Óscar Romero and the Politics of Sainthood

Anna L. Peterson
University of Florida
annap@ufl.edu

Manuel A. Vásquez
University of Florida
manuelv@ufl.edu

Abstract

In this article, we explore the debates surrounding the proposed canonization of Archbishop Óscar Romero, an outspoken defender of human rights and the poor during the civil war in El Salvador, who was assassinated in March 1980 by paramilitary death squads while saying Mass. More specifically, we examine the tension between, on the one hand, local and popular understandings of Romero’s life and legacy and, on the other hand, transnational and institutional interpretations. We argue that the reluctance of the Vatican to advance Romero’s canonization process has to do with the need to domesticate and “privatize” his image. This depoliticization of Romero’s work and teachings is a part of a larger agenda of neo-Romanization, an attempt by the Holy See to redeploy a post-colonial and transnational Catholic regime in the face of the crisis of modernity and the advent of postmodern relativism. This redeployment is
based on the control of local religious expressions, particularly those that advocate for a more participatory church, which have proliferated with contemporary globalization.

**Keywords:**

Óscar Romero, Contemporary Catholicism, Liberation Theology, Romanization, El Salvador, Saints
As Archbishop of San Salvador, El Salvador, in the late 1970s, Óscar Arnulfo Romero defended religious and secular opponents of his country’s military regime, denounced human rights abuses, and offered comfort to the victims. He was perhaps the most courageous and articulate among the countless Catholic activists who transformed the church—at least in some places—from a pillar of the status quo, into a stronghold of progressive thought and practice. Since his assassination in March 1980, Romero has become a symbol of human rights activism not only in El Salvador but also throughout Latin America. His words and image have been used by opponents of authoritarian regimes throughout Latin America, and numerous Catholic and secular grassroots organizations invoke his name and honor his memory.

Romero is not just a political symbol but also the focus of popular religious devotion. His tomb in the cathedral in downtown San Salvador has become an informal shrine, and he is widely known as “San Romero” (Saint Romero). Liberal and reformist sectors of the global Catholic Church point to Romero’s unwavering commitment to Christian values as a sharp contrast to the moral lapses and equivocations involved in the recent cases of sex abuse by the clergy.¹ More than three decades after his death, Monseñor Romero’s status as popular saint and opposition martyr remains strong. The Vatican, however, has been much less enthusiastic in officially welcoming Romero into the community of saints. Despite public support by John Paul II and Benedict XVI, Romero’s process of canonization remains stalled, in large part because his political views and pastoral work do not cohere with the global church’s increasingly conservative agenda.
In this article, we explore the tension between the construction of Romero as a saint at the popular level and the management of his memory and legacy by the Vatican. We argue that this tension is the result of the Vatican’s attempt to domesticate and “privatize” Romero’s image, depoliticizing his work and teachings as a part of a larger agenda of a neo-Romanization. Beginning with John Paul II and continuing under Benedict XVI, the Catholic hierarchy has been engaged in a “Catholic restoration, the effort to restore elements of church life and teaching that they felt have been squandered in the immediate postconciliar [post-Vatican II] rush to modernity” (Allen 2005, 91). Both John Paul II and his successor Benedict XVI have sought to present the church as the center of a new Christendom, a bastion of truth against a modern pluralism and individualism that has turned into a destructive postmodern nihilism. In that sense, the current neo-Romanization can be seen as a new version of ultramontanism, an attempt to redeploy a post-colonial and transnational Catholic regime based on the control of local religious expressions, particularly those that advocate for a more participatory church, which have proliferated with contemporary globalization.

In this context, Romero’s liberationist theology, grounded in the particular reality and needs of poor people, challenges both the institutional church’s centralized, hierarchical structure and its claim to universality. The struggles around Romero’s canonization not only provide a window into the future of progressive Catholicism in the Americas but also shed light on the process of “manufacturing saints” under the Vatican’s economy of the sacred. Romero’s case points to a dual strategy of sanctification: the proliferation and accelerations of beatifications and canonizations of
local figures who can be mobilized translocally in support of a new process of Romanization and the simultaneous control, privatization, and depoliticization of other grassroots devotions that may challenge the re-assertion of orthodoxy.

In order to foreground the tension between, on the one hand, local and popular understandings of Romero’s life and legacy and, on the other hand, transnational and institutional interpretations, we will first show how Romero is seen in El Salvador and throughout the Americas and then discuss the view from the Vatican.

“Monseñor”: Romero as popular saint

A series of events in the 1960s and 1970s helped transform Latin American Catholicism away from the frequent fatalism and conservatism of traditional popular religiosity and toward a new emphasis on social justice and democratization both within and outside the church. The most significant push toward change was the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), which was followed by two important meetings of Latin American bishops at Medellín, Colombia in 1968 and at Puebla, Mexico in 1979. These events helped give rise to pastoral and institutional changes within the church that favored greater lay participation and social engagement. They also influenced, and were influenced by, the theology of liberation that began developing in the late 1960s. Further, all these events in the religious sphere intersected in complex ways with political factors, especially the rise both of rightist authoritarian governments in much of the region and of popular revolutionary movements opposing these regimes.

The transformation of the Latin American church was neither universal nor straightforward. Developments varied widely from country to country. In some places,
notably Brazil, progressive Catholics enjoyed a great deal of support from bishops and pastoral agents (Mainwaring 1986). In other places, including Colombia, reforms were extremely limited, due largely to heavy institutional opposition (Levine 1981). In many countries, the development of liberationist movements varied from diocese to diocese. This was true in El Salvador, where progressive reforms developed primarily in the Archdiocese of San Salvador, first under the leadership of Archbishop Luis Chávez y González (1939 to 1977) and then under Archbishop Romero.

In El Salvador as elsewhere in Latin America, the emergence of strong voices in favor of social justice and human rights both gave new energy to the church and attracted new enemies. The rise of progressive Catholicism angered economic, political, and military elites, who felt betrayed by an institution that had, since the colonial period, staunchly supported the status quo. This new hostility between the church and secular powers led to unprecedented attacks on Catholic leaders in many areas, and particularly in Central America, where both military regimes and popular opposition to them were especially relentless.

In this heated context, the aging Archbishop Chavez announced his plan to retire as soon as a successor could be named. Most progressive Catholics agents and laypeople hoped that Auxiliary Bishop Arturo Rivera y Damas would replace him. Romero, bishop of the largely rural diocese of Santiago de María, was seen as a “compromise” choice, who would not ruffle rightist feathers in the church, government, military, or economic elite. Romero was named Chavez’s successor on February 3, 1977, and he became archbishop in a quiet ceremony on February 22.
Liberal Catholics worried that the new archbishop would limit their pastoral work. Some time later, Romero admitted this motivation behind his selection, when he told progressive priests “my job was to finish you off” (Erdozain 1981, 1; see also Armstrong and Shenk 1999, 91). Before Romero could move against progressive pastoral work, however, a series of events transformed him into a spokesperson and defender of the very members of the church who had feared him. From a scholarly and obscure figure on the edges of both the church and politics, Romero became known simply as “Monseñor,” the best known and most beloved figure in El Salvador.

