

ROMERO

US, 1989, d. John Duigan



El Salvador was governed by a right-wing military junta during the late 1970s. Fr Oscar Romero is a quiet, rather reserved and bookish priest working in San Salvador. It is a time of civil war. Rome appoints Fr Romero as archbishop of San Salvador and primate of the country. It is expected that his episcopate will not have a great impact and that he will support the status quo.

As he assumes office, Oscar Romero looks more closely at the social situation in his country. He begins to respond with strong critiques of the government and its repression. He is supported by some of his clergy, especially his friend, Fr Grande. When Grande is killed, Romero is so moved that he becomes more actively involved in the fight for justice.

Criticised by government and military, he is arrested and tortured but continues to speak out. He makes an impassioned radio broadcast appealing to the military to stop the repression. Instead they plan to kill him. On April 20th 1980, Archbishop Romero is shot while celebrating the eucharist.

Romero was produced by Father Edward (Bud) Keiser, a Paulist priest responsible for many decades for the popular television Insight series. The screenplay is by John Sacret Young, originator and writer of the television series China Beach. Director is Australian John Duigan (Far East, The Year My Voice Broke, Flirting and the portrait of Catholic war-cinematographer, Fragments of War).

Raul Julia gives an impressive performance as Archbishop Romero. The movie is fairly straightforward in its style, a popular biography of a clergyman whose reclusive and academic ways are challenged by the social unrest and atrocities in El Salvador. He comes to realise that Providence has marked him out as a martyr.

The movie could be criticised in some ways for its presentation of the landed aristocracy as stereotypes as well as its picture of a persecuted people. However, there is great earnestness and commitment in the narrative. It is an invitation for audiences to appreciate the challenge to a man like Romero. It communicates the atmosphere of social injustice in Latin America, especially El Salvador. Romero was shown to the American congress as background to debate about Central America.

