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Book Review: *Assassination of a Saint*

By Jasmine Colorado

On March 7, 2018, Pope Francis announced that Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero is on his way to canonization. Although no date has been set yet, the approval of miracles by an individual is the last step towards sainthood in the Roman Catholic Church. As his followers celebrate the news of his pending canonization, they are also reminded of the brutal way in which he was murdered and of the collective wound that has yet to heal among the people of El Salvador. In his latest book, *Assassination of a Saint*, Matt Eisenbrandt delivers a detailed, intriguing narrative of the murder of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero. In the wake of Romero’s death, dozens of books were written on his life and work, however, not one book has been written about his assassination. Eisenbrandt’s research is groundbreaking for two major reasons: it chronicles the investigations conducted by the author and his legal team, and also provides insight into the role played by the United States after the assassination.

The story begins on March 24, 1980, as the sixty-two-year-old Archbishop of El Salvador conducted a memorial service honoring one of his parishioners. Unlike the politically charged, revolutionary homilies he usually delivered, his words on this particular morning were much more subdued: “We know that every effort to improve a society, especially when injustice and sin are so present, is an effort that God blesses, that God wants, that God demands from us.” Moments after saying these words, Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero’s homily was interrupted by a bullet to the heart. His death extinguished the ray of hope harbored by many Salvadorans, the dream that peace could come to El

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Salvador without war. After his death, Romero’s life story spread beyond the borders of his tiny homeland: “Romero’s legacy spans the globe, with dignitaries like Barack Obama paying homage at his tomb. A statue of Romero now stands next to Martin Luther King’s in Westminster Abbey, and his bust joins those of Mother Teresa and Rosa Parks in Washington D.C.’s National Cathedral.”

Eisenbrandt highlights the last three years of Romero’s life. As tensions between the Salvadoran government and the populace escalated, Romero became a guiding figure for those suffering under the effects of oppression: “Romero…became a hero to Salvadoran campesinos as he forcefully advocated for the plight of the poor, the protection of human rights, and the need for nonviolent change in El Salvador.” When over 100,000 individuals gathered to mourn Romero on the day of his funeral, the army used sharpshooters against the crowd, resulting in a massacre. Unquestionably, this incident accelerated the bloody civil war that engulfed El Salvador for the next twelve years.

No one was ever formally charged with Romero’s murder. In 2004, Eisenbrandt along with a team of private investigators, lawyers and human rights advocates, reopened the case in the United States. Eisenbrandt was the legal director of the Center for Justice and Accountability (CJA) during the time he wrote *Assassination of a Saint*. CJA is an organization that is “part of a worldwide campaign to hold those who commit atrocities, like genocide and torture, accountable for their crimes.” and a key figure in both the trial and investigation. In an honest, yet optimistic and conversational tone, Eisenbrandt chronicles the ups and downs faced by the legal team. The conditions for the case were less than favorable. For one, the investigation reopened in the early 2000s, twenty years after the murder, meaning that many of those involved were either scattered across the U.S. or El Salvador, and others had already passed away. However, the greatest problem the legal team faced was extracting information from witnesses while members of the party that allegedly murdered Romero remained in prominent positions of power in El Salvador. “In El Salvador, ongoing obfuscation and disinformation by those

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5 The term campesino means peasant farmer.
7 Ibid., 17.
with selfish or sinister motives continue to obscure the truth... Even after the publication of this book, many facts about Romero’s assassination remain hidden because witnesses still risk death if they speak out.”\(^8\) Despite the circumstances, Eisenbrandt and his team were able to uncover truths never before revealed.

*Assassination of a Saint* requires a significant amount of context in order to understand the narrative. The book also includes a wide range of suspects, witnesses and individuals involved in the murder which could become exhausting for readers to follow. Eisenbrandt expertly blends the present with the past by opening each chapter with a testimony from a witness in present-day California and then providing a flashback to El Salvador in the 1980s. For instance, in the opening chapter Eisenbrandt begins with a testimony from a witness during the 2004 trial. Atílio Ramírez Amaya tearfully recounted the day of Romero’s death; as a judge in El Salvador at the time of the murder, he was required to investigate the case. When he refused to share his private findings with the local police, they dispatched two men to murder him and his family. Although the murder attempt failed, Amaya had to flee to the United States in order to remain alive. Eisenbrandt then flashes back to 2001, when the CJA discovered that Álvaro Saravia was living in California. Saravia has been the primary suspect shooter in the Romero assassination since the beginning but when the U.S. lent him political asylum he lived his life quietly in California until discovered by the CJA.