The archbishop’s “conversion” began on March 12, 1977, when Jesuit priest Rutilio Grande, an old friend of the new archbishop, was killed by machine gun fire as he drove from his home parish of Aguilares to a nearby village. Grande became the first priest openly assassinated in the country.³ A young boy and an old man were also in the car and were killed with him. Grande and his fellow Jesuits had initiated important pastoral reforms in the rural area north of San Salvador, including some of the first Christian Base Communities in the country. They had encouraged peasants to organize into cooperatives and even to join the growing peasant federations that were challenging the economic and political status quo in the region.

Grande’s assassination was widely seen, in retrospect, as a crucial conversion moment for Archbishop Romero. Romero himself reflected that Grande’s assassination “gave me the impetus to put into practice the principles of Vatican II and Medellín which call for solidarity with the suffering masses and the poor and encourage priests to live independent of the powers that be” (quoted in Lacefield 1981, 202-203).

Following Grande’s murder, Romero shocked both church leaders and the government
by closing the Catholic schools in the country for three days as a sign of mourning.

Even more dramatically, he canceled all masses in the country on the second Sunday after the killing, the day he held the funeral mass in the cathedral. Romero also sent a letter to the president demanding an explanation for the assassination and announcing that he would attend no government functions until the crime had been solved and the perpetrators punished. (In fact, the killing was never resolved during Romero’s lifetime. In his three years as archbishop he never attended a government event.)

After Grande’s assassination, rightist attacks on the church and popular organizations increased. Romero responded with increasingly strong defenses of progressive church activists and equally strong condemnations of human rights abuses by the military. As Archbishop, he traveled widely throughout the archdiocese, particularly to rural areas that suffered the most military harassment, including Aguilares and the guerrilla stronghold of Chalatenango. Romero’s Sunday sermons in the cathedral became famous for his outspoken denunciations of the military’s brutality and the oligarchy’s greed and for his passionate defense of the people’s right to organize. He often read out the names of people who had been “disappeared” by the government military or rightist death squads. He also opened an office in the Archdiocese to support victims of repression, including families seeking information about their missing loved ones.

Despite his strong public stance, Romero avoided partisan positions and, with mixed success, asked his priests to do likewise. The archbishop described the country’s divisions as social rather than partisan or ideological. “The conflict,” he asserted in January 1979, “is not between the church and the government. It is between the
government and the people. The church is with the people, and the people are with the church, thanks to God!” (Romero 1987, 455). He repeated this felt connection to “the people” throughout his term as archbishop, expressing both his own personal attachment to the poor and also his emerging understanding of the church as the “people of God,” rather than as a formal institution.

As a result of his outspoken denunciations of human rights abuses and his support for popular movements for social change, Romero became a target of verbal and physical attacks by rightists in the military, government, and media. He received countless death threats. Because of the many public threats against his safety, the archbishop also received offers of armed government guards, including one from the president himself in September 1979. As Romero recalled the event in his diary, he thanked the president and then, in a response that came to symbolize his solidarity with the poor, explained that

I wouldn’t accept that protection, because I wanted to run the same risks that the people are running; it would be a pastoral anti-testimony if I were very secure, while my people are so insecure. I took advantage to ask him [the President] for protection for the people in certain areas where military blocks, military operations . . . sow so much terror (1990, 75-76).

Nor did Romero seek special protection for priests and nuns, even when they became particular targets for torture and assassination. “It would be sad,” he remarked in June 1979, “if in a country where people are being assassinated so horribly, we didn’t
count priests among the victims as well. They are the testimony of a church that is incarnated in the problems of the people” (1987, 454). Romero often contended that attacks on priests, nuns, and churches only symbolized the greater repression unleashed against the laity. The true victims of persecution, he argued, were the poor and those who defended them.

If attacks on priests signified the larger persecution of Christian activists, undoubtedly the most powerful symbol was the murder of Romero himself as he said mass in a hospital chapel in San Salvador March 24, 1980. In his Sunday sermon the day before, Romero had ordered soldiers—“in the name of God, and in the name of this suffering people”—to resist orders to kill. No man must obey a human command, he asserted, which contradicts the higher law of God. After years of threats against Romero’s life, his direct challenge to the military hierarchy seems to have been the final precipitating act. Numerous observers, including U.S. Ambassador Robert White, named Roberto D’Aubuisson, an army major and the founder of the rightist political party ARENA, as the one who had ordered the crime.¹

Although Romero had lived under threat for years, his assassination shocked the Salvadoran opposition. The brazen attack on their most prominent defender left activists feeling more vulnerable than ever—and with good reason, since the political violence intensified in the months following his death. Tens of thousands of Salvadorans, including several more priests, were killed by death squads in the remainder of 1980, culminating in the rape and murder of four American women (three nuns and a lay worker) in December of that year. The repression helped unite El Salvador’s political opposition, which in turn inaugurated the nation’s civil war with a
major offensive in January 1981. The war continued, largely stalemated, until a negotiated settlement brought it to an end in 1993. More than 75,000 people—the vast majority civilians—were killed during the war.

“Saint Romero”

After his assassination, Romero was quickly seen as a martyr and even a saint by progressive Catholics in El Salvador. For the nation’s rulers, however, he became a symbol of political subversion. During the 1980s, simply possessing a photo of Romero or a book about him could lead to harassment and persecution by the military. One San Salvador lay activist recalls that in the early 1980s, “No one talked about Monseñor, because it was subversive.” Even a decade after his death, many Salvadorans, especially in the villages and poor barrios that felt the brunt of repression, hesitate to discuss the archbishop even more than a decade after his death. As one San Salvador resident put it, “having a picture of Monseñor is a sin.” The “sin” here is not a religious one but rather an offense against the status quo and a threat to the powerful. Salvadorans who did discuss the archbishop during the war repeated again and again how “alive” he remained for them, and how his words still gave strength—“as if he hadn't died,” as one man put it. As rural grassroots activist Mirtala López puts it: “Our people continue to live his words. We take his example and continue his work. He lives in the hearts of the people. We can’t help but mention his name throughout our whole lives. ... All the people live with the memory of Romero.” Echoing her words, a lay Catholic in San Salvador agreed that Romero’s words and deeds “are still alive. Every word he said, every mass he gave. In every meeting we have, we mention them. ... The presence
continues among us.” No other leader, secular or religious, comes close to Romero in influence or affection. During a two-day religious education course for laypeople in San Salvador in April 1990, for example, pastoral agents asked participants what topic or idea raised in the courses had most caught their attention. They answered unanimously: the life and martyrdom of Monseñor Romero. As they came together, the participants explained, “we felt that Monseñor Romero had been resurrected in our community.”

