

## In this issue...

We focus on the life and legacy of Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, who was murdered twenty years ago this March. His concern to be a "voice for the voiceless" still inspires people in El Salvador and throughout the world, and influences CAFOD in its call for justice.

He is the first in a series of Modern Day Prophets – individuals who have shown courage and faith in speaking out on human rights issues, often at the risk of their personal safety. Look out for future information sheets on others throughout the year. We hope that you will find these useful in the classroom.

## Diary dates

**12 March (Preston) and 14 March (London) – Pope Paul VI Memorial Lecture on Oscar Romero.**  
Contact CAFOD North West on 01772 733 310 or CAFOD Head Office on 020 7733 7973 for details.

**24 March 2000 – CAFOD Fast Day.**  
20th Anniversary of the death of Oscar Romero, El Salvador.

**Creation Musical** – performed by St Augustine's High School, Billington, in aid of CAFOD.

15 May Royal Festival Hall, London;  
22 May Bridgewater Hall, Manchester;  
27 May Philharmonic Hall, Liverpool;  
10 June Barbican Centre, York;  
1 July King George's Hall, Blackburn.  
Details from box offices.

**June/July 2000 – CAFOD Jubilee Celebrations.** Celebrate the Millennium with CAFOD. Bring yourself and a picnic:  
Cardiff 17 June: St David's VI Form College

Liverpool 24 June: Wavertree Park  
Solihull 25 June: St Columban's  
Kent 1 July: Aylesford Priory  
Durham 2 July: Ushaw College

**23 July 2000 – G8 Summit, Okinawa, Japan.**  
(See page 6 for details.)

**14 - 21 August 2000 – 16-30 years old? Travel to Rome to celebrate World Youth Day.**  
Contact your Diocesan Youth Worker for details – plenty of opportunities to get involved.

# Who was Oscar Romero?



Rex Features

*The people's priest: Romero learnt from the poor.*

**O**scar Romero was the Archbishop of San Salvador, the capital of El Salvador. He was murdered on 24th March 1980 by forces working for the government because he had spent his three years in office criticising those who made El Salvador a dangerous, violent and unfair place to live. He tried always to live and to spread the Gospel message of love, peace and justice. Though often afraid, he was prepared to risk his life for the people whom he loved most – the poor and the powerless. His vision continues to inspire people in El Salvador and around the world.

## What was the situation in El Salvador?

El Salvador was a country in turmoil, where social divisions were deep-rooted and made worse by violence. Land and wealth were in the hands of a few families who controlled the media, rigged elections and used the army to protect their position.

- 2% of the population owned 60% of the land.
- In the village of Santa Marta some farmers earned as little as 2p a day.
- Many farmers depended on just one crop – coffee. If the harvest failed their families would go hungry.
- No criticism of the system was tolerated. Each month hundreds of people were tortured, murdered – or simply "disappeared".
- The discovery of a Bible or a picture of Romero in a house could mean a death sentence for its owner.
- The distress and anger of the peasant population was growing and caused alarm among those who did well out of the system. Any call for justice was put down by brutal intimidation. The first three months of 1980 had already seen 800 murders and tension was rising. Romero knew he had to speak out.

## Why was he appointed Archbishop?

Romero had a reputation as a quiet, timid man who liked to avoid conflict and who backed down in the face of government corruption. The authorities believed that as Archbishop he would not cause them any trouble by asking awkward questions or drawing attention to the situation in El Salvador. They also hoped he would control "trouble making" priests and that he would order the people to obey. His appointment was a great disappointment to many who had hoped that the new Archbishop would be a more outspoken critic of the government. Some priests refused to congratulate him or to go to his ordination ceremony. Within a month, however, his reputation had changed.

