

*Archbishop Oscar Romero: The Making of a Martyr* by Emily Wade Will. Eugene, USA: Wipf and Stock, 2016. xix + 206pp. ISBN 978-1-4982-8355-7

Based upon contextual insights garnered during her time working in solidarity with Salvadorians, as well as multi-lingual research and a series of community-engaged interviews, Emily Wade Will offers a compelling picture of the life and significance of Oscar Romero (1917-1980). From his birth in rural El Salvador to his assassination while serving as Archbishop in the capital city, Will recasts the way that Romero's life is most-often told. The more common conversion-centred telling invokes images of a conservative 'book worm' being moved to action by the harsh reality of the suffering of his flock. Will adds much welcomed subtlety to this narrative. As a tool for analysis, she proposes instead to view Romero's life as like a lily, with many roots, that, when they were properly nourished, allowed for a beautiful blooming marked by entering into deep solidarity with Salvadorians living in poverty and experiencing oppression.

Will effectively demonstrates how these solidarist roots took hold in his childhood. In this book, we learn of his relationship to his six siblings, and about the sacrifices his parents had to make to continue his education. Firstly, they paid for extra tutoring from the local teacher to get the young Oscar beyond the third grade level. This was a time when most of the children in his hometown nestled in the hills of northeastern El Salvador, Ciudad Barrios, had left formal education for a life of manual labour. Secondly, his family funded Romero's studies in the minor seminary at San Miguel, where he was awarded a half-scholarship. His enrolment in the minor seminary (1930) marked the culmination of a dream for a serious boy, who although generally of robust health (contrary to another myth about Romero, which Will authoritatively refutes with reference to the vigorous chores he performed for his family), much preferred play-acting the role of a priest to engaging in sport. In this manner, Will shows that the roots of solidarity ran throughout Romero's life; notably, his childhood and youth were never far removed from rural poverty.

Romero did not forget these roots when studying for his Masters degree at the Gregorian University in Rome. Not shying away from his conservative side and his love for the entrapments of pre-Vatican II Catholic faith and practice, Will demonstrates that even in Rome, where rationing during the Second World War disproportionately affected marginalized people, Romero was quick to share his meager stash of bread when confronted with the face of a person who was clearly feeling the pangs of hunger. Beyond such individual charity, Will effectively illustrates that Romero had concern for systematic issues of justice long before being named Archbishop of San Salvador.

Indeed, Will's image of these roots supporting 'blossoming' allows for an informative treatment of the more well-known features of Romero's biography. These include the crescendo moment when the newly installed archbishop's long-time friend, Rutolio Grande - a Jesuit priest known for his work with the poor - was gunned down, along with a boy and an elderly man on their way to a popular religious festival (1977). That even a priest would be killed in this fashion in a Catholic-majority country can be understood, to adapt Will's terms, to precipitate the moment of the emergence of the lily flower of Romero's solidarity-oriented praxis. He had likely secured

the appointment as Archbishop due, in large measure, to his reputation as a conservative, holding appeal for many in the Curia (the Vatican Civil Service) at the time. Nonetheless, one way to understand why his message struck a chord, and why the Archbishop's condemnation of human rights abuses and political violence had such appeal, is that Romero knew the situation of the people of Mesoamerica in an intimate way, was well-educated, and occupied the most prominent bishop's seat in his country, one that at times had been intimately linked to what Will names as the main interests traditionally controlling the state apparatus of El Salvador: the oligarchs, the government, and the church. According to her framing, Romero removed one leg of this three-pronged stool. Despite opposition from the majority of his fellow Salvadorian bishops, Romero withdrew the church's support for the oligarchs and the government because, rather than supporting the common good, they had turned the instruments of the state violently against people living on the margins of Mesoamerican socio-political life. For throwing himself against such interests, through speaking out from the pulpit in homilies broadcast on the Church radio station - including calling on soldiers to disobey orders to fire upon civilians - Romero earned martyrdom. Perhaps more significantly, Will shows that he also earned the heart of the people because, in a cogent sense, he never forgot from whence he came.

Notwithstanding Will's sympathetic portrait, this monograph is not hagiography in the narrow sense. For example, we learn about many instances of Romero's quick temper. Will also presents the strong possibility that he was promoted a number of times with a 'moving him up, to move him out' motivation due to his prickly nature. We are further reminded that, when alive, Romero earned a great deal of ire from the radical left in El Salvador for what they saw as his tendency to accommodate the unjust status quo, even after the blossoming moment of Father Grande's death.

In the end, Will's grounded approach to the subject matter is a great strength of this book, especially in terms of its potential to foster positive social transformation of the type that Romero was working for at the end of his life. This human presentation of Romero's story is much more accessible. It shows that it does not take saintliness understood as perfection in order to enter into effective community-engaged work to counter political violence and oppression. In related manner, it is telling that Will writes with an appropriate accessibility. Too often and, rather ironically given their normative purposes, works related to faith-inspired liberation in the Latin American context are hyper-intellectual. As a consequence, such writings are frequently inaccessible to those without theological and academic training. While there are a few mistakes in Will's presentation that would have been caught by a proof-reader familiar with Catholic terminology and practice, the prose in *Archbishop Oscar Romero: The Making of a Martyr* is overwhelmingly clear and intelligent. It is well-suited to use in parish and educational communities, including those composed of high school and undergraduate readers. Specialists too will learn from Will's work and the way she communicates and colligates events in Romero's life.

Christopher Hrynkow  
Department of Religion and Culture  
St. Thomas More College, University of Saskatchewan  
Email: [chrynkow@stmcollege.ca](mailto:chrynkow@stmcollege.ca)