Romero’s legacy is especially strong in the poor areas of the archdiocese, both rural and urban, where he frequently visited churches. Residents remember that the great man wrote down what ordinary people told him, and he ate tortillas and beans, just like them, wanting nothing different. One woman from a poor barrio in San Salvador recalled that, “he saw no differences between people. He would talk with anyone.” They cite his actions—his decision to live humbly in a hospital for cancer patients, to eat with the poor, and to listen to them—just as frequently as they recall his words. Poor Salvadorans have similar memories of other pastoral agents who gave up comfort and security in order to take upon themselves, literally, the lot of the weak.

While actions are primary, Salvador Catholics also recall Romero’s words, and especially the fact that he alone seemed willing to tell the truth about repression. Tomasa, a member of the committee of Families of the Disappeared (CODEFAM) in San Salvador remembered that Romero “told us the truth, and we saw that he was killed for telling the truth, for saying ‘No more repression!’” He stood up for people who had no other powerful defenders, as another San Salvador resident emphasizes: “Campesinos are never listened to. Only Monseñor Romero made himself their voice.” The
common description of Romero as “the voice of the voiceless” reflects this understanding of the archbishop as the spokesman for the very large sector of Salvadorans who had been publicly silenced through poverty and repression.

The Jesuit theologian Ignacio Ellacuría, himself murdered by the army in 1989, once said that with Romero “God passed through El Salvador.” Other Salvadorans describe the archbishop in similar terms. “Monseñor Romero was a Christ of the church, a living Christ,”¹¹ according to Tomasa, the CODEFAM member. Like Jesus, they explain, Romero spread his message through the people who knew him and were inspired by him to continue his work. Also like Jesus, they believe, Romero sealed his covenant with the people with his own blood. While many innocent people were martyred during the war, there is a widespread sense at the grassroots that Romero was unique, that “there won't be another prophet like him,” as many Salvadorans repeated in the years after his death. As a powerful person willing to defend the dignity of the poor and share their suffering, Romero had no equals. Elena, a resident of a working class San Salvador neighborhood, summarized the popular understanding of Romero’s holiness:

Monseñor Romero made a pact with God, that he would be faithful to the people and that he wouldn’t lie to people who are suffering. These things aren’t of this world, but are God's. He wasn’t a man like any other, but was chosen by God. He was a prophet, which we may never have again in El Salvador.¹²
Such an understanding may stand at odds with Romero’s humility and perception of himself. Following the preferential option for the poor, he identified closely with the people, declaring, “If they kill me, I shall rise again in the Salvadoran people.”

Nevertheless, the hagiographic idealization of Romero is a key element of the religious narratives that grassroots activists have constructed in order to sustain and make sense of their continuing struggles for justice in the context of a civil war with geopolitical implications (see Peterson 1996).

**San Romero de las Américas**

Thirty years after his death, Romero remains an extraordinarily powerful figure in El Salvador. Visitors crowd around his tomb when the cathedral is open, a huge range of popular organizations invoke his name and likeness, and his writings serve as documents for reflection in numerous parishes. This is true not only in El Salvador but also throughout the Americas, among Salvadoran immigrants in the U.S. and Christian activists in many places. For progressive Catholics, Romero has become a symbol of the church’s obligation to serve and stand with those at the margins of society. For example, Pedro Casaldáliga, former bishop of São Félix de Araguaia in Brazil and well-known for his strong advocacy on behalf of indigenous people and landless peasants, sees Romero as a

... great witness, following the greatest witness, the faithful witness, Jesus. The blood of martyrs is the cup from which we all, men and women, can and must drink. Always and in all circumstances the memory of martyrdom is a subversive memory. ... Responding to those in Society and in the Church who
tried to demoralise Liberation Theology, the path of the poor in community, this new way of being church, our pastor and martyr replied: “There is an ‘atheism’ closer and more dangerous to our Church: the atheism of capitalism when material goods are set up as idols and take the place of God.” (Casaldáliga 2010)

Indigenous Catholic activists of Las Abejas in Chiapas, Mexico, are even more emphatic in their appreciation of Romero’s legacy. In a communiqué commemorating the anniversary of Romero’s assassination they call him “a revolutionary of God” and “a great defender of the rights of the poor and oppressed of Latin America.” Further, these activists see Romero as a utopian figure:

Monsignor Romero’s struggle for peace and justice has not yet ended and will not now end because the monster that fought against him continues to devour organized communities—because the beast that killed men and women in El Salvador is still alive and continues to kill many people in this country and around the world: this beast is named capitalism and neo-liberalism. (Civil Society Organization Las Abejas 2010).

Romero has then become a key symbol in a transnational “counter-public”¹³ that serves as a space to imagine a more participatory church and society. Even sectors of the church that are not directly connected with progressive Catholicism acknowledge Romero as a paradigmatic figure. According to Cardinal Óscar Rodríguez Maradiaga of Honduras, “In pastors like Monsignor Romero, we have the figure of the ‘Bishop who is
a servant of the Gospel of Christ for the hope of the world.’ With bishops like him, the Church can truly be the hope for the world” (cited in Pelton 2009, 47). Romero occupies a lofty place not only in Salvadoran and Latin American Catholicism but also in Christian churches and groups around the world. For example, Romero is depicted, among other twentieth-century martyrs like Martin Luther King and Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Westminster Abbey. The question, then, is why the Vatican has not been more eager to officially recognize him as a saint. As we shall see, part of the answer has to do with Vatican’s need to tame progressive Catholicism’s transnational counter-public, as it seeks to advance a restorationist project in response to the crisis of secular modernity.

Romero and Rome
The Roman hierarchy seemed to acknowledge Romero’s popular status with the announcement, on the tenth anniversary of his death, that the official process of canonization was beginning with a formal investigation into Romero’s “life, virtues, and death” (Woodward 1996, 49). In El Salvador, grassroots responses to the canonization process varied. Many Salvadorans welcomed beatification as an honor and a validation of Romero’s prophetic stance on behalf of the poor. “It’s a great light to have a saint of America, a living saint,” exclaimed one San Salvador resident after the canonization announcement was made. “The things that were mute are now going to be expressed.” As a saint, Romero could continue giving voice to justice and the rights of the poor, as he had done in life.
Many Salvadorans, however, also recognized that Romero’s beatification was not a source of joy to all Catholics. As another layman explained, “We’re happy, but it will cause conflicts for the conservative church, which will have to honor him like the other saints.” He added, perhaps hopefully, “Maybe they’ll go to Protestant churches now.” Other people argued that sanctification would force conservatives not to leave the Catholic Church but rather to recognize Romero’s saintliness: “People who thought badly of him will have to change their attitudes.”

