

JOY AND HOPE FOR THE 2020s: THE RELEVANCE OF ROMERO FOR THE TIMES WE ARE IN¹

Edgardo Colón-Emeric

given at Newman University, Birmingham on 22 March 2022

and Durham Cathedral with the Centre for Catholic Studies, Durham

University on 24 March 2022

INTRODUCTION

In the year 2013, I had the opportunity of visiting what I believe is the highest Methodist church in the world. The congregation of around sixty people meets in Cerro de Pasco. Before I travelled there, a friend warned me to expect a gray, ugly, cold place. She was not wrong. At 14,200 feet above sea level, Cerro de Pasco is one of the highest cities in the world, and it is cold. Moreover, there is no peak or *cerro* in sight. Instead, there is a gaping crater in the ground left from centuries of extraction of silver, zinc, and lead. At its best, Cerro de Pasco is a grim, gritty, mining town. Sadly, the church lay on the other side of town. The address of the church is “70 Hope Road.” Over the doors of the church hung a banner reading, “The earth will be full of his glory.” Both the address and the banner were at odds with the church sanctuary’s surroundings, a vast expanse of abandoned buildings that were expropriated to make room for the ever-expanding mine.

On the Sunday morning in July when I visited, the sanctuary was crowded and colorfully decorated. As the service began, two young women sporting neon stepped to the chancel. It was impossible to miss them because they wore green vests with big smiling face emojis captioned *Un lugar de gente feliz*—A place of happy people. The pair led us in an animated chain of praise choruses which did little to warm me up in the unheated building but gave me a new appreciation for the words of the Psalmist, “Let everything that has breath praise the Lord.” I had a hard time focusing on worship. Maybe it was the cold. Maybe it was hypoxia. Or maybe it was the occupational hazard of being a professional theologian. I kept wondering what to make of this church. I knew from the pastor that the children in the church suffered the effects of lead poisoning. The mining operation was the biggest employer and the worst polluter. And yet, here they were singing praises to God.

How can this be a place of happy people? Their address says Hope Road, but their location says dead end. What is the relation between the joy inside and the injustice outside? Are Christian feasts an escape, a virtual world dishonest to reality, a coping

¹ Adapted from Edgardo Colón-Emeric, “*Vivens pauper*: An exploration of the good life with Óscar Romero,” *Exploring the Glory of God*, edited by Adesola Akala, Fortress Press Academic, 2021.

mechanism? What is there to celebrate? It is against the backdrop of Cerro de Pasco that I present this lecture on “Joy and Hope for the 2020s: the relevance of Romero for the times we are in.”

The title for this lecture could be read as directions to the congregation—Joy on Hope Road. It also echoes the opening line of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.” *Gaudium et spes*, as this document is commonly known, was one of Romero’s favorite texts from the Second Vatican Council. He referenced it numerous times in his Sunday homilies, and he cited a significant portion of it in his martyrial homily. This document correlates contemporary challenges with theological responses, the signs of the times with the witness of the church. In this lecture, I correlate the joys and hopes for the 2020s with the teaching of Oscar Romero by considering the case of Cerro de Pasco. The correlation that I propose may appear absurd for several reasons.

First, the relevance of Romero, an archbishop from the disco age, for the church of the Zoom may not appear immediately obvious. However, as we consider the times we are in, Romero’s life and teaching grow in relevance. The signs of our times are not so much *gaudium et spes*, joys and hopes, as *luctus et angor*, griefs and anxieties. The multiyear, multiple pandemics of Covid, racism, polarization are still with us. A torrent of terrible news keeps coming out of Ukraine. The church’s response to these crises has been muddled. Romero speaks of the church as Christ’s best microphone. However, in many cases, its voice has been unsteady. This is not a new phenomenon. John Wesley, in his sermon on the “Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity” voices a perennial puzzlement, “What a mystery is this, that Christianity should have done so little good in the world!” Wesley is exaggerating. I believe that Christianity has done much good in the world. Still, how do we account for its proneness to schisms and cultural accommodation? Ricardo Arjona’s song “*Jesús es verbo, no sustantivo*” (“Jesus is a verb, not a noun”) voices the doubts many have about the church. His lament that in this world there are more religions than happy children haunts me.

