

When Oscar Romero became the archbishop of San Salvador in 1977, the hopes of the poor collapsed. Romero was a company man; he supported the government even though it favored oppression. But, as archbishop he could no longer tolerate the unconscionable divide between the powerful and the poor. Helpless farmers were driven off their land; many went into exile in neighboring Honduras; many others were slaughtered. The violence which frightened the population became a political tool. So Oscar Romero spoke out publicly against this injustice. Within three years he had changed from a meek observer of trends to a powerful advocate for the people. In 1980 he paid the price. This archbishop of San Salvador was killed by an assassin's bullet in a chapel while he was celebrating Mass. Monday marks the 17th anniversary of his death. Later that year, 1980, four missionary women from the United States were raped, shot, and killed. In 1981, 900 unarmed men, women, and children were massacred in the village of El Mozote. In 1989 six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter were murdered at the University of Central America. The impact of the bullets splattered the brains of the Jesuits onto the walls of their home. El Salvador has had a bloody history in recent years. Many Catholics have been martyred because they believed in justice for the poor.

On this date in 1991 a group of Salvadoran exiles in Honduras bravely moved back to their homeland and established a new community named after two American missionary martyrs, Ita Ford and Maura Clark. For the past six years St. Regis Parish has held Comunidad Ita Maura as a sister by our prayers, our personal visits, our political advocacy and our financial support. Those of us who visited there have been touched by this community's simple lifestyle, their support for one another, the courage of the martyrs whose blood spilled on the land, and the prayers they offer for St. Regis every day. As Comunidad Ita Maura celebrates its anniversary today, we celebrate in solidarity with them.

In the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ we discover that to follow Jesus may mean following him to the cross. In our own day, Oscar Romero, Ita Ford, Maura Clark and many others all followed Jesus along a path of commitment to peace and care for the helpless. They believed so strongly in this cause that they gave it their lives.

What in your life do you believe in so strongly that you would die for it? Honesty? Respect? Family? Friendships? Faith? Are we really willing to die for those things, or do we find that when we come under pressure, we won't even stand up for them? We sacrifice honesty to preserve our shame; we lower our sexual standards because of our lust; we cheat our families because of selfishness; we neglect our prayer to suit our pleasures. Are we really willing to die for our values? Or do we compromise them in favor of simplicity, convenience, selfishness, or financial gain? The season of lent has invited us to change, to recommit ourselves to what we believe in. As Jesus mounts Calvary this week, will we walk with him and die to ourselves, or will we stand outside, selling tickets to the event?