

On Saturday, May 23, Bishop Jaime Soto was in San Salvador, El Salvador to witness the beatification of the late Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was assassinated in 1980 while celebrating Mass in San Salvador, just a day after pleading and ordering soldiers to stop killing innocent civilians in El Salvador.

The following are reflections by Bishop Soto on his experience of the day.

“The crowd was buoyant with emotion as we processed in for the Mass and remained so during the course of the solemn ceremony. After Archbishop Romero was declared blessed a large image of him was unveiled to the delight of the multitude.

“Archbishop Romero died during a painful, anguishing civil war whose end was more due to the fatigue among the bitter adversaries than any true resolution.

“During my brief sojourn in the capital, San Salvador, there were chilling reminders of that conflict, though the peace agreement had been signed decades ago. Young soldiers with grim faces carried rifles half their size. Military officers with elaborate decorations posed in clusters around the sanctuary. Military helicopters hovered above. Their loud droning sound washed over the crowds. Military checkpoints were passed going in and out of the city.

“Security is still an issue in El Salvador as well as the other Central American countries. The bitter fruits of war have produced young gangs and crime cartels that formidably mock the sovereign authorities of the Central American governments.

“Still, the faith of Blessed Oscar Romero -- the faith he had instilled in his people -- was the undimmed ray of hope during this morning's solemn rituals incorporating the courageous Salvadoran pastor among the blessed of heaven.

“I greeted most people with ‘felicidades’ (congratulations), to which they would smile back, ‘gracias’ (thank you). It seemed implicitly understood that Oscar Romero belonged to ‘el pueblo’ (the people). El Pueblo celebrated one of their own who had lived and died like their shepherd and savior, Jesus. The name of the country, “El Salvador”, means “the Savior.”

“There were somewhere between 100 and 200 bishops, mostly from the El Salvador and neighboring Central American countries. There were more than 1,000 priests. The vast multitude of the faithful filled the plaza, went down the avenue and flowed into the adjoining streets.

“During the lengthy Communion time, between the hymns, an announcer would recite over the sound systems portions of Archbishop Romero's homilies. It was for these prophetic words -- condemning violence, encouraging dialogue, inspiring faith and announcing the just dominion of Jesus -- that he was seen as a threat. The archbishop's homilies were broadcast on the radio all across the country. In his last broadcasted homily, he called on soldiers not to kill their own people and to disobey their superiors' orders to do so. Days later a soldier's bullet pierced his heart while he offered the Mass.

“The ceremony was conducted outside. The weather cooperated. The sun was warm. Scattered clouds provided some relief. The most enchanting moment occurred just after the apostolic declaration was read. A soft rainbow crescent formed in the sky over sanctuary as the reliquary with the blood-stained shirt of Blessed Romero was solemnly borne on the shoulders of young priests up onto the sanctuary,

next to the main altar. Heaven and earth were in unison with the Salvadoran people rejoicing in the still undaunted testimony of this modern martyr bishop.”