

ROMERO:MEMORY ACTIVATING HERITAGE OF INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY

Call for proposals



San Ramón, Exterior of El Pueblo de Dios en Camino, c. 1998. *El Salvador Mural Project* (2011-12) (©Rachel Heidenry)

The support of Archbishop Oscar Romero (1917-1980) for the Salvadoran peasants in their opposition to the military regime of El Salvador during the last years of his life, earned him international recognition as a champion of social justice and human rights. His assassination on March 24th 1980 made him a martyr for millions of Latin Americans. Worldwide, Romero's commitment and his legacy had a strong catalyzing effect on the recognition of the Roman Catholic Church as a genuine partner in societal resistance against injustice in El Salvador and Latin America, and hence, in the pluralization of civil society movements in general worldwide. Romero's impact was felt particularly strong in Leuven (Belgium), where the university had developed into an international focal point for left-wing progressive Catholicism and liberation theology, epitomized by Camillo Torres' enrollment at the university, Hélder Câmara's frequent visits to the city and Romero himself receiving an honorary doctorate from the university on February 2nd 1980, only few weeks before his untimely death.

Hundreds of Flemish activists and scholars within and beyond the university community mobilized on behalf of the cause of the murdered archbishop in the course of the 1980s, strengthening and intensifying the existing solidarity movement with El Salvador and other Central American countries (especially Nicaragua and Guatemala). However, this specific engagement in Europe – in Belgium and Leuven more specifically – on behalf of Romero and El Salvador is not widely known any longer and has become subject to amnesia. Yet, the entanglements and cross-fertilizations between the university of Leuven and Latin American have generated a significant body of material and im-

material heritage at various institutions of our university, including the Collegium Pro America Latina (COPAL), the Centre for Liberation Theology, KADOC-KU Leuven, and the University Parish. Today, this heritage is insufficiently appreciated, valorized, and shared with the relevant groups in and beyond Leuven.

This decaying recollection jeopardizes our knowledge and awareness of the historical engagement for the Latin American cause in Belgium and beyond. We believe that returning the focus to Romero and his legacy will help us to raise more attention to the plight of Central Americans, who are today confronted with what William Robinson has called 'the second implosion' of the region (massive migration, economic crisis, state violence), and to reassess the (enduring?) conjunction between solidarity with Latin America and the broader, global struggle for peace, justice, emancipation and inclusion. How does our own dissolving memory and flawed understanding of Romero at present relate to the polyphonic significance attributed to his person and legacy by people and communities across the world, in the past as well as in the present?

To address these issues, a group of scholars linked to various centers and faculties at KU Leuven developed [Romero:Memory], a one-week multidisciplinary academy to confront our own understandings of Romero and his significance for the solidarity movement with Latin America and El Salvador with those of scholars, activists, writers, etc. from the Global South. In this way, we want to generate a polyphonic and co-creative understanding that goes beyond Eurocentric approaches.

We are seeking participants to take part in an intensive one-week academy to present and discuss the impact and imprint of Romero's legacy on the works, actions and ideas of people, groups, communities, societies (or the participants themselves) in the present as well as in the past. We invite scholars, activists, journalists, writers, artists, as well as other profiles to participate and present their work in connection to one or more of the four following thematic fields:

Sociology

Focusing on societal dynamics and societal changes and questioning the issue of integration/harmony or conflict as driving forces for progress and change, sociology invites to look beyond individual, particular experiences and to 'imagine' the public dimension or the relationship of these private experiences with society. Sociology raises questions such as: what did the person of Romero mean for the movements and activities of resistance in El Salvador already existing at that time? Were his sermons perceived as a threat or intensification of the social and armed conflict, or as a contribution to peace and harmony? Which thematic aspects of his sermons got most response from civil society movements and movements of resistance? How does looking through the prism of 'Romero' contribute to our understanding of the hurdles and possibilities of contemporary societal change and private/public relations?

Theology

During the workshop we will also discuss theological dimensions of the figure of Romero, his faith history, martyr death and 'resurrection' in the people of El Salvador. Remembering Romero calls for a critical appraisal and global constructive continuation of the legacies of liberation theology today. At stake is an exploration of the intersections between spirituality and politics: in which ways do faith practices translate into political agency, and how has the figure of Romero been activated for political engagement in the name of faith?

Law

The significance of Romero can only be appreciated to the fullest extent within the broader political and social context of El Salvador during the 1970s and 1980s, when the country experienced extreme levels of violence against political opponents of the regime and large sections of the population. During this academy we wish to explore a) the legal and criminological dimensions of the atrocity crimes as investigated by the Salvadoran Truth Commission, within the larger framework of transitional justice measures for the country; and (b) the long-term reception of the truth commission's findings, both in El Salvador and within the wider context of Central America (including Guatemala and Mexico).

History

Writing and remembering the history of international solidarity movements with Central America raises a set of methodological and conceptual challenges. Who were the actors of solidarity – from liberation movements and European activists to exiles and migrants? (How) did solidarity movements construct relations of alterity and similarity (Durkheim) between donors and receivers? How did personal connections, next to ideas, contribute to international solidarity? What were the 'afterlives' of the international solidarity with El Salvador during the 1990s? To avoid the pitfall of eurocentrism, we have to ask the question of how European solidarity was received and recast in Central America.

FORMAT AND PARTICIPATION

[Romero:Memory] will consist of presentations, discussion sessions and lectures by international keynote speakers. Prior to the academy, a series of video interviews will be conducted with former activists that played a leading role in the mobilization on behalf of El Salvador in Flanders/Belgium during the 1980s. Source material (personal archives, publications, etc.) will be collected, digitized and disclosed through an online application. Furthermore, collections of testimonies will be gathered in El Salvador and will be presented during the academy. The 'dialogue' between all these sources and testimonies, and the participants of the academy will foster our understanding of the multiple and different meanings of Romero and El Salvador solidarity movements in Belgium, Europe and beyond.

[Romero:Memory] can itself be considered as a 'performance' of remembering Romero and therefore offers a unique opportunity to study how historiographical, sociological, criminological and theological forms of knowledge intersect in heritage formation. To this end, we will invite an ethnographer-theologian to observe, describe and analyze the practices and discourses of heritage formation at work during the academy.



PRACTICAL

[Romero:Memory] will take place from 4 to 10 November 2019, in Leuven (Belgium). All participants will be offered accommodation during the academy (6 nights) and will be able to recover travel costs (with a maximum of EUR 1000).

In order to apply, please send an abstract of your contribution to the academy (max. 1,500 words), a CV and a letter of motivation (ca. 500 words) to jonas.vanmulder@kuleuven.be. The deadline for submissions is July 1st 2019. The selection will be done collectively by the project team, giving due attention to gender, age, diversity and cross-disciplinarity. The number of participants will be limited to ensure an intensive and fruitful collaboration. The working language of the academy will be English.

After [Romero:Memory], a number of research papers will be selected for an edited volume published through Leuven University Press (GPRC).

PROJECT TEAM (KU LEUVEN)

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