Second, and perhaps more problematic, the correlation of Romero and Cerro de Pasco may seem forced for this audience. Óscar Romero is not Peruvian, neither am I. However, this lecture is not an exercise in history. It is not about keeping Romero’s memory alive so much as learning from Romero how to live in the times we are in. I want to be true to Romero, but even more I want to be true to the God of Romero and the pilgrim church for which he is an exemplary guide. There are after all many places like Cerro de Pasco around the world, even, I imagine, in

England. And the theological vision of Saint Óscar can help bring into focus the relation between justice, joy, and life for the Cerro, the barrio, and the mill town. Romero's contribution to elucidating this relation is summed up in his phrase *gloria Dei, vivens pauper*—The glory of God is a living poor person. Elsewhere, I have argued that this formula synthesizes Romero's understanding of salvation, Christ, the Church, poverty, and Christian hope. Here I use it to address the questions from Cerro de Pasco. I begin with setting Romero's saying in context.

AN IRENAEAN VISION

On February 2, 1980, Romero spoke at the University of Louvain on the occasion of being awarded a doctorate *honoris causa*. The title of his address was "The political dimension of the faith from the perspective of the poor." For forty minutes he spoke of how the church's engagement with the politics of El Salvador from the perspective of a preferential option for the poor had deepened the church's understanding of the central mysteries of the faith. As he concluded his reflections on the God of life and the life of the Church, Romero drew on the wisdom of the early church.

The early Christians used to say *gloria Dei, vivens homo*. We can make this concrete by saying *gloria Dei, vivens pauper*. We believe that from the transcendence of the gospel we can judge in what does the life of the poor truly consist and we believe also that by placing ourselves on the side of the poor and trying to give them life we shall know in what does the eternal truth of the gospel consist.ⁱ

The phrase *gloria Dei, vivens homo* is a quotation from Irenaeus of Lyons.ⁱⁱ Irenaeus was among the first theologians to reflect on the mystery of the transfiguration. On Mount Tabor, Jesus reveals the glory of God and the glory of the human. The identity of Christ and the destiny of humanity are made known by the light of the transfiguration. By the light of the transfiguration, humans achieve the purpose of their existence, they see God and live. The glory of God is a living human being. The phrase is profound. God is glorified when I am fully alive. And when God is glorified, I become fully alive. The clearer the vision of God, the more alive the human becomes, the more the glory of God is manifest.

The phrase *gloria Dei, vivens pauper* is Romero's adaptation. This is the only time in Romero's writings that the phrase appears in its original form or in its Latin American transposition. This fact alone might make us treat Romero's statement of "gloria Dei, pauper vivens" as a casual remark, a gesture of erudition at the end of a speech and a clumsy one at that since Romero does not mention the name of its author. It is true that Romero was not an academic. He did not write scholarly essays and learned monographs. He was first and foremost a pastor. He wrote letters; offered prayers, visited parishes, listened to parishioners, and preached homilies. He was not a professional theologian, but he presents a theological vision

of a God who desires to transfigure all things, the earth, humans and history, starting with the outcasts of history: the poor, the weak, and the vulnerable. The richness of his vision is often missed by its unsystematic articulation and by the power of Romero's story. Nevertheless, the vision is coherent and can be summed up by the Salvadoran saying, "the glory of God is a living poor person."

