

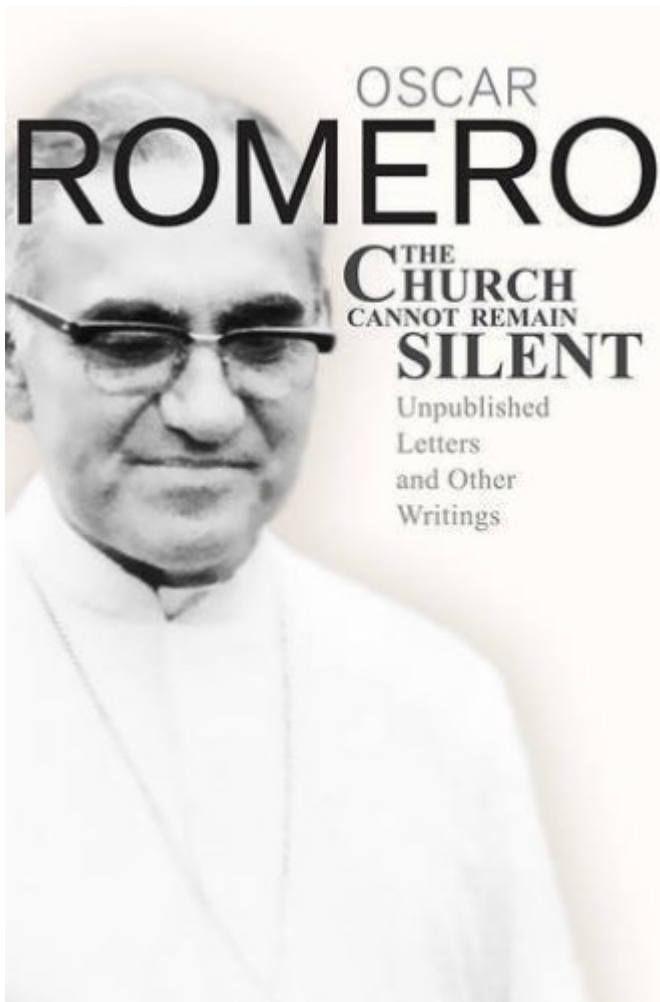
Oscar Romero's wisdom for today

The Salvadoran archbishop was thoroughly of his own time. But his words speak to us too.

by [Elizabeth Palmer](#)

March 8, 2017

In Review



The Church Cannot Remain Silent

Unpublished Letters and Other Writings

by Oscar Romero, translated by Gene Palumbo and Dinah Livingstone

“We experience here great contrasts in the life of our society, in economic, political, and cultural marginalization,” Oscar Romero wrote in a letter on February 9, 1978. “In a word, INJUSTICE. The church cannot remain silent in the face of such misery, for to do so would be to betray the gospel, it would be to become complicit with those who here trample human rights.” It’s tempting to apply his prophetic words to our own context, in which increasing economic, political, and cultural contrasts have produced a renewed sense of urgency for many.

But we are far from Romero’s situation. As archbishop of San Salvador in the late 1970s, he was surrounded by instances of torture, disappearances, false imprisonments, and assassinations. He knew priests and nuns who were brutally and unapologetically killed, and Romero would eventually be murdered while presiding at mass. As he wrote the letters and sermons excerpted in this book, the violent repression of political dissent in his city (and across his country) was driving refugees to flee, looking for asylum. Romero explains:

There is no freedom of expression; if someone asks for a piece of bread, he’s thrown in jail. It’s forbidden to say that people are dying of hunger and malnutrition, that they have no health care, that the unemployment rate is very high (65 percent in our country), and that illiteracy is a serious problem.

The Salvadoran civil war was one of several contemporaneous Central American conflicts that would become the [roots of the sanctuary movement](#) in the United States.

Romero was frequently accused of being a communist, and the contributors to this book repeatedly argue that Romero was not political. “How can we present him rightly, freeing him from attempts on the part of a political party to adopt him as their banner, their figurehead?” asks Cardinal Angelo Amato in the introduction. It’s a fair question, and certainly Romero’s advocacy for farm workers and poor villagers was rooted in his faith rather than any political divisions of his day.

But the book's continual insistence that Romero was pastoral rather than political creates a divide that may be unhelpful for many of its readers. To live in faith in today's world is to be political. When a Christian speaks out against economic injustice or advocates for generosity toward refugees, an accurate description of this behavior is *political*, even if the motivation is purely biblical or doctrinal. When that Christian happens to be a Catholic martyr who is being examined by the Congregation for the Cause of Saints, maintaining a heuristic division between politics and faith is prudent (even if [not entirely accurate](#)). But the reality for most of us is that living in faith requires us to do things that intersect with politics.

Whether we label it as political or not, there's plenty of prophetic prose in this book. Prayer, Romero believed, is at the heart of engaging faithfully in a broken world. He explains to a priest, "We can best encourage each other by praying for one another. That will be the source of our faithful action." And he insists that we should pray even for our enemies: "Those worshippers of the worldly powers . . . will never understand the church's message of solidarity with the poor as long as they seek to hold on to their privileges. . . . We must pray constantly for their conversion."

There's also plenty of ethical instruction, which gives insight into the daily interactions Romero had with his parishioners. He advises a wife that "the conjugal act between legitimate spouses" need not be suspended during Lent or on feast days, adding that "the preliminary and complementary acts accompanying the conjugal act are permitted as long as they are in accord with human dignity and promote love between the two of you." After telling another woman that "the church considers sterilization to be a grave offense," Romero counsels "the sin you have committed can be forgiven if you repent" and encourages her to "recommend to others that they not think about being sterilized." To a teenager who ran away with a man who subsequently betrayed her, the archbishop writes:

It's never too late to start over. You can remake your life. Return to the side of your parents and follow their advice. One day you will find a man who really loves you and will form a Christian home with you. I recommend that you read the New Testament, where you will find the path to happiness.

This suggestion is no simple panacea—it embodies the complexity of the gospel that drove Romero's ministry. In the face of the joys and sufferings of this world, Romero called his people to persistent faithfulness, rooted in scripture and grounded in

communal worship: "The risen Christ is our hope."