

# MICROPHONES OF GOD: ROMERO'S MESSAGE FOR THE PRESENT TIME

Edgardo Colón-Emeric

at the Ecumenical Service for the 42<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the martyrdom of St Oscar Romero, at St Martin-in-the-Fields, London on Saturday, 19 March 2022

*Gracia y paz de Dios nuestro Padre y el Señor Jesucristo.*

It is good to be here. I am grateful to the Romero Trust for their generous invitation, for the supporters of this Service, and for the ecumenical hospitality of St. Martin in the Fields in allowing this Methodist preacher to share some thoughts on today's topic: Microphones of God: Romero's Message for the Present Time.

In addressing this topic, I am claiming that Romero has a message for the present time. Celebrating Romero's martyrdom is an act of thanksgiving to God for the life of his servant. In so doing, we are engaging in an ecumenical act because the saints belong to God. The ecclesial communions from which they rose receive honour for their contribution to the formation of these living icons of grace. Romero has a message for us, not just as a saint, but also as a teacher and theologian. This son of the church is also a father of the church and I dare say a doctor of the church. He is not just to be remembered and revered - but studied. In the present time, when there is a torrent of news but a drought of truth, Romero invites all Christians to be transfigured into microphones of God.

## MICROPHONES OF GOD

Romero was well acquainted with the promise and peril of the amplifying power of microphones. On January 23, 1980, a bomb blew up the transmission equipment of YSAX, the diocesan radio station known as the *Voz Panamericana*, the Pan-American voice. These attempts to silence the church had become increasingly common in El Salvador. Working feverishly, technicians finished repairs just in time for Romero's Sunday homily, four days later. When Monseñor stood at the pulpit, he spoke the words found in your bulletin. ***"God's best microphone is Christ, and Christ's best microphone is the church, and the church, is all of you."*** When the Panamerican Voice was destroyed by a bigger bomb on February 17, many parishioners showed up the following Sunday carrying tape recorders so that they could rebroadcast the sermon when they returned to their communities. The people of God, not YSAX, was Romero's best microphone.

What Romero said 42 years ago, remains true: ***"Each one of you has to be God's microphone."*** The vendor in the corner shop; the taxi driver dropping off a passenger; the student learning the multiplication tables; the Christian accountant,

the Christian homemaker, the prelate, the pauper—microphones of God, each and every one of them. There is a rich incarnational theology in this metaphor. It builds on and concretizes the Augustinian distinction between the voice made flesh in John the Baptist and the Word made flesh in Jesus. There is deep missional spirituality in this image. It makes “*sentir con la iglesia*” not simply Romero’s episcopal motto but the people’s commission.

Microphones of God. Each one of you personally and collectively has a message to bear. This is your baptismal gift and task, but it does not happen automatically. Some microphones appear to be on permanent mute. Others seem to have a poor connection. Still others are picking up all kind of background conversation that is distractive and even destructive. Too often, the church’s microphones have simply served to amplify partisan propaganda, promote pious platitudes, and hype harmful hopes. Romero would encourage us to consider today’s gospel story as a sound test. In order to be transfigured into true microphones of God, you must listen to Jesus, find your voice, and preach peace.

## LISTEN TO JESUS

In doing my research for a book on Oscar Romero’s theological vision, I did what scholars do, I went to a library in San Salvador. Reading entries in the church’s newspaper, called *Orientación*, I came across plans for remodelling Romero’s cathedral. The drawings showed the words spoken by God to overwhelmed disciples in today’s reading, etched in stone above the main entrance: *ipsum audite*. Listen to him. The planners hoped that the cathedral would serve as a mount of transfiguration, a Salvadoran Mount Tabor. For Romero, the transfiguration of Christ was not an odd biblical story; it was a major feast and the focus of his theological vision. The ecumenical potential of this vision remains untapped. Romero’s emphasis on the transfiguration of Christ, the God of the poor, can bridge differences between Christians from the north and the south, and also between Western and Eastern Christianity. Moreover, this vision is word for us because the transfiguration is an epiphany for Lenten times.

Days of sackcloth and ashes are upon us. Ever since the pandemic, my sense of the passage of time has become blurred. In many ways, March 2022 feels like a continuation of March 2020. It seems like I am living in a strange land where it is always Lent and never Easter. How much has really changed in El Salvador since Romero was martyred? I doomscroll through the events of the world around us with a sense of *déjà vu*: runaway inflation, fuel shortages, a growing wealth gap, democracies overrun by dictators in Latin America; new waves of refugees in Europe. Days of mourning and lament have overtaken us. And then the gospel of transfiguration.