## El Salvador factfile



**Land Area:** 21,040 sq km  
(NB smallest country in Central America)

**Capital:** San Salvador  
(El Salvador means "The Saviour")

**Population:** 5.8 million

**People:** 94% "mestizo" – "mixed" European and Indian; 5% Amerindian; 1% white

**Religion:** 75% Catholic with an active Protestant minority

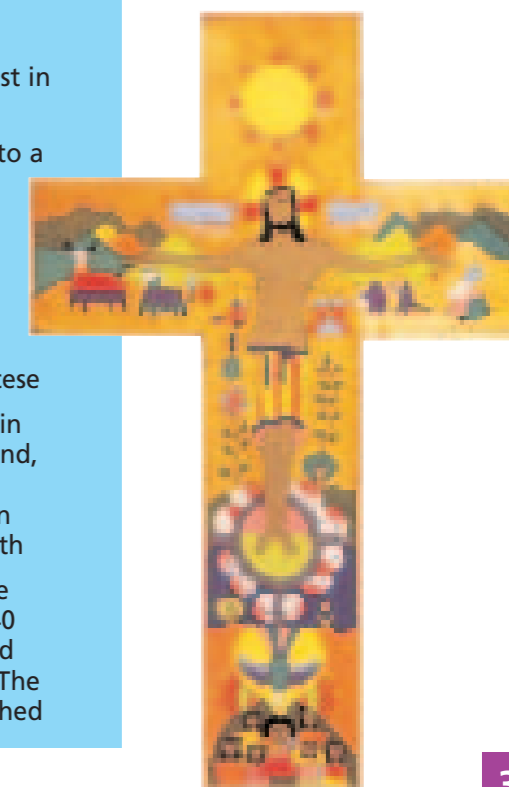
**Languages:** Spanish; Nahua – among some Amerindians; English quite widely spoken

**Climate:** tropical – rainy season: May to October; dry season: November to April

**Natural hazards:** known as the "Land of Volcanoes" – frequent earthquakes and volcanic activity

## A life at a glance

- 1917:** Oscar Romero born 15 August in Eastern El Salvador
- 1929:** left school and apprenticed to a carpenter
- 1930:** inspired by a local priest, he trained for the priesthood
- 1942:** ordained priest in Rome
- 1944:** returned to El Salvador as Secretary to San Miguel diocese
- 1977:** appointed Archbishop. Within weeks the murder of his friend, Rutilio Grande, led him to embark on a course of action which would lead to his death
- 1980:** murdered on 24 March while saying Mass. At his funeral 40 people died as shots are fired and explosions cause panic. The funeral Mass was never finished





Rhodri Jones

### What was his turning point?

The crucial event which transformed Romero was the murder of his friend, the Jesuit Rutilio Grande, in 1977.

Like many nuns and priests, Rutilio lived and worked with the poor, encouraging them to organise to find the voice they needed, and giving them hope of a fairer and more just future. The government and army felt threatened by this and were determined to remove those who could damage their position of power. Romero was shocked by Rutilio's death and called on the authorities to bring the killers to justice. It soon became clear, however, that they had been behind it.

Romero realised that this was a turning point for him – where the personal and the public elements of his life came together. He knew he had to make a stand:

"When I looked at Rutilio lying there dead I thought: if they have killed him for doing what he did, then I too have to walk the same path."

### What actions did he take?

Above all, Romero urged justice, peace and forgiveness. He tried to see the best in everyone – even those who appeared to be the enemies of the people. Specific ways in which he acted were to:

- Call for land reform and a fairer distribution of wealth.
- Use the Church's radio station to condemn corruption, torture and murder.
- Set up the Legal Aid Office to document the abuse of human rights and to provide advice.
- Mention the names of those who had suffered or died in his weekly sermons – to make them real and to give them dignity. He also named those responsible for crimes against the people.
- Use his sermons to provide information about the wider world in a country which was becoming increasingly isolated.
- Shelter refugees in the Cathedral precinct.

### Why was he killed?

The day before he died, Archbishop Romero made a passionate plea for peace and justice in El Salvador:

"When you hear the words of a man telling you to kill, remember instead the words of God, 'Thou shalt not kill.' In the name of God, in the name of our tormented people who have suffered so much, I beseech you, I beg you, I order you...stop the repression!"

These words sealed his fate. As Romero had become more and more confident and outspoken in his criticisms of the authorities, he knew he was pushing them to a point where they would try to silence him.

On the day of his murder, he seemed sad. He went to confession and left his room tidy – as if, said his friends, he knew he was going on a journey.

In the evening he was saying Mass in the chapel of a hospital where he lived. He had just finished his sermon and was about to begin the preparation for Communion when a shot rang out and he collapsed at the altar. He died soon afterwards.