Many, perhaps most, Salvadoran Catholics saw the official announcement as simply redundant. Popular acclaim has long since beatified “Monseñor” as “Saint Romero of América.” As a Salvadoran refugee living in Washington D.C. put it, “Monseñor Romero is so important and significant that the pueblo (people) no longer consider him human. For the Salvadoran people Monseñor is a saint and many people with problems will even go to the tomb of Monseñor Romero to plead that he intercede on their behalf” (Recinos 1993, 267). In light of widespread popular sanctification of Romero, official proceedings seem simply an acknowledgement of the obvious. A resident of San Salvador, Julia, articulated the attitude of many: “He’s already a saint for us.” A Salvadoran nun, Josefa Avila, echoed this point: “The people already proclaimed him a saint,” she explained. During his life, Romero repeatedly said that the people were his prophets, she adds, “and the people say that he’s their prophet,” regardless of the official church’s position.15 Ricardo Urioste, archdiocesan Vicar-General under Romero and his successor, Arturo Rivera y Damas, expressed a similar sentiment. Despite charges that Romero was manipulated by the left, Urioste explained in a 1987 interview:
For me he is a saint and so I really am not interested in applying for a formal canonization process. ... We are so satisfied with Archbishop Romero that we don't need to have him made a saint. The people have him in mind when they suffer, are persecuted, and are killed. He is the one who gives them strength. So what else do you want from a saint? (Woodward 1996, 40)

Many Salvadorans ask no more; popular acclaim of Romero’s holiness is widespread and undeniable. In his book Making Saints, journalist Kenneth Woodward notes that Romero’s tomb “has become a national shrine for pilgrims from throughout Central America” and that already “several hundred cures and other ‘miracles’ have been claimed through his intercession” (38).

One difficulty for the official church has been in determining whether Romero, as a potential saint, is also a martyr as defined by Catholic doctrine. The murdered archbishop lies outside the tradition of martyrs “for the church,” killed, as classical Christian martyrs were, because of a tyrant’s hatred of the faith. As Woodward explains, “Romero identified the church with ‘the people’ in such a way that it would be a falsification of his own convictions to suggest that he was killed out of hatred for the church.” Romero’s death represents a martyrdom, but for a broader cause than the church or even “charity.” Woodward continues: “It was not ‘the church’ that made Romero an assassin’s target, but rather his personal, though not exclusive, identification of the cause of Christ with the cause of liberation for the Salvadoran people” (154).
Salvadoran liberation theologian Jon Sobrino agrees that Romero represents a new kind of holiness: “a saint within society, not just within the synagogue,” who is “at once a Christian saint and a Salvadoran hero.” Although this model of holiness is new to El Salvador, Sobrino claims, it is not unprecedented in Christian history. Romero practiced a pure form of \textit{imitatio Christi}, “not just because he was crucified in the end, like Jesus, but because he was with the people. ... Most saints do not get into direct contact with the people, the way Jesus did. That was not the case with Romero” (Woodward, 47). Father Mario Ferrer also perceived this quality: “the holiest characteristic of Monseñor Romero is that he accompanied the people, he made himself into a pilgrim with the people in their most difficult time. ... He knew how to walk with the people.” Because of his firm commitment to “walk with the people,” Romero represents a kind of public saint, or, in Sobrino’s (1987) terms, a “political saint.”

The novelty of Romero’s public life complicated the official church’s ability to respond adequately to his death and, especially, to popular beatification of him. For years after Romero’s assassination, both Salvadoran bishops and Vatican officials insisted that he could not be beatified until the political controversies surrounding his death had subsided, so that the opposition could not make political capital out of official recognition. They argued that such “manipulation” of Romero’s legacy obscured his status as a martyr “for the church.” An underlying fear was that sanctifying Romero, in light of his political symbolism, could seem to indicate church approval for the Salvadoran (or even wider Latin American) left as well as for progressives within the church. Thus church officials in the 1980s insisted that “before
Romero can be recognized as a saint, he must first undergo a kind of transformation: ‘the people’s saint’ must become ‘a martyr of the church’” (Woodward 1996, 43-44).

Because of this hesitation, the March 1990 announcement that the hierarchy was initiating steps toward beatification surprised many Salvadorans and led them to speculate about what convinced the bishops to move toward beatifying Romero, given their well-known reluctance to do so as long as the political and religious left in El Salvador invoked his name. Some assumed that members of the hierarchy harbored ulterior motives, perhaps a desire to hasten Romero’s “de-politicization” and to manipulate his legacy through the canonization process. José Peña, a priest in the archdiocese of San Salvador interviewed shortly after the announcement, interpreted the move toward beatification as an attempt to contain Romero within the institutional church by portraying him as a “man of prayer” rather than an activist. Similarly, Daniel Vega, another priest from the archdiocese, claimed that Rome and the hierarchy hope to “ecclesialize” Romero through the beatification and canonization processes. If in fact the official church hopes to diminish Romero’s popular appeal, however, it is not likely to succeed. “The church’s proceedings cannot change what Romero is for the people,” as Vega put it, “just as it cannot change what Jesus is.” Peña, the other priest, adds: “the people aren’t afraid of losing Romero.”

This interpretation was validated, at least in part, by the declarations that Benedict XVI gave to the press in an interview on his way to Brazil in May 2007 to attend the fifth meeting of the Conference of Latin American and Caribbean Bishops. When asked to give his assessment of Romero’s canonization, the pope readily recognized that the Salvadoran Archbishop was “a great witness of the faith, a man of
great Christian virtue, who made a commitment for peace and against the dictatorship and who was assassinated during the celebration of a Mass. Thus, his death [was a] credible testimony of faith.” For Benedict XVI, however, “the problem was that a political sector wanted to use him [Romero] for its own [interest] as a political symbol [bandera política], as an emblematic figure. How to highlight [poner en manifiesto] his figure adequately, protecting it against those attempts to instrumentalize it? That is the problem” (Benedict XVI 2007). Benedict’s comments have been echoed by Cardinal Jose Saraiva Martin, head of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, who has raised doubts about the motive behind Romero’s assassination. “To be a martyr, the Catholic faithful must be killed for ‘hatred of the faith.’ There can be political, social motives. If the motive is not clear it must be studied in depth” (quoted in “Archbishop Romero’s Beatification” 2008).