Why bring up Irenaeus? What does Lyons have to do with San Salvador? Romero was not a scholar of Irenaeus or of any of the Church Fathers. It is unlikely that he would have engaged secondary literature on the bishop of Lyons to any significant extent. Romero's reading of Irenaeus was probably based on reading selections from *Against the Heresies* with the guidance of the humanistic appropriation of the Irenaean aphorism that was characteristic of the time following Vatican II. Still, it would be a mistake to downplay Romero's knowledge of Irenaeus because what the Salvadoran cleric lacked in terms of technical expertise, he more than made up for in pastoral and spiritual experience. The bond tying Romero to Irenaeus is not simply textual; it is pneumatological. Both drank from the same wells.

The Holy Spirit who spoke through the prophets spoke through these bishops for the glorification of God, the sanctification of the people of God, and the transfiguration of the world. Irenaeus was one of the first Greek Church Fathers. Romero was one of the first Latin American Church Fathers. The bishop of Lyons preached the scandal of the incarnation. The archbishop of San Salvador preached the scandal of the transfiguration. The first was a witness against heretics who condemned the flesh as not worth saving. The second was a witness against those who condemned the poor as not worth saving. More than heresy hunters, both were pastors and martyrs. The encounter of Romero with the wisdom of the early church found in fathers like Irenaeus is fruitful. In what follows, I highlight two fruits from Romero's theological vision that are in season for addressing the joys and hopes of Cerro de Pasco and the 2020s: a Christian vision of life and a Christian practice of fiesta.

A CHRISTIAN VISION OF LIFE

Irenaeus' saying played a pivotal role in how Romero responded to the murder of his friend, Father Rutilio Grande. Some suggested the celebration of a *Misa Única*, a single mass for the entire archdiocese, but Romero was not sure. Jon Sobrino recalls the archbishop's initial vacillations: "If the Eucharist gives glory to God, will not God have more glory in the usual number of Sunday masses than in just one?"ⁱⁱⁱ Father Jeréz responded with Irenaean insight. "I think Monseñor is absolutely right to be concerned for the glory of God. But unless I am mistaken, the Fathers of the Church said, '*Gloria Dei, vivens homo*'—the glory of God is the living person."^{iv} The words struck a chord in the archbishop's heart and gave him the theological rationale to move forward with the single mass. If you are concerned for the glory of

God, then you are concerned for the life of the human. A single mass would most powerfully glorify God by making visible the desecration of life that occurred on the road from Aguilares to El Paisnal. Almost two years later, at the gathering of Latin American bishops in Puebla, the wisdom expressed by theologians like Irenaeus gave Romero the language with which to describe the terrors of the Salvadoran crucible. He unfolded the scene tersely to the Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff. "In my country, people are being horribly murdered. We must defend the minimum gift of God, which is also the maximum: life."^v

Life is God's first and best gift. Fullness of life can only be attained in the kingdom of God. For Romero, the church's proclamation of this heavenly hope must be accompanied by the affirmation of historical hopes. In the words of Isaiah 65:21, dear to the Archbishop of San Salvador, "They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit." For Isaiah and Romero, dignified employment and housing can be signs of the new creation. These signs do not rob eschatological hope from its orientation - but rather confirm it by pointing to the inbreaking of the kingdom. "Where the poor begin to live, where the poor begin to liberate themselves, where humans are able to sit around a common table to share, there is the God of life."^{vi} It is when the poor begin to flourish, when they experience joy and liberation that the glory of God becomes manifest even in the midst of unjust circumstances

Gloria Dei, vivens pauper. Romero's revision of the Irenaeus quote is not a correction; it is a *concretar*, a contextualizing, a making it real within a particular history. The fight against heresies is no longer being waged against second century Gnostics but against twentieth century idolaters of capital. Against these foes, the simple repetition of Irenaeus would miss the mark, his theological vision would be an abstraction. In order to be faithful to the Holy Spirit who spoke through the prophets, the apostles, and the doctors of the church, Romero must rewrite Irenaeus. In doing so, Romero shifts the optic of the bishop of Lyon's vision. The key terms in the aphorism—glory, human, life—are resituated. The heavenly hopes remain within the field of vision, but the focus zooms in on earthly hopes in order to affirm the dignity and value of the basic levels of human life. This is why Romero says that although abundant life can only be attained in the kingdom of God, neglecting the earthly goods that make life possible in history would be blasphemous.

