

Archdiocese of Baltimore's Hispanic community celebrates Blessed Romero's upcoming canonization

WALKERSVILLE - A colorful, hand-painted, 7-foot tall crucifix towered over a church overflowing with parishioners at St. Timothy Parish in Walkersville July 22 during a Mass dedicated to Blessed Oscar Arnulfo Romero, a Salvadoran priest and martyr on track for canonization in Rome Oct. 14.

The Mass - followed by a dinner reception - was organized by three parish communities: St. Joseph in Hagerstown, St. John the Evangelist in Frederick and St. Timothy. It represented the second of five cultural events hosted this year by the Office of Hispanic Ministry of the Archdiocese of Baltimore to honor the life and legacy of Blessed Romero.

"Monsignor Romero is and will always be the conscience of Latin America," said St. Timothy's pastor, Father Juan Vazquez-Rubio, in his homily. "His voice was the voice of a prophet who looked over his flock during El Salvador's darkest time. He was the voice of the voiceless."

As a priest and bishop, Blessed Romero tended to the poor, visited prisoners and founded an Alcoholics Anonymous program at a parish in San Miguel, El Salvador, where he served for 20 years. He also revived popular devotions to the country's patroness, Our Lady Queen of Peace. But he's mostly known for his three years as archbishop of San Salvador beginning in 1977.

Blessed Romero was assassinated in 1980 while celebrating Mass one day after calling on the government to end its violation of the human rights of El Salvador's people.

While Catholics inside and outside El Salvador recognized him as a martyr

immediately, his sainthood cause was stalled for years as some church leaders debated whether he was killed for his faith or for his politics.

Celebrations in honor of Blessed Romero started in the archdiocese June 30 at Sacred Heart in Glyndon, and will conclude at the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen in Homeland with a Mass of thanksgiving for Blessed Romero's canonization Oct. 28.

Lia Salinas, Director of the Office of Hispanic Ministry for the Archdiocese of Baltimore, said a canonization is always a cause for rejoicing in the Catholic community.

"The Office of Hispanic Ministry is pleased to host these celebrations (in honor of Blessed Romero) because they bring the communities together - not just the Hispanic community - but anyone who wants to learn about (his) life and legacy," Salinas said. "It is also a way for the local community to participate and celebrate his upcoming canonization, as the vast majority will not be able to attend ceremony in Rome."

During the dinner reception at St. Timothy church hall, parishioners looked over an exhibit about Blessed Romero's life, witnessed a dramatization about his "passion and death" performed by members of the parish's young adult group "Voceros de Cristo," and listened to a keynote address by Father Juan Antonio Garcia-Membreno, associate pastor of St. John the Evangelist in Frederick.

Jose Angel Alas, a 61 year-old parishioner of St. John the Evangelist in Frederick and a native of Chalatenango in El Salvador, was 23 years old when Blessed Romero was murdered. He remembers listening to the sermons of the late Archbishop of San Salvador on the radio.

"We must hold Monsignor Romero's words close to our hearts," Alas said. "He experienced violent times, but he fought on. He told God's truth."

Alas referenced the current situation in Nicaragua, where police and paramilitaries have attacked churches and threatened clergy for offering shelter to civilians protesting authoritarian rule.

"(Blessed Romero) said that no military order should come before God's law, but

God's law is being broken every day," he added.

"Men like Monsignor Romero are not born every day." Alas said. "The more I learn about him, the more I am convinced he was a saint walking among us on this earth."

Catholic News Service contributed to this article.