A nun who witnessed his death said: "Monsignor Romero's last sermon was

beautiful. He spoke as if he knew that he was going to be killed. He said several times that if a grain of wheat does not die, it cannot bear fruit. When he finished he walked to the centre of the sanctuary. A second later we heard a shot."

### What has happened since his death?

- A week after Romero's murder his funeral descended into chaos as government troops fired on the mourners and threw bombs into the crowd. 40 people died and the Mass was never finished.
- In December 1980, three American nuns and their colleague were raped and murdered in the capital by government forces. This drew the attention of the world to El Salvador again.
- In November 1989, six Jesuit priests and their two female housekeepers were murdered – again by government forces.
- El Salvador drifted into a civil war in which thousands died. Although the war ended in 1992, the people still suffer violence, injustice and appalling poverty.
- No one has ever been prosecuted for Oscar Romero's murder.

Despite this gloomy picture, the people of El Salvador have drawn strength from the example of Oscar Romero and from their faith. There are many stories of hope and courage: of villages being rebuilt, communities taking control of their future and of forgiveness and reconciliation.

### "If I get killed I will rise in the Salvadorean people."

Why is so much attention being paid to Romero twenty years after his death. Why does he matter to so many people? Should we focus so much on the actions of one individual?

The message from El Salvador and across Latin America is that Romero and his message still live on – as he prophesied. The people still gain enormous strength from their memories of him and the words he left behind. His sainthood was assumed almost immediately and the people's faith in themselves is strengthened by the memory of his faith in them. They commonly say: "St Romero of the Americas, pray for us".

### Remembering Romero

These descriptions of Oscar Romero by people who knew him give us some idea of how important he is to the people of El Salvador:

"He is present in all those who are poor, oppressed, living in refugee camps, captured, mothers, wives and children of those who have disappeared... A man for all seasons, a symbol of the hopes and tragedy of the Salvadorean people, and a witness and martyr of the truth, justice and love of God."

Jon Sobrino SJ



Sipa-Press/Rex

"They may have killed the man but his message of justice for all still lives even today."

Liam Gearon

"It is not difficult to find parallels with Jesus' own three-year public ministry – the challenges, the doubts, the teaching, the agony and the death."

Julian Filochowski, CAFOD Director

"A great man, a great priest, a great bishop."

Ricardo Urioste

"I thank God for that great prophet of El Salvador. He died as Christ died. Today he intercedes for all the poor and for all his flock."

Nun from El Salvador

## Secrets of the stolen children, El Salvador

The fate of hundreds of missing children is being exposed by a CAFOD funded support group. During the civil war many children, some as young as 15 days old, were seized by the military, often ending up being kept as mascots or handed over to orphanages as "war orphans". Their parents have never given up hope of finding out what happened to them.

"We know a place where on just one day the military took more than 52 children off to their barracks," says Fr Jon de Cortina SJ of the Association for those Searching for their Children.

The Association provides support to parents, helps them to trace their children and, where possible, arranges a reunion. It is also pressing for the investigation of cases where children were sold for profit.



Steve Smith/ Andes Press

**Few of us are in a position where we can do as much as Oscar Romero did but there is still much that we CAN do personally which will make a difference.**

**Remember: think globally – act locally**

**Here are some suggestions: Buy fairly traded goods wherever possible**

The best known example is the Fair Trade Mark earned by a small range of products such as Cafédirect; Teadirect; Clipper Tea and Maya Gold Chocolate. For more information write to Cafédirect, 66 Clifton Street, London EC2A 4HB or e-mail: info@cafedirect.co.uk. This will directly benefit workers in developing countries who will receive a fairer wage for their work.

### Send yourself to Japan!

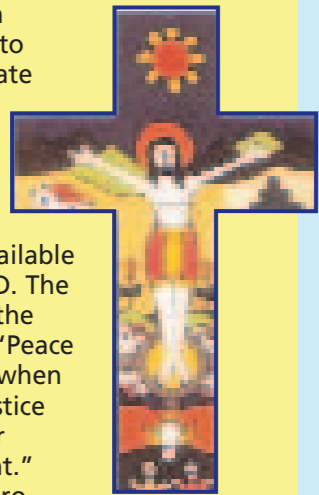
Use the CAFOD postcard to register your concern about the unfairness of poor countries' debts. This will put pressure on world leaders who are meeting in Okinawa in July 2000 to discuss how much money the poorer countries will still have to pay.