In Romero's theological vision, Rutilio Grande was an exemplar of Irenaeus' *vivens homo* and a Christian vision of life. In what may well be a word play of the martyred priest's name, Romero speaks of Father Grande as an exemplar of the greatness (*grandeza*) of the human. As Romero explains, "the greatness of the man is not found...in having titles, riches, money; the greatness of the man is found in being

more of a man, more human."^{vii} By pouring himself into the life of his parishes at Aguilares and El Paisnal, Rutilio became more human, more alive, more *grande*. The *vivens homo* of Irenaeus becomes concrete in those who orient their lives to the *vivens pauper* of Romero.

Romero's Christian vision of life is not common in the history of Latin America or our world. Much more common is Machuca's vision. Bernardo de Vargas Machuca was a sixteenth century Spanish conquistador. His family motto was *A la espada y al compás, más y más y más y más* (By the sword and the compass, more and more and more and more).^{viii} In Romero's vision, Machuca's *más*, makes him less, and yet his nihilistic vision is at the root of the pedagogy of death which has become second nature in Latin and North America. It is the vision of a dystopic world where a minuscule minority treats the vast majority as speed bumps on their pursuit of the *dolce vita*.^{ix} By contrast, in Romero's vision, the *vivens homo* is not one who has more but one who is more: *No tener más, sino ser más*. There is a universal call to human life. The fulfillment of this call is a possibility that is available to all because human beings are not passive victims of their social circumstances; they have agency and responsibility. "Each human can grow in humanity, in being worth more, in being more."^x

Of course, Romero wants his people to have more. He wants the poor people who make up the majority of his flock to heed Paul VI's admonition that social conditions need to change from less human to more human ones. He wants a more just economy for El Salvador. But progress is not to be pursued in a naïve manner as if it were an untrammelled good. "If progress leads away from God or leads away from and mutilates and runs over the human, it is not true progress." As Romero saw in Grande, the glory of God is a living poor person, a life that consists not in having more, but in being more, in order to give more; a life made possible by the vision of the God who became poor and is celebrated through the Christian practice of fiesta.

CHRISTIAN PRACTICE OF FIESTA

On Sunday, January 21, 1979, Óscar Romero preached a homily titled "A murder that declares to us resurrection."^{xi} Just the day before, Father Octavio Ortiz, along with four young people, had been assassinated at a Christian retreat by military operatives. The face of Father Octavio was unrecognizable, having been crushed underneath the treads of an armored personnel carrier. One of the survivors, María José Forrier, witnessed how the soldiers searched in vain for weapons and instead found songbooks and musical instruments.^{xii} The gospel reading for that Sunday of ordinary time was from Mark 1:14–20, where Jesus announces the nearness of the kingdom of God. In the light of this good news, Romero addressed his congregation and clarified the goal of the liberation for which they struggled.

It is the struggle for the kingdom of God, a struggle where one does not need tanks or machine guns, a struggle where one does not need swords or rifles. The struggle is fought with guitars and church songs.^{xiii}

Óscar Romero believed Christian worship was central to the struggle for liberation—which was ultimately the struggle for preparing the way for the kingdom of God. According to Ellacuría, “True Christian liberation is discovered and promoted in the liturgy and only in the liturgy.”^{xiv} In other words, there is no true liberation without the practice of Christian fiesta.

