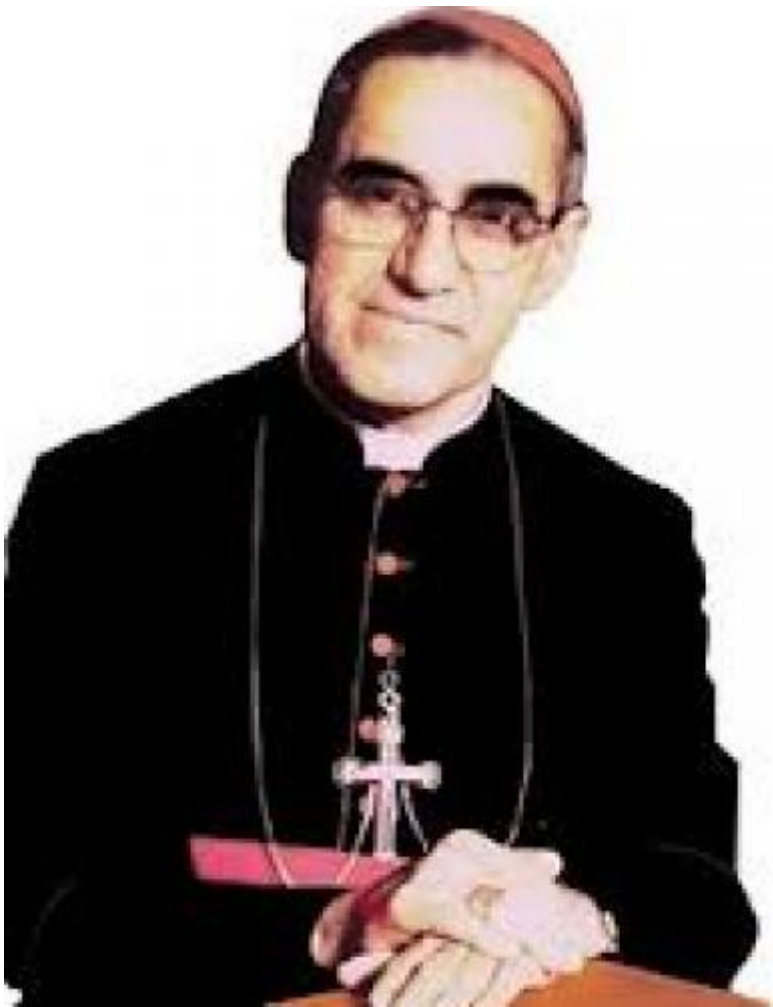


Pope Francis Declares Slain Archbishop Oscar Romero a Martyr in Step Toward Sainthood



Vatican City, February 4 (RHC)-- Pope Francis has declared Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero a martyr to the Catholic faith, a step that paves the way for Romero's beatification and possible sainthood. Known as the "Voice of the Voiceless," Archbishop Romero was a prominent advocate for the poor and a leading critic of the U.S.-backed Salvadoran military government. He was killed nearly 35 years ago, on March 24, 1980, by members of a U.S.-backed death squad while he delivered mass at a hospital chapel.

For years, the Church blocked the process because Romero was one of the main proponents of Liberation Theology -- an interpretation of Christian faith from the perspective of the poor.

Unlike other candidates for beatification, martyrs can move to the beatification stage without a miracle attributed to them. A miracle is needed for canonization, however.

Archbishop Romero denounced the right-wing death squads that operated in El

Salvador, and the oppression of the poor, calling for an end to all political violence.

After his election in 2013, Pope Francis, the first Latin American pontiff, unblocked Archbishop Romero's sainthood process.

The Church restricts the martyr designation to people who were killed out of hatred for the Catholic faith. Doubt over whether Archbishop Romero was killed for his politics in support of the poor or for his faith was one of the reasons his case was stalled.

Pope Francis, who has advocated that the Church focus more on poverty, is considered to be more in line with Archbishop Romero's approach to social justice than previous pontiffs.

In August, Pope Francis hoped for a quick path to beatification, calling the Salvadorian archbishop a "man of God."

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