The Vatican’s decision to slow Romero’s canonization process to avoid a politicization of his legacy contrasts with other recent cases in which the beatification of other controversial figures has been actually accelerated, ostensibly because they fit with the Holy See’s larger theological and political agenda. A case in point is the expeditious canonization of Father Maximilian Kolbe, a Polish priest who was starved almost to death and then killed by lethal injection by the Nazis at Auschwitz, after he offered himself in place of a fellow prisoner. Even though Kolbe had some anti-Semitic ties in his past, his selfless act cannot be denied. Moreover, two clear miracles had been attributed to his intercession, providing ample grounds, according to Catholic doctrine, for him to be designated a confessor.18
John Paul II named Kolbe as a martyr, according to Garry Wills, in order to advance “the thesis that Catholics were the victims of the Holocaust, not the victimizers” (Wills 2000, 62). In addition, elevating a Polish Catholic to the status of martyr would bolster the national church vis-à-vis a state that had imposed martial law in a desperate attempt to maintain the troubled Communist regime. The trouble was that the documents prepared for Kolbe’s canonization concluded that neither his arrest nor his assassination was the result of his defense of the faith. “He was arrested on political charges. If the guards [at Auschwitz] had wanted to kill him as a priest, they would have chosen him instead of the family man. When he substituted himself, it was a noble act, but one a non-priest or a non-Catholic could have performed” (Wills 2000, 62-63). Despite this countervailing evidence, John Paul II pushed hard to have Kolbe declared both a confessor and a martyr. When the commission appointed to consider Kolbe’s case turned the pope down, he took matters into his own hands. When he canonized Kolbe in 1982, John Paul II declared: “And so, in virtue of my apostolic authority I have decreed that Maximilian Kolbe, who, after his beatification was venerated as a confessor, shall henceforward be venerated also as a martyr” (Wills 2000, 64).

The expeditious canonization of Kolbe might be explained by changes in the beatification process that John Paul II introduced in 1983. In the traditional procedure, the burden of proof fell on the candidate’s supporters, who were met by a devil’s advocate challenging their case. The new procedures introduced by John Paul II were “an academic-historical process, in which the key document is a biography of the candidate, prepared according to contemporary scholarly standards. Theologians and
historians, not lawyers, became the key actors in the process. John Paul’s reforms also took a lot of the process out of Rome and into the local diocese where a cause originated” (Weigel 2005). These changes, making canonization easier and faster, enabled John Paul II to become the “greatest saint-maker in church history.”

The change in canonization procedures could be read as a decentralizing and democratizing move. The question remains, however, why the Vatican did not also expedite Romero’s case. One could argue plausibly that Romero’s death parallels Kolbe’s, as both involve a clear political dimension. In Romero’s case, however, the Salvadoran government and elites who ordered his assassination had actually declared open season on progressive Catholics because of their “subversive” commitment to the theology developed at Medellín and Puebla. Death squad members had publicly encouraged their members to “Be a patriot, kill a priest!” (Lernoux 1980, 76). If anything, then, despite the danger of politicization, Romero would seem to have a stronger case as a martyr for the faith than Kolbe, since Romero was killed for preaching core Catholic social teachings. Why then did Benedict XVI hesitate even to proceed with Romero’s canonization, let alone to use his apostolic authority to settle the matter once and for all?

**Contemporary Developments: A New Period of Romanization**

Part of the answer to this question lies in changes in the Vatican that began with John Paul II’s papacy and have been consolidated (albeit with some important modifications) by Benedict XVI. Vatican II inaugurated a period of self-examination and openness to the modern world, in which the church saw itself as the “pilgrim people of God,”
searching for answers and open to the wisdom of the extra-ecclesial world. Vatican II also initiated a process of decentralization, devolving some of the authority that had been concentrated in Rome following an intense period of Romanization during the nineteenth century. Although ultramontanism, the affirmation of papal authority over any temporal power or any local spiritual authority, can arguably be traced back to the investiture controversies of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, it gathered considerable momentum after the Protestant Reformation, which opened the door to religious pluralism and the separation of church and state. Particularly, after the French Revolution, the Church felt under siege by militant liberal elites that sought to assert the power of the secular nation-state. This struggle against rising secular nationalism culminates with the loss of the Papal States in 1870. As its political power dwindled, the papacy reasserted its spiritual authority with increasing stridency, first with the promulgation of *The Syllabus of Errors* in 1864, which condemned among other things freedom of conscience and the press, civil marriage, and religious pluralism, and then with establishment of the doctrine of papal infallibility in the First Vatican Council (1870).

In Latin America, the nineteenth century also witnessed the rise of independent nation-states that sought to curtail the power of the church severely, since the latter had very often supported the *ancien régime* as part and parcel of the *Patronato Real*. Because the Royal Patronage had given to the Spanish and Portuguese crowns the power to nominate bishops and build churches as part of the evangelization of the Americas, the Church was heavily invested in the preservation of the colonial system. In response, revolutionary elites sought to break the close link between church and
state through a variety of strategies, ranging from expropriating lands held by the church to instituting civil marriage and denying priests the ability to vote. To deal with this challenge, the Vatican advanced an ultramontanist project that encouraged a realignment of the national churches, positing itself as the new point of reference in the wake of the crumbling of European colonial empires.

The result of this “Romanization” was the gradual emergence of a new post-colonial, transnational Catholic regime based on the control of local religious expressions (see Ribeiro de Oliveira 1979). Such local control was key, given that popular religious life was dominated by relatively autonomous organizations and specialized folk religious agents, such as cofradías, curanderas, beatos, rezadoras y planíderas. Moreover, these local religious expressions were often hybrid, blending and juxtaposing practices, beliefs, and symbols from Catholicism with African-based and indigenous religions, and thus posing the danger of widespread heterodoxy.

In order to carry out the process of Romanization, the Holy See fostered the missionary work of European religious congregations, who took charge of seminaries, schools, and parishes throughout Latin America. European devotions such as the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Jesus the King, and Our Lady of Lourdes were introduced, while local devotions like that of Padre Cícero in northeast Brazil were dismissed, since European church officials were sure that “Our Lord does not leave France to work miracles in Brazil” (Della Cava 1970). The Holy See also sought to bring national devotions such as that of the Virgin of Guadalupe under firm clerical control by fostering the veneration of saints “in the context of the parish” (Ribeiro de Oliveira 1979, 325). This Romanization had mixed results, both because of the lack of enough
institutional resources to implement it and because of the complexity, diversity, and
dynamism of local religious expressions. “[W]ithout a place in parish organization and
without [their] own organization[s],” some popular practices and devotions, “did not
survive except in the domestic and private sphere” (Ribeiro de Oliveira 1979, 325).
Other expressions of traditional popular Catholicism became institutionalized, though
not without some conflict. Even today, brotherhoods and other lay organizations and
specialists continue to play a vital role in traditional popular Catholicism, sometimes in
close cooperation with clerical authorities, sometimes in tension (see Theije 1990).