In Hispanic/Latino theology, fiesta is an anthropological category. Modernity has privileged the anthropology of the autonomous self that constructs its own ends. To be human is to be *homo faber*, a making being. The English language expresses well the tenets of this anthropology: we work to “make a living,” exhort people to “make something of themselves,” and celebrate the “self-made” individual. In its earliest stages, Latin American liberation theology adopted this vision of the human. The Hispanic theologian, Roberto Goizueta rightly states that for many liberation theologians, to be human is “to be engaged in the transformation of society, to become an agent of change.”^{xv} Actions that were an end in themselves were devalued, being was conflated with making. Popular religiosity, liturgical celebrations, and the daily struggles for a beautiful life were seen at best as “useless” and at worst as obstacles for political transformation. However, more recent versions of Latin American and Latinx theology have seen the limitations of the *homo faber* and have instead grown in appreciation of the *homo festivus* and the subjunctive mood of life.^{xvi}

First, a brief grammatical lesson. Verbs in the indicative mood express facts. Verbs in the subjunctive mood express possibilities. Life in the indicative mood is a conjugation of economic, political, social conditions as they are. It assumes the stability and inescapability of the status quo. Life in the subjunctive conjugates these conditions as they could be by giving them a new object—the day of the Lord, the day of the great fiesta. Life in the subjunctive is expressed through drama, dance, song, and carnival. There is ambiguity to the subjunctive mood of life. The splurge of a fiesta may be a celebration of the richness of being alive or an expression of consumerist values that bigger is better. The focus of attention on a young woman in the *quinceañera* may point to a reversal of social roles that brings a marginalized person to the forefront or a coming-of-age party that solidifies patriarchal gender roles.

Fiestas celebrate life in the subjunctive. Romero understood the difficulties of this verbal mood. In El Salvador, many fiestas lost their subjunctive endings and became

conjugations of the indicative mood of life and expressions of a corrosive, virulent nationalism. Perhaps the hardest fiesta to conjugate in the subjunctive was the feast of the transfiguration.

In El Salvador, the feast of the transfiguration is the patronal feast that marks the Spanish conquest of the indigenous peoples of the region, the *Cuscatlecos*, on August 6, 1526. This triumph in Central America echoed the earlier victory of Christian crusaders over Muslim forces on August 6, 1456, in Eastern Europe. In both cases, a decisive blow had been struck against the foes of the church. In El Salvador, the celebration of the transfiguration or the fiesta of the *Divino Salvador del Mundo* as it is called, became a reference point for a national identity born from the violent conquest of the indigenous.

As the titular feast of El Salvador, the celebration of August 6 developed local rituals which frame in important ways Romero's homilies. The most unique of these is the one known as the *Bajada*. The *Bajada*, or descent, is the name of the procession of the image of the Divine Savior through the streets of San Salvador near the Cathedral on the eve of the feast. It is called a "Bajada" because the first part of the procession is characterized by sense of descent. Traditionally, the image began its journey from the Church of Calvary. It processed through the streets of San Salvador clothed in passion. On its journey to the Cathedral, the image was lowered into some structure that concealed it. Then, in what is known as the *descubrimiento*, the image was raised high for all to see. Only now, it is clothed in brilliant white bearing the seal of the Republic.

When Romero became archbishop he called for a simpler celebration of the *Fiestas Agostinas*, which followed the feast of the transfiguration. Dances, floats, and beauty queens were to be set aside for a season because these ran the danger of anesthetizing people to the social powder keg on which they sat. Equally significant is that Romero did not change everything. He did not eliminate the *Bajada*. Instead, he underlined its traditional connection to Christ's *bajada*, his kenosis, his descent into death in order to bring hope. Romero did not eliminate the traditional songs associated with the transfiguration. Instead, he invited the composition of new ones. He did not eliminate the seal of the Republic from the white robe but saw it as a pledge that God wanted to reform the nation and would hold those who opposed transfiguration accountable.

Romero associates the *Bajada* with Christ's life-giving descent into the world. The *Bajada* should be celebrated with that same evangelical orientation. Seeing Christ descend before he is transfigured sets the pattern for how Salvadoran Christians relate to their society. They are not to build booths on Mount Tabor but go down and address the violent problems rending the nation. They are not to hold

themselves back like the reserved sacrament but go into the places of hunger as the bread that gives life. Romero hoped that by motivating the poor to join in the bajada that they would become more fully alive as they grew in their historical awareness and in their conviction that salvation and social transformation are found only in union with Christ. Instead of listening to the many voices offering truncated solutions, they should listen to Christ.

