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Of Many Things

For many people there is no such thing as a good time to die. Death always comes too soon, too suddenly. Even the patient, wracked with pain, will often cling jealously to the last breath of life. Can we really speak of a time for dying?

Yet even when death comes most abruptly, savagely, there can be a sense of decency, in the old Latin sense of fittingness, to the time and manner of dying. The murder of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero of San Salvador was a cruel and cowardly act, a gesture of brutal contempt by the powerful toward one who had championed the cause of the powerless. Still, there was a kind of bitter beauty in the moment of his dying. The assassin's bullet struck down the Archbishop as he raised the cup of salvation in offering during the Eucharist.

Death, some theologians tell us, is the final signature of life, the final statement of who we are and what we have become. Could there be any clearer statement of who Archbishop Romero was and what he stood for than the manner of his dying: struck down moments after he had proclaimed the Word of God to his people and reminded them, as he had so often, that it is a word of dignity and justice for the human person.

Repeatedly, the Archbishop had warned his countrymen of the dangerous violence that in the end claimed him as one of its victims. His death will in all likelihood intensify the tragic cycle of protest and repression that now convulses the small Central American country of El Salvador. But let us be clear on the sources of that violence and those ultimately responsible for it.

Within hours of the Archbishop's murder, State Department analysts were reporting to a Congressional committee

that leftist guerrillas in El Salvador are trained and financed by Fidel Castro's Cuba and smuggled into the country through Honduras. But the real responsibility for the violence in El Salvador does not rest with Fidel Castro or the insurgents he, not surprisingly, supports. The deaths of Archbishop Romero and the hundreds of others, including six priests, who have been murdered by the military and paramilitary terrorists over the past several years are the responsibility of those entrenched elites of El Salvador who have fiercely resisted even modest attempts at social and economic reform.

One of Archbishop Romero's last pleas to the United States was to refrain from sending military assistance to the embattled El Salvador government. Whatever the good intentions of some elements within the junta now running the country, they have proven incapable of controlling the nation's military who, in too many instances, have used their firepower in brutal and indiscriminate repression. Yet the Carter Administration persists in asking Congressional approval not only for economic aid to El Salvador (which is needed) but also military aid which, Archbishop Romero warned, will increase the level of violence in that densely populated and desperately poor nation. In response to the Archbishop's pleas, our State Department raises again the convenient but distracting specter of Fidel Castro.

The prospects for peace and some kind of justice in El Salvador seem bleak. But Archbishop Romero would have reminded his people that for a Christian death and defeat are not the final word. Easter is a good time to remember that, even a good time for dying.

J.O'H.