Are there any people who are "voiceless" in this country. Who makes sure their voice is heard? What could you do to help? (eg children, homeless, asylum seekers.)

Remember the poor in your prayers.

### Archbishop Romero memorial cross

A colourful, painted, wooden cross, produced in El Salvador to commemorate the 20th anniversary of



Archbishop Romero's death, is available from CAFOD. The back bears the inscription "Peace will flower when love and justice pervade our environment." Oscar Romero. Born 15th August 1917. Died 24th March 1980. It measures approx. 100mm x 60mm and costs £2.40 (inc p&p) from CAFOD.

## Whose side are you on?

**"I am always going to receive first any peasant who comes here whatever the day or the hour, whether I am in a meeting or not. My brother bishops all have cars. The priests can take the bus and have no problem waiting. But the peasants? They have come walking for miles, in great danger and often without eating."**

Oscar Romero was a product of his time and place. He learned to see the world from a different perspective: the poor were his brothers and sisters and they were being crucified by poverty and injustice. He realised that the choices he made had a direct effect on the people around him. But he recognised that this was not a one-way process – that he was also changed by his engagement with the poor.

The 1960s and 70s had witnessed a great deal of discussion about how the Gospel message could be made real for the end of the 20th century and for the people of Latin America. A new way of thinking was developed – a theology of liberation – the liberation of the poor from the chains of their oppression.

Liberation theology sees the Bible message as Good News for the Poor; it calls all Christians to work for liberation from sin and injustice as part of the task of making the kingdom of God visible in the world. It has given hope and encouragement to many who recognise the need to work for justice now – not simply waiting for a reward in heaven.

The stories of the Old Testament – of a chosen people oppressed by slavery and travelling through the wilderness to the promised land – seemed especially relevant to the poor and landless of Latin America. They could also identify with a Christ who had a special message for the poor (See Matthew 25: 35-36; Luke 4:18; Luke 6:20), a Christ who suffered but also, importantly, triumphed.

At the Conference of Medellin in 1968, the Bishops of Latin America took a decisive step towards an "option for the poor", committing the Church to giving "preference to the poorest and most needy sectors of society". They also stressed their solidarity with the marginalised and they favoured a process of educating the poor about the causes of their poverty and the means by which they could overcome injustice.

One important aspect of liberation theology has been the reassessment of the beliefs of the indigenous peoples of Latin America, which are marked by a respect for the natural world and for the community.

Many of these ideas have been recognised as being relevant to the situation in other parts of the world where poverty and oppression go hand in hand.

To find out more about liberation theology see *Liberation Theology: Coming of Age* by Ian Linden, 1997. Available from CAFOD resources.

## Classroom activities

### Group work

"Let us not tire of preaching love; it is the force which will overcome the world"

"More important than the moment of death is to give Him all my life and to live for Him"

"The glory of God is the living poor"

"The truth is always persecuted"

"I beg you, in the name of God, stop the repression"

"Let my death be for my people's liberation"

"The violence we preach is not the violence of the sword... it is the violence of love"

"He who is committed to the poor must share the same fate as the poor"

"Let my blood be a seed of freedom"

"A bishop may die but the Church which is the people will never die"

Oscar Romero has been called "the Voice of the Voiceless", a term often used in connection with those who stand up for the poor.

- If you were asked to choose one of these quotations to accompany a poster which summed up his life and work (for example, the front cover of this magazine) which one would you choose?
- Go through the list on your own and rate the quotes from one to ten in order of preference.
- Then get into groups of four or five and share your top three quotes. See if you already have some agreement. Discuss the quotes which are most popular and then make a decision as a group about which will be your final choice.
- Feed back your decision to the rest of the class, explaining your choice and why you rejected some of the others.