Romero was an *homo festivus*. Life is characterized by indicative patterns and routines. Feasts are disruptions or interruptions of the quotidian. The celebration of a feast pauses daily life while simultaneously affirming and perfecting the quotidian. Through the celebration of fiestas he tried to school his congregation in the conjugation of life in the subjunctive mood of kingdom possibilities. An editorial published in *Orientación* on the eve of the feast of the transfiguration in 1978 says it well, “The feast wants to live life intensely. And within that life the feast presents an anticipation of the future reality. This is why a feast must always have an element of novelty. In each feast, one tries to exceed what was done in previous years.”^{xvii} There is an element of excess and novelty intrinsic to all feasting, but in liturgical feasts, the excess and novelty come from God. The editorial continues, “In the liturgical feast we try to anticipate the future of the fullness of the kingdom of God and to live it in history. This is why liturgy can never be far from history. It will always be inserted in history.”^{xviii} At its worst, the celebration of Christian fiesta romanticizes and re-inscribes unjust social arrangements. At its best, keeping the feast, fires hope for the transfiguration of the world.^{xix}

In El Salvador, the struggle for the kingdom of God was not advanced by more celebrations of worship but better celebrations of the divine liturgy. Indeed, a single mass celebrated concretely could speak more clearly and firmly than a multitude of abstract, tone deaf, Eucharistic celebrations. The struggle for the kingdom is fought with guitars and songs and with words and sacraments. The truth proclaimed through the celebration of the Christian practice of fiesta can free the people of God to say with Romero, in all kinds of social, verbal, and theological moods, that the glory of God is the poor person fully alive.

RETURNING TO CERRO DE PASCO

It is time to return to Cerro de Pasco. I have been considering the theological vision of Romero in conversation with Irenaeus, but what does any of this have to do with joy on Hope Road? Cerro de Pasco stands for many of the signs of our times. Its broken landscape, polluted waters, and vulnerable population testify to the persistence of extractivist, neo-colonial, racist interactions in the global economy. What does Óscar Romero’s theological vision contribute to being a *gente feliz*? What news are there from El Salvador to the Cerro, the barrio, the mill town, and the university?

First, Romero would warn the congregation against the danger of *conformismo*. The good life and the way of the cross are inseparable. It is no accident that for both Irenaeus and Romero, the paradigms of the human being fully alive are the martyrs. This identification begs a question. How does the conjunction of glory and suffering not devolve into the glorification of suffering? Romero terms this the problem of *conformismo*—complacency with an unredeemed status quo. *Conformismo* promotes a distorted view of society and sanctification; it reduces Salvadorans to an amorphous mass, to making do, to surviving. The aphorism *Gloria Dei, vivens pauper* puts the lie to this vision. All humans, starting with the poor, were made for communion with the Triune God. The people of God cannot settle for mediocrity when they were made for divinity; they cannot be *conformistas* when they were made for transfiguration. Seeking the face of God does not dull the senses to the pain inflicted by the wild beasts of wealth, power, and national security; it gives them new purpose. The dissonance between the current situation of shameful injustice and the divine vocation to glory fuels protest and guides action. *Conformismo* means giving up on the subjunctive mood of life because it is hard to sustain. Romero would say, do not be conformed with the verb charts of this world, but be Christ formed by the celebration of the Christian fiesta.

