

Pope Francis recognises Oscar Romero as martyr

Beatification is just around the corner for the bishop who was killed at the altar. After years of self-interested hesitations and obstacles, the Pope has finally given the green light

This morning Pope Francis authorised the Congregation for the Causes of Saints to promulgate a decree confirming the martyrdom of Oscar Arnulfo Romero, the Archbishop of San Salvador who was killed "in hatred of the faith on 24 March 1980". The Pope's approval is the culmination of a surprising acceleration in the final stage of Romero's journey toward beatification: theological experts from the Vatican dicastery for the Causes of Saints unanimously recognised Romero as a martyr last 8 January. The Congregation's bishops and cardinals gave their approval on 3 February. The Pope was expected to approve the decree on Thursday but he decided to speed things along. The Pope's speedy action is in contrast with the sluggish delays, the sabotages and the obstacles that have slowed the beatification process of a man whom Latin American Catholics have been referring to as "San Romero de America" for some time now.

Romero's beatification cause took off in Rome in 1996 after the diocesan phase had been concluded in El Salvador. After that the whole process started slowing down. This was despite the letters that were sent by the Salvadoran Episcopate which shook off old differences and informed Rome of its unanimous support for a speedy recognition of Romero's martyrdom. And despite the numerous petitions from faithful who wanted to see Romero beatified during the Jubilee year.

In those years, there was an influential faction of prelates in Rome who inspired an underground resistance to Romero's canonization. Something happened to Cardinal Francesco Saverio Nguyen Van Thuan that was quite a revelation: back in 2000, while preaching the spiritual exercises to the Pope and the Roman Curia, the late Vietnamese prelate mentioned Romero among the great witnesses of the faith of our time. At the end of the meditations he was severely reprimanded by some Latin American prelates who accused him of praising a figure they saw as controversial and "subversive" in the presence of the Pope. When a month or so later a book was published containing the Lenten meditations, Romero's name was nowhere to be seen.

For a long time the reason used to justify the blocked beatification cause, was the former Holy Office's examination of monseñor Romero's homilies, his diary and his publications, to verify whether they were in line with Catholic teaching. Many years passed by and thousands of pages were sifted through before it was finally concluded that Romero's episcopal teachings did not contain any doctrinal errors.

Back then, it was Colombian cardinal Alfonso López Trujillo who played a prevalent role in the management of Romero's cause. At the time Cardinal Trujillo was an influential consultant of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, who passed away in 2008. The Congregation for the Causes of Saints had received instructions that were aimed at causing delays. Since then, the Vatican dicastery received no counter-indication that would unblock the cause and get the process really rolling, following the standard steps and procedures. In May 2007, when he was flying to Brazil for his first Latin American voyage, Benedict XVI was also questioned about Romero's beatification. The former Pope replied with a mini defence of the murdered bishop, describing him as a "great witness of the faith" and recalling his "truly incredible death" at the altar. He did not refer to it as martyrdom but he very clearly stated that Romero was a figure "worthy of beatification".

beatification". Astonishingly, the words the Pope pronounced to the cameras and which were captured on dozens of dictaphones, disappeared from the official versions of the interview published by Vatican media.

Some circles said that raising Romero to the honours of the altar would equate to the beatification of liberation Theology or Marxist-inspired popular movements or the revolutionary guerillas of the 70's. These prejudices were confuted some time ago, including in the studies produced by the historian Roberto Morozzo della Rocca. Romero was a devout and tormented priest who had experienced a pastoral conversion as a result of the harrowing suffering he witnessed during the dictatorship and death squad days.

Pope Francis' decision to speed the beatification process up, does away with self-interested cautiousness and resistance fuelled by secret political prejudices. The real Romero was not the subversive trouble maker some new political theory made him out to be. Even his most radical statements, when he named and shamed the people's oppressors from the pulpit, were driven by his passionate concern for the fate of the poor, which is an ineliminable element of Church Tradition.