In chapters 1–4, Eisenbrandt provides further context regarding the investigation. El Salvador has always been a land of extremes; he explains that the people of El Salvador rebelled against the elitist minority in the 1930s and adopted certain Marxist ideologies: “But the ideology’s appeal in 1932, just as in 1977 had little to do with Soviet global hegemony and instead emanated from a hope to alleviate the dire socioeconomic inequalities.”\(^9\) Throughout the 1900s a small group of businessmen and their families—de-facto oligarchs—ruled the country, specifically the lucrative coffee sector, and denied many human rights to *campesinos*. Under the oppressive rule of the rich, it was impossible for anyone in the lower class to overcome poverty. The Salvadoran army fully supported the oligarchs; many of the

\(^{9}\) Ibid., 14.
members of the right-wing party belonged to the oligarchy and possessed close ties to the United States. U.S. ambassador Robert White, a key figure in the preliminary attempted investigation, described El Salvador as: “Magnificent suburbs full of villas right out of Beverly Hills are flanked by miserable slums right out of Jakarta where families have to walk two blocks to the only water spigot.”

These obvious and painful inequities brewed an unrest that increased with each new oppressive action made by the government. From the 1881 law that outlawed indigenous communal lands and privatized the exportation of coffee, to the 1932 massacre of approximately 30,000 farmers perpetrated by the military, to the assassination of Archbishop Romero, all of these heinous acts fueled the crisis that ultimately ignited the nation’s brutal civil war.

Eisenbrandt also introduces Roberto D’aubuisson in the first chapters as the death squad leader and politician accused of orchestrating Romero’s death. “The CIA labeled him ‘egocentric, reckless and perhaps mentally unstable.’ To his backers in the business community, Salvadoran armed forces, and U.S. Republican Party, however, D’aubuisson was charismatic articulate and intelligent, a leader born to protect the country from the looming scourge of communism.”

He is known for founding death squads, military groups funded by the right-wing business community. These entities committed kidnappings and killings of any guerilla member, sympathizer, or civilian who appeared suspicious. These assassinations went untried and were oftentimes carried out by military personnel in plainclothes. After the death of Romero, the military ransacked a small farm and arrested a group of right-wing extremists including D’aubuisson. The CJA uncovered a diary and other incriminating documents, including Operation Pineapple—a set of documents that seemed to indicate that D’aubuisson and his associates were responsible for the death of Romero. Although evidence pointed to D’aubuisson’s involvement, the wealthy families of El Salvador raised such angry protests and threats that he was eventually set free and went on to become a leading politician of El Salvador.

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11 Ibid., 37.
12 Ibid., 33.
13 Ibid., 31.
An inescapable theme throughout the book is the United States’ interference in both the civil war and Romero’s murder. Robert White, the U.S. ambassador stationed in San Salvador at the time, wrote to the CIA and emphasized his suspicions in regard to D’aubuisson and his connection to the murder. Yet, despite the evidence compiled in White’s messages, he was told that there was not enough proof to accuse D’aubuisson of the crime. Furthermore, the U.S was deeply involved in both the politics and the military of El Salvador during the war: “From 1946–1979, the U.S government had provided the Salvadoran armed forces a total of $16.7 million. In just the first year of Reagan’s presidency, military aid was $82 million, and it grew significantly in subsequent years…In its first year of office, the Reagan Administration explicitly abandoned human rights as a factor in its Central American policy and provided aid to El Salvador without conditions.” Eisenbrandt also expands on the military assistance provided to El Salvador. The Atlacatl Battalion, the first elite army unit trained by Reagan’s administration, slaughtered at least 700 civilians (many of them children) in the community of El Mozote. After the first reports of the massacre appeared in American newspapers, the Reagan administration released a statement certifying that the military of El Salvador was “making a concerted effort to protect human rights.” This action proved once again that in spite of the atrocities perpetrated by the Salvadoran military, the U.S would continue to protect the oligarchy.