In the middle of the Lenten journey, God gives us a glimpse of the end: the transfigured Christ. Today's scripture reading is not a misplaced Easter story, as some scholars suggest. The story of what happened on that unnamed high mountain traditionally called Tabor is there to remind us that Lent has a point. The point is not surviving till Easter. The point is transfiguration. We are dust and to dust we shall return. But this dust is bound for glory. The transfiguration is a Lenten epiphany. Listen to Jesus because "*Christ is God's best microphone.*" His transfigured human flesh modulates the eternal will to the audible range. In Christ, the God that seemed far off becomes intimately near. Jesus is God's most eloquent sermon, and you are Jesus' best sermon. In the mirror of Lent, we see our failures but in the light of Tabor, all of us, says Paul, "*are being transfigured into the same image from one degree of glory to another.*" And "*This comes from the Lord, the Spirit*" (2 Cor. 3:18).

It is this Lenten wisdom, which allowed Romero to look at his poor, persecuted church and say without a trace of irony: "*it is good for us to be here.*" Even as he was hurt by gossiping priests and bishops, even as he struggled with self-doubt, even as he received death threats, he could affirm the goodness of his church as the transfigured body of Christ in history because he listened to Jesus. And Romero learned to listen to Jesus in the company of the poor, the weak, and the wounded.

It is significant that during his years as archbishop, Romero lived at the Hospital of Divine Providence, a cancer hospice centre run by Carmelite nuns. All his Sunday homilies were prepared at the *Hospitalito*, as it is affectionately called, where he is said to have remained awake in prayer late into the night. The *Hospitalito* was both home and Gethsemane, a Lenten place where he encountered God. In the cancerous bodies of the patients, he saw the agony of the mothers of the disappeared and heard the hopes of an entire nation.

Romero could be the voice of the voiceless because he first listened. When preaching at the Cathedral, Romero declares *Ipsium audite*. Listen to him! When praying at the *Hospitalito*, he heard *Ipsos audite*. Listen to them! In order to be transfigured into true microphones of God, you need to listen to Jesus and to the groans of his poor, suffering body. You also need to find your voice.

## **FIND YOUR VOICE**

In March 2020, the award-winning poet Carolyn Forché visited Duke Divinity School and met with some of my students. In our conversation she shared with us the backstory to her book *What you have heard is true: A memoir of witness and resistance*. She told us of how a mysterious stranger, Leonel Gómez, showed up unannounced at her front door and invited her to travel with him to El Salvador. The year was 1977. Romero had just become archbishop. The pitch was

simple: come witness the beginning of another Vietnam. She tried to demur by announcing her lack of experience in covering news. Leonel did not want a journalist. He wanted a poet. I will not spoil the book but she accepted the offer. Leonel got a poet.

In today's scripture, Tabor is a school of prophecy and poetry. When the disciples testified to what they had seen, heard, and felt on the high mountain, they became poets. Peter compares the transfiguration *"to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts."* John in his gospel does not offer a narrative of the transfiguration like Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Instead he testifies, *"we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son"* and offers lyric verses to *"the light of all people," "the true light which enlightens everyone," "the light of life," "the light of the world."* Similarly inspired, James writes that *"Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change."*

It is significant that in the Bible and in church history, most prophets and mystics speak in poetry. God has spoken by his prophets and by his poets. When prose falls short, poetry comes to our aid. This is why in the midst of the violence in El Salvador Romero commissions Guillermo Cuéllar to write a hymn for the transfiguration. The first line of the hymn is *"Vibran los cantos explosivos de alegría"* (The songs resound with outbursts of joy) and it tells of the people of God going to the cathedral to praise the transfigured Christ. The final stanza was Romero's favourite *"Pero los dioses del poder y del dinero se oponen a que haya transfiguración."* (But the gods of money and of power are opposed to there being transfiguration). It took a poet to see something that the theologians missed. The transfiguration is a scandal. Throughout most of its history, the Salvadoran celebration of this feast was a patriotic extravaganza with military parades, trumpets, and cannon fire. It only became problematic when Romero celebrated it from the world of the poor. The transfiguration of the body of Christ in history begins with the Lenten faces of the landless campesino, the overlooked market woman, and the unemployed labourer. Make no mistake there are gods opposed to transfiguration. There are gods content with things remaining as they are. There is a battle to be fought, but Romero says, that it is to be fought *"with guitars and church songs."*

