



Bishop Hicks' Column

September 2022 | Memories of St. Oscar Romero arise from today's Nicaragua



In 2005, I began an extraordinary assignment in my priesthood, working and living for five years in the country of El Salvador. This small Central American country embodies and emanates the spirit of St. Oscar Romero. When I first arrived to begin my missionary work, I started learning about this martyred archbishop. Needless to say, he quickly became one of my heroes and eventually one of my favorite saints.

During the 1980s, El Salvador had plummeted into a polarized and violent civil war. When the government began killing priests, nuns and laity, Archbishop Romero began to speak against the oppression with a loud and courageous voice. He became known as the "voice of the voiceless."

Officials with this brutal government began to threaten this dauntless shepherd and told him bluntly that if he continued to preach against their regime in favor of peace and justice for all people, he would be silenced by imprisonment or even death.

Regardless of these threats, the archbishop continued to use his voice against the corruption, hatred and killings of innocent people. Then, on March 24, 1980, while Romero was celebrating Mass in a Carmelite chapel, a lone gunman opened fire on him and killed him.

After Romero's assassination, a bloody civil war continued to rage in El Salvador, in which the poor, the Catholic Church and the people were cruelly persecuted. Finally, after more than 12 years, the war formally ended in 1992 with the signing of the Chapultepec Peace Accords.

Over the years, I have taken family, friends and visitors to see the "holy sites" of St. Oscar Romero in San Salvador, including the chapel where he was martyred and his tomb. I have always thought we were visiting "historical" sites, thinking to myself, "That all happened in the past, and thank God things like that no longer happen here and in our modern world."

That overly innocent idea of mine was recently shattered, as we have been following the current persecution of the Church in Nicaragua. The secretary-general of the United Nations has indicated he is "very concerned" about the Nicaraguan government's actions against democracy, civil society organizations and the Catholic Church. A few weeks ago, the Nicaraguan police conducted an overnight raid on the main offices of the Diocese of Matagalpa.

They forcibly took and arrested several people that night, including Bishop Rolando Álvarez, who had been under house arrest. Leaders around the world have called these actions by the Nicaraguan government a systematic persecution and harassment against the Catholic Church. As I write this, Álvarez is reportedly being held under yet another house arrest, at his parents' home in the capital city of Managua.

One might wonder: Why is this government targeting and repressing the Catholic Church and its leaders? Part of the reason is the Church continues to follow the example of St. Oscar Romero by being the voice of the voiceless, especially by speaking out against human rights violations throughout the country. During his house arrest at diocesan headquarters, Bishop Álvarez posted a message on social media: "We have to respond to hate with love, despair with hope, and fear with the strength and courage given to us by the glorious and resurrected Christ."

On August 19, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops conveyed our support of the Church and people of Nicaragua through a statement from Bishop David J. Malloy of Rockford, who serves as the chairman of the USCCB Committee on International Justice and Peace: "I express our continued steadfast solidarity with our brothers in the Nicaraguan episcopate, along with their priests and foreign missionaries, in their calling to freely proclaim the Gospel and live the faith. The faith of the Nicaraguan people, who stand in solidarity with their bishops and priests, is an inspiration for us all."

Because we are a church that embraces the ideals of justice, peace and human dignity, please join me in solidarity with our Nicaraguan brothers and sisters. Let us also work and pray for an end to persecution against the Church, as well as for the protection of religious freedom – not only in Nicaragua, but throughout the world.

Jesus stood up to read, and they handed him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Unrolling the scroll, he found the passage where it is written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring the good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4: 17-19) †