Second, Romero would commend the gift of tears so that the truth of Cerro de Pasco can be seen. The exhortation of Paul VI at the close of Vatican II needs to be heard ever anew, “in everyone we can and must recognize the countenance of Christ, the Son of Man, especially when tears and sorrows make it plain to see.”^{xx} Tears clear the eyes of the beholder and wash the face of the sufferer. Thanks to this gift, the Christian can walk among and with the marginalized and see “the face of Christ between the burlap bags and baskets of the harvester, the face of Christ amidst tortures and mistreatments in the prisons, the face of Christ dying of hunger in the children who lack food to eat, the face of Christ in the needy who cries out to the Church with one voice.”^{xxi} The gift of tears does not come naturally. It takes practice. This is why Romero frequently invites members of his congregation to visit the *Hospitalito*, the cancer hospice center where he lived and died. The *Hospitalito* was an excellent school of tears, an academy of lament. It was a place where Christians learned to be “honest with reality.”^{xxii} The gift of tears has the power to help the *gente feliz* of Cerro de Pasco to see reality and prophecy—the earth is the Lord’s not the company’s.

Third, Romero would insist on the possibility of a good life on Cerro de Pasco. Throughout his ministry, Romero adopts Peter’s exclamation when Jesus is transfigured on Mount Tabor: “Lord, it is good for us to be here” (Mt 17: 4). The Spirit gave Romero eyes to see that, in spite of everything, it was good to be a pastor in San Salvador. There is more to reality than violence and exploitation. Even

in the direst need, everyone has something to offer Jesus. “The poor one who comes to him to say: Lord, I have no work. I spent the whole week looking and I bring nothing but anguish. I have no work. That too is a service, an offering, a sacrifice. Or the mother who comes to tell of the illness of her son or that he was disappeared.”^{xxiii} The point is not that suffering is good - that is *conformismo*. The point is that when one’s life is consecrated to God, then the hospital bed, the jail cell, even the kitchen in Cerro de Pasco, becomes an altar from which the goodness of being alive can shine forth.

Fourth, Romero would affirm the beauty of life in Cerro de Pasco. When united to Christ, life is beautiful regardless of the circumstances. Óscar Romero often spoke of the loveliness of his native land. This is not surprising. El Salvador has been gifted with a lush landscape punctured by soaring volcanoes and sprinkled with cool, gentle lakes. The oligarchy’s massive landholdings have made it difficult for Salvadorans to see the beauty of the land as anything but private property. This is a serious problem, because being truly alive is dependent on seeing rightly. The vision of the wounded but beautiful body of Christ has the power to help his people learn to see beauty again even in places of ugliness. Peter was not wrong in affirming the goodness of being on Tabor. By the light of Christ, everyplace becomes Tabor. San Salvador is Tabor. El Paisnal is the *monte excelsum* where Jesus led his disciples. By this same light, the hospice patient at the *Hospitalito* is an icon of the transfigured Christ. There is beauty in Cerro de Pasco that has not been commercialized by the multinationals: a blazing sun in a clear sky, the kindness of a stranger, the laughter of children, two young women leading worship. Romero would challenge the *gente feliz* on Hope Road to dare to dream and to work to realize these dreams. Cerros and barrios can be transfigured into places where the glory of God shines through clean water, steady ground, and healthy children.

Finally, Romero would tell the people in Cerro de Pasco that there is no future without fiestas. When soldiers confiscated the fireworks that were to be used in celebration of the feast of Saint Bartholomew, the patron saint of Arcatao, Romero protested. “Oh that they would respect the joy of the people! They even took their fireworks away! In a town, there is no fiesta without fireworks.”^{xxiv} Romero was prophetic not only denouncing sin but also in announcing fiesta. In his homilies, the narration of the events which transpired in the life of the church during the previous week could include the lament for murdered *campesinos* and a birthday greeting for a fellow cleric. It seems incongruous to mix quotidian, prosaic affairs with the serious national events. But this kind of festive interruption was common in Romero’s preaching. At the same time, Romero always remembered the ambiguous, one might say Lenten character of all celebrations in El Salvador’s historical moment. As he explains, “That is what church fiestas are like: with blood of martyrdom, with hope of Christianity.”^{xxv} There is no future without fiestas because

a fiesta is more than having a good time. It is a phenomenon of wealth, not of material wealth, but of existential wealth. A fiesta praises the creator and celebrates the creation even in spite of the inscrutability of the first and the contradictions of the second.

