

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

The Oscar

This time of year, you hear a lot of buzz about the Academy Awards, a.k.a. the Oscars. I've had the good fortune to become acquainted with another Oscar—and he's much more interesting.

I'm speaking of the late Archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero.

When I attended one diaconate retreat at the Immaculate Conception Seminary in Huntington, the retreat master, Fr. Joe Fonti, arranged for a screening of the 1990 film *Romero*, starring the late Raúl Juliá in the title role. I'd seen bits and pieces of the movie on television, but never watched it from start to finish. The movie is a powerful testament to faith, of course. But the cumulative force of the story is nothing less than devastating. When the lights came up, a lot of us who'd watched the movie were blinking back tears.

In bare outlines, Romero's story by now is well known. In 1977, he was appointed archbishop of San Salvador, during one of the most tumultuous periods of El Salvador's history. Weeks later, a close friend of Romero's—a Jesuit priest—was assassinated for his activism among the poor. The archbishop was shaken, grief-stricken—and transformed. He became outspoken in defense of the poor, more critical of poverty and social injustice. In 1979, a military junta came to power—bringing with it increased persecution of the church. Priests were attacked, threatened, killed. Parishes and convents were sacked. The archbishop spoke out passionately in defense of his people and his church.

But on March 24, 1980, while saying Mass in the small chapel of a cancer hospital, the archbishop was shot through the heart by a member of a military death squad. Romero's blood spilled over the altar. He died instantly. An audio recording later revealed that he was gunned down while elevating the Eucharist. Days later, a quarter of a million people came to his funeral. He was buried beneath the sanctuary of the San Salvador cathedral.

A decade later, the cause for his canonization began. Romero received the title "Servant of God" in 1997. He was beatified in San Salvador on May 23, 2015.

The last few years of his life are recounted vividly in the movie (which was produced by Paulist Films—the first time they'd produced a Hollywood release). Raúl Juliá brought a heartfelt passion and dignity to the role; to prepare, he read the archbishop's diaries and watched films to capture his spirit and mannerisms.

One of the things that struck me was the subtle but palpable change that Romero undergoes; he begins the film as a bookish, somewhat aloof intellectual, but matures into an eloquent, outspoken defender of the defenseless, standing shoulder to shoulder with all those who suffer injustice. He walked closely in the footsteps of Christ, sometimes prophetically predicting his own assassination. The movie shows all that, and makes you feel not only his courage, but also his sense of mission.

Here is what the priesthood can and should be. Here, in fact, is what the priesthood of *all* the baptized should be. Here is the Christian life lived bravely, heroically, to its fullest. But don't take my word for it. If you have the chance, look for *Romero* on DVD. With the anniversary of his death approaching this March, now is a good time to become acquainted with Oscar Romero's extraordinary life and legacy.

A footnote: Reading up on Romero's life and the making of the movie, I discovered that Raúl Juliá—who had been born and raised a Catholic—returned to the Church as a result of this role, just a few years before he himself died prematurely, from a stroke, at age 54. All of which makes me think: while Raúl Juliá never won an Oscar, this Oscar was probably the greatest prize of his life.

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