In the following chapters, Eisenbrandt analyzes Romero’s transformation to a right-wing approved archbishop appointed to keep other members of the clergy under the thumb of the oligarchy. The church opposed the preaching of the Liberation Theology, a Marxist-tinged ideology with the core belief of providing equality and education for the poor in order to create a consciousness and advancement amongst the lower class people. At first, Romero maintained conservative views and gently chastised his fellow priests whose views became too radical, however, after the Salvadoran army murdered his close friend Rutilio Grande—a priest that helped spread the Liberation Theology—Romero’s views drastically changed. For the next three years of his life he used his pulpit to criticize the government and

14 Eisenbrandt, Assassination of a Saint, 67.
15 Ibid., 43.
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military, helping families of the kidnapped and missing to find their loved ones. He even wrote to Jimmy Carter’s administration and pleaded with them to cease the financial support for the troops that killed civilians daily.

The following chapters center on the investigation itself as the team attempts to find and question Alvaro Saravia and Amado Garay. Garay was known to be the getaway driver for Romero’s killer. He was wanted by the CJA for his wealth of information. After traveling to El Salvador Eisenbrandt’s team came into contact with some of Garay’s relatives and discovered that he was in the witness protection program in the United States and could only see his family in undisclosed locations with the FBI present. With the FBI’s cooperation, Eisenbrandt’s team was finally able to interview their key witness. Obtaining information from Garay was no easy feat, but his testimony was essential to Eisenbrandt’s quest for the truth: “Garay’s status as a conspirator is the reason we want to find him. He was a member of D’aubuisson’s death squad and one of the only eyewitnesses to Romero’s assassination...”

The team also chronicled their urgent search for Saravia, the alleged shooter. Despite facing danger in both El Salvador and the United States, Eisenbrandt’s team continued to track Saravia, and despite finally finding him, they were unable to extradite him to the United States. However, on the basis of Eisenbrandt’s investigation, Saravia was ultimately tried and convicted in absentia, he is the first and only man ever charged with Romero’s murder. Despite the victory, the outcome remains bittersweet as many of the facts surrounding Romero’s death remain hidden, and Salvadorans are still suffering in the aftermath of the war and have yet to find relief.

Assassination of a Saint stands as a prime example of a modern true crime thriller, non-fiction in its highest form. Eisenbrandt beautifully combines the history of El Salvador, and the murder of Archbishop Romero, with the efforts of his team to uncover the truth behind the killing. Ultimately the true power in Eisenbrandt’s narration is bound to the dialogue. Although a large part of the story is set in a modern, air-conditioned courthouse in Fresno, all of the characters come alive, with their motivations, accounts, and emotions seeping through every word. The book is dynamic, fast-paced and transcends culture and politics to find

16 Eisenbrandt, Assassination of a Saint, 97.
values identifiable by all. By delivering simple sentences and portraying himself through a humble, friendly persona, Eisenbrandt engages his reader, as they read the real-life drama cemented in the historic roots of a troubled country. It is also important to acknowledge the author’s brilliant representation of global relations in El Salvador’s bloody civil war. Both his passion for the case, as well as the admiration he holds for Romero are clearly visible in the text. An example of this can be seen during a breakthrough of the case in which he describes: “I start to cry as we turn to each other and start hugging. While I wipe tears from my cheeks someone in the audience shouts: ‘Monsenor Romero!’ A chorus responds: ‘Presente!’”17 In other words, the audience in the courtroom as well as the author felt as though Romero was present.

During the 2004 trial, Eisenbrandt read a letter written by archbishop and human-rights activist Desmond Tutu aloud to the courtroom: “His [Romero’s] assassination in public with his people is reminiscent of the assassination of another great man, Mahatma Gandhi…the purpose [of this case] is not retribution, but to seek the truth and to restore the moral balance.”18 The author admits that Romero would be in despair at seeing the state of present-day El Salvador, and yet through the near impossible task accomplished by the CJA, he and his team proved that any amount of effort and awareness, passion and tenacity, could create a positive impact. Ultimately, Eisenbrandt not only lives up to the legacy of his hero, but also finds a glimmer of hope in a tale full of darkness and evil.

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17 Eisenbrandt, Assassination of a Saint, 147.
18 Ibid., 150.
Bibliography


Author Bio

Jasmine Colorado is an undergraduate at California State University San Bernardino. After graduating with a double major in history and literature in the fall of 2019, she intends to transfer to graduate school and complete her PhD. Her plan is to write children’s historic fiction and fantasy novels as well as teach at community college level. In her free time, she enjoys learning about mythology, visiting different countries, and creating ceramic artwork. She would like to extend a special thanks to Professor Deckard Hodge for his constant support in her academic endeavors, encouraging words, and for inspiring her to pursue her passion for writing and teaching.