          We can see then that struggles around the canonization of popular local saint
Óscar Romero are part of a long and evolving economy of sanctity, with ebbs and flows
that accompany and interact with periods of dramatic social change. Whereas in the
nineteenth century ultramontanism emerged as a reaction to the breakdown of the
colonial order and the emergence of secular modernity, particularly of nationalism in
its liberal democratic and socialist versions, the new effort to Romanize Catholicism
post-Vatican II is a response to the crisis of modernity’s pretense to provide alternative
secular universal values. More specifically, nationalism, which had already shown its
limitations with the rise of Nazism and the Holocaust, is now challenged by
globalization’s “time-space compression.” Driven by rapid changes in transportation
and communication technologies, globalization has brought cultures into contact with
each other, simultaneously producing widespread transcultural hybridization and
heightening conflict. Amid this baffling world where are nation-based maps are no
longer viable, the Vatican sees an opportunity to restore the papacy’s universal
authority. As José Casanova writes, globalization offers “a transnational religious
regime like Catholicism, which has never felt fully at home in a system of sovereign territorial nation-states, unique opportunities to expand, to adapt rapidly to the newly emerging global system, and perhaps even to assume a proactive role in shaping some aspects of the new system” (Casanova 1997, 121-122).

To take advantage of the opportunities afforded by globalization, the Holy See must first deal with the counter-publics and other potentially unruly forces unleashed by Vatican II, including liberation theology. In some ways, Vatican II continued the Romanization trend, for example, by instituting an aggiornamento that in some cases undermined local traditions and practices. Overall, however, the council represented a temporary break from ultramontanism. The Council called for the laity’s active participation in various aspects of church life, the strengthening of national and regional episcopal bodies such as CELAM, the use of the vernacular in services, and the engagement with modernity and dialogue with other religions. These reforms were all part of an attempt to make more flexible a regime that had grown increasingly distant from the immediate concerns of the rapidly urbanizing working and middle classes.

John Paul II and Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, then prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, initiated a process of rethinking Vatican II, interpreting it from a “hermeneutic of continuity” rather than one of rupture (McBrien 2008, 198-200). In particular, John Paul II and Ratzinger wanted to discipline the unruly currents of reforms unleashed by the council. They believed that Vatican II had led to excesses, opening the church to modernity’s discontents, including secularization. More specifically, they are concerned about the evacuation of religion from the public sphere, as well as the affirmation of an ideological pluralism that flies in the face of
Christianity’s universal message of salvation. In a speech to the presidents of the Doctrinal Commissions of the Bishops’ Conferences of Latin America, held in Guadalajara, Mexico, in May 1996, Ratzinger stated:

Relativism has thus become the central problem for the faith at the present time. No doubt it is not presented only with its aspects of resignation before the immensity of the truth. It is also presented as a position defined positively by the concepts of tolerance and knowledge through dialogue and freedom, concepts which would be limited if the existence of one valid truth for all were affirmed.

In turn, relativism appears to be the philosophical foundation of democracy. Democracy in fact is supposedly built on the basis that no one can presume to know the true way, and it is enriched by the fact that all roads are mutually recognized as fragments of the effort toward that which is better. Therefore, all roads seek something common in dialogue, and they also compete regarding knowledge that cannot be compatible in one common form (Ratzinger 1996).

In a lecture given the day before the death of John Paul II in 2005, Ratzinger elaborated on his concern regarding relativism. Today, moral strength “has diminished, because the technical mentality relegates morality to the subjective realm, while we have need, precisely, of a public morality, a morality that is able to respond to the threats that weigh down on the existence of us all” (Ratzinger 2005a). This moral subjectivism undermines the claims to universality of values such as freedom and tolerance, which
were at the heart of the Enlightenment. Moral subjectivism is the symptom of a new dogmatism: relativism. Relativism becomes “a dogmatism which believes itself to be in possession of the definitive scope of reason, and with the right to regard all the rest only as a stage of humanity, in the end surmounted, and that can be appropriately relativized. In reality, this means that we have need of roots to survive, and that we must not lose sight of God, if we do not want human dignity to disappear” (Ratzinger 2005a). In his homily to the College of Cardinals gathered to elected John Paul II’s successor, Ratzinger was even more blunt: “relativism, that is, letting oneself be ‘tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine’, seems the only attitude that can cope with modern times. We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one’s own ego and desires” (Ratzinger 2005b).

The struggle against relativism and the need to assert orthodoxy frame many of the changes in Latin American Catholicism since John Paul II became pope. As the head of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith during John Paul’s papacy, Ratzinger sought to reign in liberation theology. He objected especially to its use of social scientific methods and its socially committed stance in a Latin American context characterized by dramatic economic inequalities, political repression, and rising revolutionary fervor. Romero’s tenure as Archbishop of San Salvador reflects, perhaps more sharply than any other event of the time, both the church’s social commitments and the dramatic political setting in which those social commitments were expressed. In particular, Ratzinger was concerned that the use of class analysis in conjunction with the preferential option for the poor would divide the universal church. This is why he
wrote in the *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation*, a document that sought to correct liberation theology’s deviations from church doctrine, that, the special option for the poor, far from being a sign of particularism or sectarianism, manifests the universality of the Church’s being and mission. This option excludes no one. This is the reason why the Church cannot express this option by means of reductive sociological and ideological categories which would make this preference a partisan choice and a source of conflict.

(Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1986, 723)

Ratzinger also objected to the spiritualization of socialist humanism, which in his eyes ran the danger of turning the Kingdom of God into a mere temporal political reality. As Ratzinger took on liberation theology, silencing Leonardo Boff, investigating Gustavo Gutiérrez, and more recently sanctioning Salvadoran theologian Jon Sobrino, John Paul II also began to appoint bishops far more concerned with doctrinal orthodoxy and liturgical purity that with structural sin and social change. For example, he appointed Fernando Saenz Lacalle of the Opus Dei as Archbishop of San Salvador. While supporting Romero’s canonization, Saenz Lacalle all but dismantled the programs and organizational structures that had made the archdiocese of San Salvador a bastion of progressive Catholicism, even since the last year of Archbishop Luis Chávez y González, Romero’s predecessor. Saenz Lacalle also accepted the title of brigadier general of the Salvadoran army, in spite of the latter’s legacy of widespread human rights abuses, including the summary execution of six Jesuits and their
housekeeper and her daughter in 1989 (Wirpsa 1997). Archbishop Saenz Lacalle supported the canonization of Romero but refused to participate in the annual commemorations of his assassination, underscoring the hierarchy’s wish to transform a public devotion into a private piety (Amesbury and Kirschman 2010, 13).

