Óscar Arnulfo Romero y Galdámez (1917–1980) was born into a poor family of Cindad Barrios, El Salvador. After having served his apprenticeship as a carpenter, he studied theology in San Salvador and Rome. Here, he was ordained a Catholic priest in 1942 and licensed theologian in 1943. For 23 years, he served as a parish priest in Anamorós and also as Secretary of the Bishop of San Miguel. In addition, he was chosen Secretary of the Episcopal Conference of El Salvador in 1967. After 5 years of working as an auxiliary bishop in the Archdiocese of San Salvador, he became Bishop of the Diocese of Santiago de Maria in 1975. From 1977 to the day of his assassination, March 24th 1980, he worked as Archbishop of San Salvador.

It was the political murder of one of the priests of his archdiocese that opened his eyes to the ongoing repression and injustice in his country. From then on, he protested openly against the violations of the poor by the ruling oligarchy. As the voice of the poor, he was eliminated himself.

His four Pastoral Letters (1977–1980) and his address to the University of Louvain in answer to the conferral of a doctorate honoris causa (1980) have become crucial texts of the Theology of Liberation.

The Murder

Oscar Arnulfo Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador, was murdered on March 24th, 1980. While celebrating Mass in the Chapel of Divine Providence Hospital, a sniper shot him dead. One has to go back 800 years into the past to find a similar example of bloodshed in the midst of a Christian country. On December 29th, 1170, Archbishop Thomas Beckett was beaten to death at the altar in Canterbury Cathedral.

The El Salvadoran judiciary has never solved the murder. The enquiries were long and drawn out; members of the judiciary who were given the responsibility of official enquiries were intimidated and found their lives threatened. Witnesses were kidnapped and disappeared without trace.

In 1992 after the end of the civil war, the UN installed a Committee of Truth to discover violations against Human Rights in El Salvador.
between 1977 and 1991. To the murder of Romero the commission pointed out: the politician and former intelligence officer Roberto D’Aubuisson, founder of the right-wing party ARENA, planned the action with the help of the police officer Colonel Alvaro Rafael Savaria. It was he who entrusted Hector Antonio Regalado, a Cuban professional killer who lived in exile in El Salvador, to carry out the murder. Regalado was taken to the place of action by Savaria’s personal chauffeur, Amando Antonio Garay, who also drove him home immediately after the fatal shot. Savaria paid the sniper and reported to D’Aubuisson that the job had been done.¹

On March 20th, 1993, the report of the Committee of Truth was published. Only a few days later, the government issued an Amnesty Act, and the file on the murder of Romero was finally closed, together with thousands of similar files. The murderers and their accomplices were never punished in El Salvador.

However, on September 3rd, 2004, a federal judge in Fresno, California, found the former Colonel Alvaro Rafael Savaria guilty of active involvement in the murder of Archbishop Oscar Romero and sentenced him to a fine of 10 million US dollars. Romero’s family and the Legal Aid Office of the archdiocese of San Salvador had taken Savaria to court. Savaria had lived in the USA since 1987. He was not present at the trial, but as a witness, his former personal chauffeur Amando Antonio Garay was. D’Aubuisson was already dead at that time (Brockmann 2005, 249ff.; Hernández 1996; Maier 2001, 154ff.; Rechtsschutzbüro 2005a, 45ff.).

Who was Oscar Romero?

Oscar Arnulfo Romero was born the second of eight children in Ciudad Barrios, a remote village in eastern El Salvador on August 15th, 1917. His family lived modestly. As his father wanted him to become a craftsman, he put him in apprenticeship as a carpenter when he was