Remembering Romero
“God Passed Through El Salvador” BY GENE PALUMBO

SAN SALVADOR—FR. PAUL SCHINDLER REMEMBERS the day when Óscar Romero sat beside him, trembling. Romero knew he wasn’t among friends. The scene was a clergy meeting in early 1977, and many of the priests were furious: a man they’d clashed with—Romero—had just been named as the new archbishop.

As the meeting was ending, Romero—who hadn’t yet been installed—was asked if he’d like to say a few words. For all Schindler knew, they would be the last words he’d ever hear from Romero. Discouraged at the prospect of working under someone he was unsure of, Schindler had told his bishop back in Cleveland that he’d decided to return home after eight years of parish work in El Salvador.

“He walked to the front of the room and began to speak,” said Schindler, “and after a half hour, I said to myself, ‘I’m not going anywhere.’”

It was Schindler’s first glimpse of something that, until then, had been unknown to him and many others: Romero had begun to change. Earlier, in his years as an auxiliary bishop in San Salvador, many had regarded him as too docile, too accepting of a social order which they felt, cried out for change. Schindler had told his bishop back in Cleveland that he’d decided to return home after eight years of parish work in El Salvador.

Those were the years when Eva Menjívar came to know him. She was assigned to Ciudad Barrios, the small town in eastern El Salvador where Romero was born and grew up. The town was located in the Santiago de María diocese, and by the time Romero was named bishop there, Menjívar and her fellow sisters had catechetical and literacy programs underway, and were offering job training in sewing and auto mechanics.

Menjívar says that when people invited Romero to visit their far-flung hamlets, he almost always accepted. She recalls an occasion when residents of one of those hamlets staged a play for him, a play they had written about several Gospel parables. Afterward, they spoke about what the parables meant to them.

At the end they turned to Romero and—as one might ask an expert—said, tell us what these parables really mean. His reply, Menjívar recalls, was, “I have nothing to add. I’ve learned more about the Bible today than I did when I studied it in the seminary in Rome.”

“We had never seen a bishop draw near to the people the way he did,” says Menjívar. “He’d greet them all, try to speak with them all, and when they had questions for him, he was happy to try to answer them.”

Schindler’s experience was similar. “Whenever I’d invite him—and not just to the main church, but to the rural villages—he would come. He was always there with the people. That was his whole thing: to walk with them, to feel with them, to inspire them.”

Menjívar recalls the sisters’ monthly retreats with Romero, and the time in late 1976 when, informed that the National Guard had arrested two teenage catechists in Ciudad Barrios, he went there immediately to demand their release. To ensure that they wouldn’t be re-arrested, he took them back to Santiago de María where he listened to their accounts of being tortured.

Menjívar was later transferred to a parish near the town of Aguilares. There she worked with Jesuit Fr. Rutilio Grande, whose sainthood process is now underway. On the evening of March 12, 1977, she was at Mass when she was handed a note saying that Grande had disappeared. She went straight to Aguilares and, upon arriving, learned that he had been murdered along with an elderly campesino and a teenager.

Grande and Romero had become close friends in the late 1960s, when both were living at the seminary in San Salvador. When Romero was named bishop in 1970, he asked Grande to preside at his installation ceremony.

In the following four years—up until the time he left for Santiago de María—Romero had bitter disputes with priests in the archdiocese, and when, to their dismay, he was named archbishop in 1977, it was Grande who stood up for him.

“Rutilio said to us, ‘Yes, he’s conservative. But he’s honest, and he’s someone you can work with,’” said Fr. Pedro Declercq, a Belgian missionary whose work with grass-roots Christian communities led to the bombing of his parish.

Declercq didn’t have to wait long to see how much Romero had changed. They’d had an ugly falling out in 1972, when his parishioners invited Romero to visit them to say Mass and explain why he had justified, on behalf of the bishops conference, a military invasion of the National University.

The army had wounded some people, arrested others, and evicted people whose homes were on the university’s campus. The discussion between Romero and the parishioners began at the homily, but quickly turned into a shouting match, with Declercq finally tearing off his vestments and saying the Mass was over.

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When Romero returned to San Salvador as archbishop, he visited the parish again. As recounted by Sister Noemí Ortiz in María López Vigil’s *Monseñor Romero: Memories in Mosaic*,

[Romero] brought up [the earlier incident] as soon as he got there. “We couldn’t even celebrate the Eucharist that afternoon . . . We were insulting each other . . . Do you remember? I remember it well and today, as your pastor, I want to say that I now understand what happened that day, and here before you I recognize my error.

“I was wrong and you were right. That day you taught me about faith and about the Church. Please forgive me for everything that happened then.”

Well, all of us, young and old, started crying . . . We broke into applause, and our applause melted into the music of the party . . . All was forgiven.

On the night of Grande’s death, Menjívar was sitting beside his corpse, using a towel to absorb the blood that was trickling out, when Romero arrived at the parish. She said Romero approached the corpse and, after standing in silence for several moments, said, “If we don’t change now, we never will.”

Jesuit Fr. Jon Sobrino, a prominent liberation theologian, was at the parish that night, and answered the door when Romero knocked. Earlier Romero had criticized Sobrino’s writings on Christology; later, as archbishop, he would consult Sobrino when preparing his pastoral letters.

Sobrino says that after Romero himself was murdered, “people began speaking of him as an exceptional person and Christian. In the funeral Mass we held for him at the UCA (Central American University), Ignacio Ellacuría said, ‘In Archbishop Romero, God passed through El Salvador.’ The people spontaneously proclaimed him a saint.” (In 1989, Fr. Ellacuría, along with five other Jesuits and two women, was murdered at the UCA.)

When Pope Francis ratified Romero’s status as a martyr, Schindler said, “The people in the parish have been waiting and waiting for this. They hold him as a saint, and they’ve always held him as a saint, and now that the pronouncement has been made, they’re going to be overwhelmed.”

Menjívar said that when she heard the news, “I felt great joy — and at the same time, I thought to myself, I hope this will be the occasion for those who killed him to be converted.”

Gene Palumbo made his first reporting trip to El Salvador in early 1980. He moved there to cover the civil war (1980-1992) and has stayed on. He reports frequently for The New York Times, and has also reported for Commonweal, National Public Radio and the Canadian Broadcasting Company. He teaches at the Casa de la Solidaridad, a semester-long study-abroad program for U.S. university students. A version of this article appeared in the National Catholic Reporter.