JOY AND HOPE

What is the relevance of Romero for the joys and hopes, fears and anxieties of the 2020s? I have spoken of two fruits from his *concretar* of Irenaeus. A Christian vision of life and a practice of fiesta for addresses like 70 Hope Road in Cerro de Pasco. It may be that as Arjona laments there are more churches than happy children in the world. This is a scandal. But in his song, there is also dream: Jesus is not a noun, he is a verb, and this is good news. We can learn from the poor, the best conjugators of the Verb made flesh, how to promote and protect life in the indicative of the quotidian and in the subjunctive of fiesta. If life is oriented toward being more in order to give more, then the gathering of the people of God to sing Lenten praises can be a prophetic act denouncing extractivist economies and announcing the divine economy of the reign of God. When this happens, Cerro de Pasco becomes Mount Tabor, a mountain of transfiguration and the church a place of happy people for “the earth will be full of his glory.”

ⁱ Oscar Romero, *La voz de los sin voz: La palabra viva de Monseñor Romero*, edited by Rodolfo Cardenal, Ignacio Martín-Baro, and Jon Sobrino (San Salvador: UCA Editores, 1980): 193.

ⁱⁱ Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* IV.20.7 from *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol.1 The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus*, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994): 489f. Emphasis added.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jon Sobrino, *Archbishop Romero: Memories and Reflections* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), p.15.

^{iv} *Idem*.

^v *Idem*, p.16.

^{vi} Oscar Romero, *La voz de los sin voz*: 191.

^{vii} *Homilías: Monseñor Óscar A. Romero, Volumes I-VI*, edited by Miguel Cavada Diez, (San Salvador: UCA Editores, 2005-2009), II, 320.

^{viii} Matthew Restall, *Seven Myths of the Conquest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003): 99.

^{ix} See Ivan Petrella, *Beyond Liberation Theology: A Polemic* (London: SCM Press, 2008), 20.

^x *Populorum Progressio* 15.

^{xi} Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own. For Óscar Romero's homilies, I am consulting *Homilías: Monseñor Óscar A. Romero, Vols. I-VI*, ed. Miguel Cavada Diez (San Salvador: UCA Editores, 2005-2009). The above quote is from *Homilías*, 4:183-195.

^{xii} Romero, *Homilías*, 4:188.

^{xiii} Romero, *Homilías*, 4:193.

^{xiv} Ellacuría, “Liturgia y liberación,” 31.

^{xv} Roberto Goizueta, “Fiesta: Life in the Subjunctive,” in *From the Heart of Our People: Latino/a Explorations in Catholic Systematic Theology*, ed. Orlando O. Espín and Miguel H. Díaz (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999): 84-99, 88.

^{xvi} Cándido Pozo, "La teología de la fiesta, ¿ocaso de la teología de la liberación?" Teología de la liberación, ed. Teodoro Ignacio Jiménez Urresti (Burgos: Ediciones Aldecoa, 1973): 411–425.

^{xvii} Orientación July 30, 1978, p.7

^{xviii} Orientación July 30, 1978, p.7

^{xix} See Marva J. Dawn, *A Royal "Waste" of Time: The Splendor of Worshipping God and Being Church for the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999) . "Worship is a royal waste of time that spirals into passion for living as Christians and back into more passionate worship. It is totally irrelevant, not efficient, not powerful, not productive, sometimes not even satisfying to us. It is also the only hope for changing the world" (17).

^{xx} https://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/speeches/1965/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19651207_epilogo-concilio.html Homilías I, 180.

^{xxi} Homilías III, 432

^{xxii} Cf. Todd Walatka, *Von Balthasar and the Option for the Poor: Theodramatics in the Light of Liberation Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 2017), 155.

^{xxiii} Homilías III, 85f.

^{xxiv} Homilías V, 261

^{xxv} Homilías V, 47.