The Vatican offensive against progressive Catholicism in Latin America coincided with the explosive growth of evangelical Protestantism in the region, leading to accusations from conservative sectors of the church that liberation theology and base ecclesial communities had neglected the spiritual needs of the population in the search of social transformation. In order to shore up Catholicism in the region, John Paul II used the occasion of the 500th anniversary of European presence in the Americas to call for a “New Evangelization.” At the core, of this New Evangelization was “‘a call to conversion’ for all Catholics, especially ‘baptized men and women whose Christianity is devoid of vitality’” (Peterson and Vasquez 1998). Given the focus on personal and spiritual conversion, the New Evangelization shifted the pastoral center of gravity away from liberation theology and base Christian communities toward movements such as Opus Dei, the Legion of Christ, and the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement. In turn, this pastoral shift explains why John Paul II was very supportive of the efforts to canonize José María Escrivá, the founder of the Opus Dei, despite Escrivá’s troubling association with dictator Francisco Franco.21

Beyond the emphasis on conservative lay movements, John Paul II also stressed the importance of popular devotions, particularly the Marian devotions and the cult of the saints, in the New Evangelization. Thus, John Paul II’s prolific saint making may be better understood as part of an effort to incorporate properly vetted local religious
figures, symbols, and practices into a global missionary project of Catholic renewal. As George Weigel writes:

Wojtyla took Vatican II’s teachings on the ‘universal call to holiness’ with great seriousness. The ‘universal call to holiness’ was not, to his mind, a nice phrase; it was a living reality within the Church. Sanctity was not just for the sanctuary; sanctity is every Christian’s baptismal destiny (Weigel 2010).

At the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American Bishops, which took place in Aparecida, Brazil in 2007, Benedict XVI endorsed the New Evangelization, adding an explicit call for the laity to focus on mission and discipleship, particularly through teaching and learning the catechism and attending Sunday Mass. Pastoral programs must give “importance to the value of Sunday Mass. We have to motivate the Christians to participate actively in Mass, and if possible, even better with their family” (Benedict XVI 2009, 8). Furthermore, Benedict XVI stressed that a great means to introduce the people of God to the mystery of Christ is catechesis. It is convenient, thus, to intensify catechesis in the formation in the faith of children, youth, and adults. A mature reflection about the faith is light for the path of life and strength to be witness of Christ. ... In this area, we must not be limited only to homilies, conferences, Bible or theology courses, but we must seek also the media: the press, radio, television, websites, forums, and so
many other systems to effectively communicate the message of Christ to a great number of people (Benedict XVI 2009, 6-7).

While Benedict XVI does not mention base communities in his address at Aparecida, the documents of the meeting clarify the church’s position on this grassroots ecclesial institution: praise them but insist that,

their validity depends always on ‘Keeping themselves in full communion with their bishops and in the context of the pastoral plan of the diocese.’ ...

Considerable emphasis is also given to these communities and other movements, along with schools and universities not as valid expressions per se, but rather as potential sources of clergy and persons choosing a consecrated life. (Levine 2009, 184-185)

Thus the lay initiatives generated by Vatican II are turned inwards toward the reproduction of the institutional authority. Benedict reminds the laity that they are also “the Church, an assembly called by Christ to bear witness to the whole world. All baptized men and women must be aware that they were configured to Christ Priest, Christ Prophet and Shepherd, through the common priesthood of the people of God” dovetails with John Paul II’s “universal call to holiness.”

As Romero’s pastoral letters denouncing forms of idolatry like the national security state, wealth and private property, and popular organizations demonstrate, he would agree with John Paul II and Benedict XVI that Christianity’s central message—
salvation through Jesus Christ—cannot be replaced by human projects and artifacts. In Romero’s words:

Adhering to the demands of the same prophetic denunciation and conversion, the church reminds us that making any created thing into an absolute is an offense against the one Absolute and Creator, because it erects and serves an idol, which attempts to put in the place of God himself. (Óscar Romero 1985, 133)

In contrast to idolatrous ideologies,

the church turns its entire effort for the liberation of the people toward the sole absolute, that definitive liberation toward which all strivings for justice ought to converge: the liberation in Christ, which set sin aside and, while promoting liberation on earth, does not lose sight of the people’s final vocation to the one and only Absolute. (Óscar Romero 1985, 36)

Romero’s thought then does not contradict John Paul II’s or Ratzinger’s concern for relativism and a robust proclamation of the faith. Because Romero’s pastoral vision is strongly associated with the preferential option for the poor, however, and with liberation theology’s use of the tools of Marxism to draw out the historical implications of this option in the Latin American context of deep socio-economic inequalities, both popes are wary of affirming his legacy by canonizing him. Both John Paul II and
Benedict XVI see Marxism as the quintessential example of the dangers of modernity: a secular utopia grounded solely on human praxis, which has not only failed but has contributed to the instrumentalism and disorder of the post-Soviet era. If Romero is to be canonized, his legacy must be stripped of the relativistic aspects linked with liberation theology and its use of social science. Drawing from sociologists Max Weber and Pierre Bourdieu, we can say that Romero’s prophetic charisma must be routinized, rendered at the service of a priestly bureaucracy seeks to present itself as holding a legitimate monopoly over the instruments of salvation (see Bourdieu 1991).

It is in this context that the recent beatification of John Paul II takes place. Despite—or perhaps even as a strategy to neutralize—concerns that John Paul II failed to address the sexual abuse of minors during his papacy, the Vatican has been extremely responsive to the laity’s call to make him a santo subito, waiving the normal requirement to wait five years after death to begin the canonization proceedings. More than anyone else, John Paul II is an emblem for a church that “has embraced globalization, welcoming its liberation from the straightjacket of the territorial sovereign nation-state that had restricted its Catholic universal claims” (Casanova 2001, 433).

The concern about the politicization of Romero, who, as we saw, has also been proclaimed a santo subito at the popular level, is thus part of a global struggle against modern relativism and an attempt to reclaim the church’s place as the holder of universal and foundational truth. As the case of Father Kolbe reveals, politics in itself is not sufficient reason to stop or delay a process of canonization. The manufacture of sanctity, however, has to cohere with the Vatican’s larger geo-political and religious
agenda. In Benedict XVI’s vision, Europe occupies a central place as the “a spiritual homeland, the hallmarks of which are freedom and Christian values.” For him, Europe is the front line where the battle against corrosive forces of secularization and the dictatorship of relativism must take place. John Paul II was a cosmopolitan pope, deeply engaged in a mobile, transnational evangelization that drew from local devotional resources in Catholic strongholds like Latin America, Poland, and Ireland. In contrast, Benedict XVI’s vision is more provincial. Benedict has concentrated in the salvation of Europe from the evils of secularization and the threat of Islam, a competing form of orthodoxy that can fill the moral void left by relativism, as a prerequisite for the emergence of a new global Christendom anchored by the Holy See. The recent sexual abuse scandals seriously threaten to undermine this new Christendom project: a church that claims to have privileged access to religious truth has been unable to deal effectively with widespread crimes in its own ranks. Arguably, this inability to hold its own members accountable is the result of the centralization of authority that Vatican II sought to mitigate and that Benedict XVI seeks to consolidate as a bulwark against relativism.