### What do you think?

- Oscar Romero has been called a prophet, a martyr and a saint.
  - Look these up in a dictionary and explain in your own words what they mean.
  - Do you think Oscar Romero was a saint? Explain your answer.
  - Do you think there is a place for saints in the modern world?
  - Is it wrong to place too much emphasis on the work of one man?
- Some people argue that the poor and those treated unjustly should accept their situation in life and should wait for their reward in Heaven. How do you think Oscar Romero would respond to this argument? What is your opinion? Write a speech in response to this.
- Find out about Thomas Becket – the Archbishop of Canterbury murdered in 1170. Why was he killed? Can you see any similarities between his life, death and legacy and that of Oscar Romero? (See "Murder in the Cathedral" by T S Eliot or *Medieval Realms* history text books.)

### GCSE style question

- Describe how one well-known Christian has helped to fight injustice. (5)
- "I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me drink, in prison and you came to see me." (Matthew 25: 35-36) "He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives, sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free." (Luke 4: 18) Explain how these two passages might affect the attitudes and actions of Christians. (7)
- "Christians should not get involved in politics; they should leave that to the politicians." Do you agree? Give reasons to support your answer and show that you have thought about different points of view. You must refer to Christianity in your answer. (8) (Total: 20 marks)

# ROUNDABOUT THE SCHOOLS

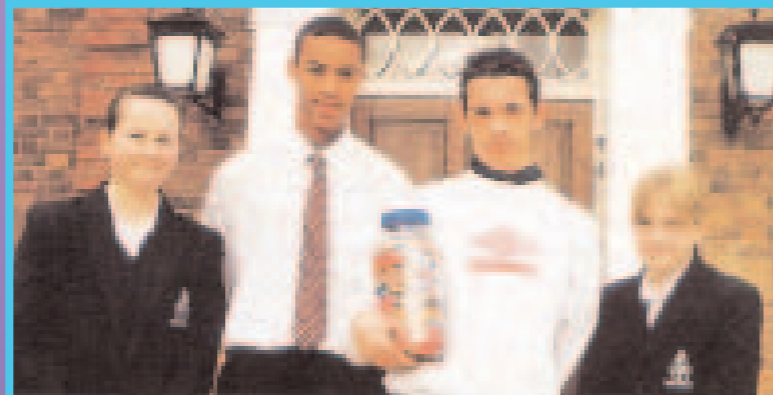


Senior pupils at **St Rose's School**, Stroud, act out a *Fair Share* Bolivian feast for younger pupils as part of their Harvest Fast Day.

Sixth formers at **St Bede's School**, Lanchester, Co Durham, prepare to welcome the Millennium Stars Football Team from Liberia on a global education day.



Dorothea Littlejohn, Mary Hunt, Brendan Sebuliba and Paul Temple of **St Wilfred's School** in Crawley with the jar of chocolates which they used to raise funds for CAFOD at Harvest Fast Day.



Students at **St Mary's College**, Hull, get to grips with the issue of Fair Trade by playing the CAFOD *Trading Trainers* simulation game during their reflection day.



Staff from **Cardinal Newman School** in Hove join CAFOD's Patricia Mulhall in an INSET session.

At **New Hall School** in Chelmsford, raising awareness of the problems faced by heavily indebted countries has resulted in some impressive creative responses from pupils, which the school hopes to publish. This poem by Sophie Smethurst in Year 9 is entitled *Sensibility*.

*Rub sand in my eyes, make them hot and burning,  
So my tears smoulder and sizzle,  
When they drop onto the cool, smooth stone.*

*Rub salt in my ears, so the world echoes around me,  
Numb my senses, make me immune,  
For I will never feel more pain than this.*

*Cries of anguish as people fall,  
Their legs too weak  
To carry their heavy hearts.*

*Bulging eyes filled with sorrow,  
How can there be drought,  
When there are so many tears,  
That flow down the riveted cheeks of these humans.*

*These rules of pavement,  
Carved into the sandy shore,  
Being washed away,  
Layer after layer,  
Grain after grain,  
How long should they wait?  
How long will they wait?*

