we work against peace?
- What observations can you make about the differences between the two collages?



# MONSIGNOR ROMERO

Monsignor Oscar Arnulfo Romero was born on August 15, 1917, in Ciudad Barrios, in El Salvador's eastern department of San Miguel. His father was a postman and his mother took care of the children. There were seven children in the family.

As a child, Oscar was shy and liked to be alone. He preferred study to play, and whenever he did play, he used to make altars and dress up as the priest.

When Oscar was 10, he started work as a messenger boy. He spent many hours on horseback travelling through the mountains helping his dad deliver letters.

When he was older, Oscar was given a scholarship to study in the Minor Seminary in San Miguel. In his free moments, he liked to play the flute. Some years later he entered the Major Seminary in San Salvador, where he studied until 1937.

On Palm Sunday 1942, at age 25, Oscar was ordained a priest in Rome, Italy. His first parish was Anamoros, in El Salvador's easternmost department of La Unión. Despite the

harsh sun, the young priest travelled the dusty highways and byways of his parish to minister to the Catholic villagers who were his first flock.

Later Father Romero was transferred to his home department of San Miguel, where he served for more than 22 years in various posts. He won the people's admiration; when he was to be transferred to San Salvador, the women who sold food and other items in the market collected signatures to petition that he remain in San Miguel.

In June 1970, Father Romero was consecrated a bishop in San Salvador. In 1977, when the situation in El Salvador had become tense and violent and the army was persecuting organizations that worked for people's basic rights, Romero was named Archbishop of San Salvador.

Many were disappointed that he had been named to this important post. They saw him as someone who had the support of the rich and powerful and who would not help those being persecuted.

Monsignor Romero accepted his new duties, and soon witnessed firsthand the injustices going on in his country. His good friend, Father Rutilio Grande, who worked north of San Salvador in Aguilares (both a town and a Catholic parish), was murdered by government-backed "death squads" in March 1977. Romero learned of torture chambers and "disappearances."

As time went by, Romero identified himself more and more with the poor and suffering. He visited the sick. He defended the workers in their conflict with employers. He talked with the country people. He consoled the relatives of those who had disappeared.

And so his homilies (sermons) became very clear and outspoken. He himself said, in July 1979, that he wanted his homilies "to be the voice of the people, the voice of those who have no voice."

Visiting was very important to Archbishop Romero because it allowed him to talk with ordinary people and learn about their problems. In his homily of October 12, 1979, he said, "How pleased I am when in the poor little towns the people and the children throng about me; upon  
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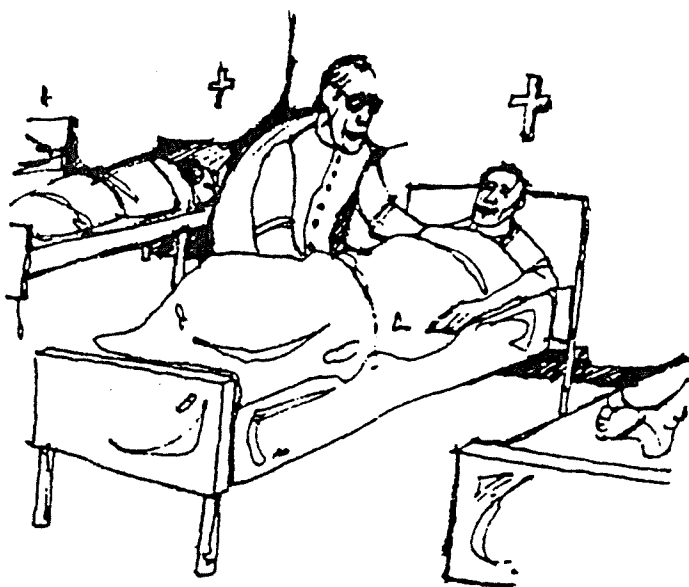


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arrival at a town they come out to meet me, coming with confidence, because they know that I bring them the message of God."

Archbishop Romero realized he had much to learn from his people, and one of his great qualities was humility. He was eager to learn and accept counsel from poor, suffering people. "The people are my prophet," he once said.

Instead of living in a magnificent bishop's palace that the country's wealthy, powerful people had promised to build for him, Monsignor Romero decided to live in a little room in Divine Providence Hospital, near the cancer patients, whom he loved dearly.



Thousands of Salvadorans listened to his weekly sermons in the great cathedral in San Salvador and also on Radio YSAX. Some of the bold statements he made included:

- "Where are those who have disappeared? When will torture and arbitrary capture cease?"
- "Life is always sacred."
- "I believe that many people talk about changes in El Salvador, but they don't want to change anything—especially those most to blame; those who hold economic

power don't want to part with their goods in order to seek the country's welfare."

- "A church that is not one with the poor is no true church of Christ."

In his last Sunday homily, Romero directly addressed soldiers in the Salvadoran Army. He reminded them that the people they were killing and hurting were their own brothers and sisters. He urged them to stop their killing, even if it meant disobeying orders.

Like Jesus, Archbishop Romero was a sign of contradiction: the poor received his word with joy but the proud rejected it and persecuted the people and the church. Many were killed. Of those killed, Romero said, "They are martyrs in the popular meaning of the word. They are those whom I call truly just men and women. We must respect their memory."

Monsignor was threatened with death many times. When the government offered him protection, he said, "Before my personal security, I want security and tranquility for 108 families and for those who have disappeared, for all those who are suffering. Personal well-being, the security of my own life do not interest me."

The threats were fulfilled on March 24, 1980. A hired gunman shot and killed Archbishop Romero as he said Mass in the hospital's chapel. But his example, his courage and his great faith in God had deeply touched many people, and lived on in them. As Romero had so well prophesied of himself, "If they kill me, I will rise again through my people."

Archbishop Romero is still revered in El Salvador. Many children and young people in El Salvador today are named Oscar Arnulfo, in honor and in memory of Monsignor Romero.

*Adapted—and used with permission—from the booklet, "Monseñor Romero, tenth anniversary," written by the Maize Education Team (a Salvadoran popular education organization), with illustrations by Alfredo Burgos. San Salvador: 1989.*