**Conclusion**

The making of Saint Romero has to be understood as a multi-scalar phenomenon, linking a vibrant popular devotion with changes taking place in Latin American and global Catholicism. Romero’s case highlights the contradictions in a new process of Romanization in Catholicism, which simultaneously encourages the beatification and canonization of local figures as key resources for a global church renewal and seeks to
keep at bay the centripetal forces of secularization, pluralism, and cultural and moral relativism. The solution to this contradiction in Romero’s case lies in the depoliticization and disciplining of the most radical aspects of his preferential option for the poor.

While rectification of potential unruly local religious expressions is central to the Vatican’s efforts to present itself as a foundational alternative to the bankruptcy of modernity and its elevation of human reason and praxis, power is rarely exerted in a single direction. Other religious and secular actors play key roles in the emerging economy of sanctity. We saw, for example, how progressive Catholic activists in El Salvador are deeply suspicious of the attempt to “ecclesialize” Romero, to turn him into just “a man of prayer.” Against a global project of Romanization that seeks to reassert orthodoxy, to institute “a system of euphemisms, of acceptable ways of thinking and speaking the natural and social world” whose legitimacy is predicated on a misrecognition of its own positional interests, Salvadoran Catholics affirm Romero’s political and historical embeddedness. This embeddedness is precisely what animates a vigorous grassroots devotion.

But the politics of Romero’s canonization should not be understood as a simplistic struggle between global processes of domination and local resistances. In this economy of sanctity, contestation takes place at all levels. Thus, on the one hand, we have indigenous Catholic activists in Mexico proclaiming Romero “a revolutionary of God” and Salvadoran-American activists in Los Angeles calling on Romero to help them deal with the negative consequences of transnational migration (i.e., disintegrated families, deportations, and gang violence). “Salvadorans in this violence-
stricken country call upon San Romero de America in the hopes of converting their gangster children into productive citizens” (quoted in Amesbury and Kirschman 2010, 3). On the other hand, the Salvadoran bishops in a recent letter sent to the Vatican expressing their “great desire that Archbishop Romero be canonized as soon as possible,” call the Salvadoran people to pray and engage in private devotion to encourage the process. According to José Luis Escobar Alas, the new archbishop of San Salvador, “The truth is that we have seen little private devotion and, on this point, it is fitting that there be greater devotion. There can be no public devotion for a person whose cause is being studied in the Vatican, but there can be private devotion, and it is fitting that it increase.”

Is this call to develop a “private devotion” simply the Salvadoran hierarchy’s attempt to allay the Vatican’s fears of political instrumentalization? Or will the public veneration of Romero as a politico-religious martyr suffer the fate of many popular practices during Romanization in the 19th century, becoming a private or domestic devotion? Or will the private and public devotions coexist? If so, under what terms and among whom? The answers to these questions will depend not just on developments within Catholicism, but also on the evolution of Salvadoran society, which has made significant strides toward demilitarization and democratization, but remains marked by the deep social inequalities that Romero denounced.24
References


Benedict XVI. 2007. “Entrevista Concedida por el Santo Padre durante el Vuelo Hacia Brasil,” May 9. [Translation by the authors].


Casaldáliga, Pedro. 2010. “Reflection by Archbishop Pedro Casaldáliga.” CAFOD. 


1 For example, a recent front page of the National Catholic Reporter juxtaposes an article about new revelations on the sexual abuse of children by Marcial Maciel Degollado, founder of the Legion of Christ, a group strongly favored by John Paul II, with another essay remembering Romero as “a steady, gentle shepherd.” National Catholic Reporter, April 16, 2010.

2 Portions of this section have been adapted from Peterson 1997.

3 Another priest was killed in suspicious circumstances in the early 1970s, but the death was ruled an accident, though many Catholic activists believed he had been killed.
White claimed there was “compelling, if not one hundred percent conclusive” evidence that D’Aubuisson was involved in the murder. Later investigations, including the report of the United Nations-sponsored Truth Commission, supported this charge and confirmed more generally that D’Aubuisson organized some of the country's most brutal death squads (see Russell, 1984, 115; Brockman 1989; and Universidad Centroamericana “José Simeón Cañas,” 1993). Finally, a recent interview with Álvaro Saravia, the last surviving member of the group that planned and carried out Romero’s assassination, directly implicated D’Aubuisson and Mario Molina, son of the former right-wing military president Arturo Armando Molina. See Dada 2010.


7 Group discussion, San Pablo parish [pseudo.], San Salvador, April 1990.

8 Lucía [pseud.], San Juan parish [pseud.], San Salvador. Interview by Anna Peterson, April 7, 1988.

9 Tomasa [pseud.], Committee of Families (CODEFAM), San Salvador. Interview by Anna Peterson, April 4, 1990.
Social theorist Nancy Fraser uses the term counter-publics to characterize “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (1989, 67). Catalina Romero identifies some of the transnational networks and actors that constitute this parallel arena: “In the poor neighborhoods of Lima, Rio, and Santiago, priests and nuns from Canada, France, Italy and the United States are active and well known. In the distant provinces of the Andes in Peru, German Catholic solidarity has established ‘partnerschafts,’ economic programs for the peasants. The martyrdom of Bishop Oscar Romero has promoted solidarity with El Salvador and has helped to establish links between local parish groups in each country” (Catalina Romero 2001, 482).
Confessor of the faith is an honorific title given to those exemplary individuals who suffered persecution, imprisonment, exile, and/or torture for the faith. They are distinguished from martyrs, who have died for the faith. In other words, historically, martyrs are held in higher regard than confessors.

Padre Cícero is held to be a powerful saint by the people of the Brazilian northeast, who attribute to him a miracle in which the host he was giving at Communion turned into the blood of Jesus. The Vatican has thus far not sanctioned the event as legitimate.

According to geographer David Harvey (1989), the disorderly transition from a nation-based, centralized, and energy-intensive regime of capitalist production to one that is flexible, de-centered, and information-intensive has brought about the “obliteration of space by time” through communication and transportation.
technologies that have sped up production and consumption cycles and drastically reduced the turn-over time of capital. Culturally, this process has undermined our cognitive maps. See also Jameson (1991).

21 Even with the introduction of reforms to streamline the process, Escrivá’s canonization was fast. His cause was introduced in 1981 and he was beatified in 1992 and canonized in 2002.

22 Even some conservative Catholics have expressed concerns about the quick beatification. See “A Statement of Reservations Concerning the Impending Beatification of Pope John Paul II,” 2011.

23 See Bourdieu’s discussion of doxa, orthodoxy, and heterodoxy (1977, 159-171).

24 Commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of Romero’s assassination, Salvadoran President Mauricio Funes acknowledged the role that the state had in the crime and asked for forgiveness from the church and Romero’s family. Moreover, Romero’s legacy was celebrated through a series of cultural events and the unveiling of a mural at the international airport.