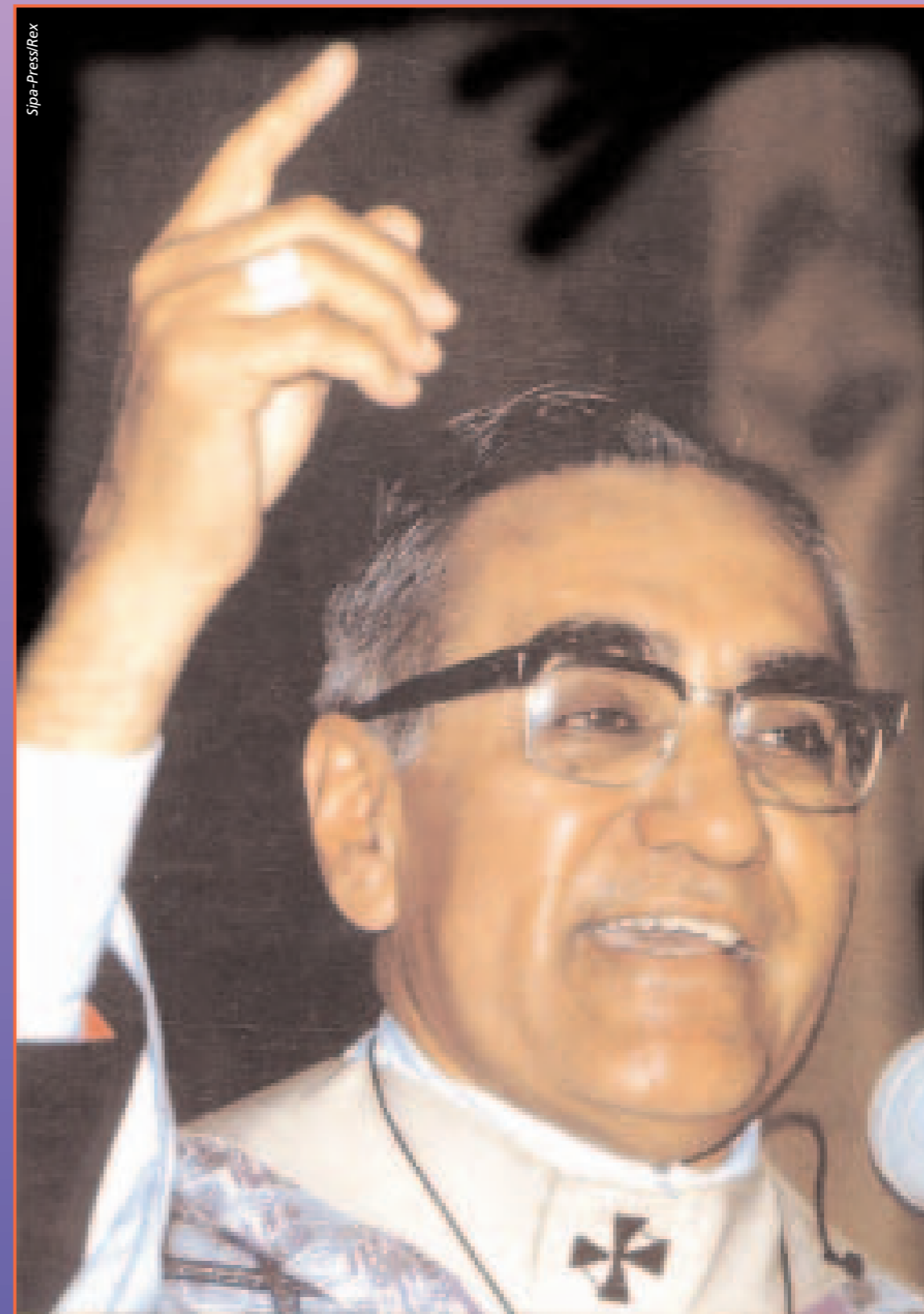
If you would like help to run INSET with your staff or education days on global issues in your school, ring 020 7733 7900 and ask for the CAFOD schools team – Patricia Mulhall, Noreen O'Neill – or contact your CAFOD Regional Organiser.

CAFOD, Romero Close, Stockwell Road, London SW9 9TY

E-mail: [schools@cafod.org.uk](mailto:schools@cafod.org.uk) or visit our web site at <http://www.cafod.org.uk>

# Secondary Schools fairground

Issue 18, Spring 2000



**Oscar Romero**  
*A voice for the voiceless*  
20th anniversary 24 March 2000

**CAFOD**  
just one world