Romero calls Lent, *"God's plan for the transfiguration of all peoples from Christ"* because giving a microphone to a person whose voice has been ignored is a transformative experience. Every baptized Salvadoran, each child of God, can say with the prophet Ezekiel, *"The Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet."* God opens the mic to stutterers like Moses, sidelined disciples like Mary, fumbling orators like Paul, and even to Balaam's donkey. You have a voice and your voice is wanted. Your poor verses are wanted. Your accents are wanted. Your rhythms are

wanted. Romero was not Methodist, if he had been, he might have said: O for a thousand mics to sing my great redeemer's praise! In order to be transfigured into true microphones of God, you need to listen to Jesus, find your voice, and preach peace.

## **PREACH PEACE**

Preaching peace does not mean avoiding ruffling feathers. The transfiguration of Christ is not a light show. It is God's plan for reconciling a violent world. Romero notes that the five people whom Jesus gathered on Mount Tabor were aggressive in their temperament and their actions on behalf of justice. Moses killed the Egyptian who was oppressing the Hebrew people. Elijah ordered the slaying of the prophets of Baal. Peter drew his sword against the guards coming to arrest Jesus. James and John, the sons of thunder, called for fire to rain down from heaven on the Samaritans who had refused to extend hospitality to Jesus and his disciples. This is no coincidence. Moses, Elijah, Peter, James, and John are not only stand-ins for the people of the Old and New Covenant but for the story of humanity's addiction to violence, a story as old as Cain's murder of Abel and as recent as Putin's invasion of Ukraine.

A pedagogy of death has been at work throughout human history and the history of the Americas. Love of violence moved Pedro de Alvarado to hack his way through the indigenous peoples of Central America until he conquered them on August 6, 1526 and dedicated the victory and the spoils to El Salvador, the Saviour: a violent transfiguration. Love of violence moved lynch mobs, death squads, drug cartels, and brother Herbert.

I met Herbert on a Thursday night, December 6, 2007 at Bethel Methodist Church in Zacamil. This church is in the heart of gang territory. The bullet holes on the church building spoke for themselves but Herbert's witness was more eloquent still. He had once been a gang leader with the MS13. Feared by his community, he was known as El diablo. He constantly harassed people attending Bethel Methodist Church. On one occasion, he assaulted the pastor, beat him and left him for dead. After years of this dance macabre, the bill came due. Herbert was hospitalized after a shootout with a rival gang. He was in need of a blood transfusion, but for this to happen he needed a blood donor. No one would donate. Not his gang brothers for fear. Not his family for shame. The only person willing to step up was Wilfredo, the local Methodist pastor. When Herbert was discharged from the hospital, he set his sights on Bethel. He barged into the church in the middle of a worship service, walked up to the pulpit, faced the pastor and asked, "Why? Why did you do it?" The pastor's answer was simple. "Christ did the same for me." The answer may sound cliché to cultured ears but it sounded like gospel to Herbert who at that moment

gave his heart to Jesus and became a Christian. Herbert went on to lead the youth group. He was also given responsibility for a rehabilitation house next door to the church. Through Herbert's ministry, three of his fellow gang members were converted and eventually became pastors.

Brother Herbert was transfigured into a true microphone of God. He preached peace. Bethel Methodist Church became a Salvadoran Tabor. "But the gods of money and of power are opposed to there being transfiguration." Two years after I met Herbert, he was dead. A gang member gunned him down in front of his son while selling newspapers because Herbert's witness was bad for business. But here is the thing, Jesus wants transfiguration. He still has the power to transfigure the love of violence into the violence of love, gang bangers into God's servants, failure into hope, a sinful story into salvation history, supporting actors into protagonists, and senseless tragedies into Lenten tales that end in Easter resurrections.

### **TRUE MICROPHONES**

Learn from Oscar Romero, this doctor from the Latin American Church for the whole church. His teaching on transfiguration is timely. Do not become conformed to this world become Christ-formed. Jesus is God's best microphone. You are being transfigured into Jesus' best microphone. Listen to him. Find your voice. Preach peace.