

## EXCAVATING HOPE

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What does it mean to excavate? The typical image of an excavation evokes the powerful act of digging into the earth. This raises a profound question: why do we seek to excavate? Often, it's in pursuit of treasure—whether precious stones, vital water, or other natural resources. For archaeologists, this journey is about uncovering historical remains that connect us with the past and illuminate our present. Regardless of the treasure sought, the act of digging becomes a path to reveal hidden wonders, treasures waiting to be discovered for a reason, inspiring curiosity and exploration.

Excavation is a journey that demands a dedicated team, bringing together the strength and talents of individuals. It requires immense human effort and technical skill, often spanning months or even years. The incredible treasures unearthed in significant excavations are a testament to the collective spirit and unwavering commitment of the men and women who tirelessly strive to discover them.

If we reflect on our initial question, what does it mean to excavate? To "excavate" is to engage in a collective pursuit to uncover treasures.

I have been invited to speak about this hidden "treasure." The treasure we seek is hope. To this end, we will explore insights from experts on hope and how we navigate our quest for it, in an increasingly unequal and unjust world. Among these voices is Monsignor Romero, known as "the prophet of hope." I will share my transformative encounter with him.

I want to clarify that I did not know Oscar Romero personally. However, I have learned about him through the testimonies of others. In this way, while I did not know him in a physical sense, I feel a deep spiritual connection with him. My relationship with Romero is one of profound spiritual friendship. By "spiritual," I refer to the deep significance he infused into his pastoral actions. Now, when was the first time I encountered Romero?

In 2005, I arrived at the Jesuit novitiate house in Ciudad Guzmán, Jalisco, Mexico. As I entered, the first thing I noticed was a large photograph of an adult priest wearing classic 80s glasses. Beside

him was a gallery of photos featuring two adult women and six adult men. Alongside this gallery, there was another large photograph of a man with his arms open toward the sky, his body positioned like a cross, surrounded by soldiers prepared to shoot him. Most of the photos were in black and white. The first photo was of Monsignor Romero, the gallery depicted Julia and Celina along with the six Jesuits who were murdered at the UCA in El Salvador, and the man in the cross-like pose was Miguel Agustín Pro, who was extrajudicially executed by the Mexican government.

The images of these witnesses have accompanied me for almost 20 years. In the picture of Monsignor Romero, I read the powerful words: "If they kill me, I will rise again in the people." For a novice striving to follow in the footsteps of Jesus from Galilee, grasping that this journey may lead to sacrifice is a daunting challenge. Initially, I sought to evade the weight of that phrase, as if I could ignore its significance. But then, something profound shifted within me: "If they kill me, I will rise again in the people."

What inspired me, in what direction? Why didn't I return home? What compelled me to remain in a place filled with images of those who had been slain by the military amid injustice and inequality? My answer today is hope. I stayed because I felt hope. I was moved toward hope and by hope.

To articulate this inner movement, I call "hope," I realized the importance of engaging in dialogue with others who shared this sentiment. I sensed a collective response was needed: "What do we call hope?" I was not alone on this path. The presence of our community revealed that we were a group taking shape. Hope, it seems, is a journey best travelled together, united in purpose.

Today, we can revisit this question for Romero: why didn't you leave that 'valley of tears,' as women in Latin America often describe it? Why didn't you leave El Salvador? Why did you choose to stay among people who were tortured and unjustly assassinated? Why remain with those who have lost everything—those without land, shelter, or decent work?

This question offers a profound insight into Romero's decision to remain in this 'valley of tears.' For Oscar Romero, the suffering of the people is where God reveals Himself. The voices of the simple, everyday people are, in essence, God's voice. In this sense, Romero's dialogue with God is deeply intertwined with his pastoral relationship with the women of his time. From the images of his pastoral work, we can envision him praying the rosary alongside the peasant women he served.

Women in Latin America often find strength in the rosary, praying with a prayer known as “La Salve.” I have witnessed this powerful practice in Mexico, where I have spent most of my life, as well as during my four years in Colombia and in London, where I connect with a remarkable group of women from Ecuador, Venezuela, Peru, Costa Rica, and Honduras. These women, devoted to their homes and working tirelessly in cleaning houses, offices, and shopping centres, often hold multiple jobs while facing exploitation and low wages.

“La Salve,” known in English as “The Hail Holy Queen,” carries profound meaning. The Spanish version contains enriched phrases that add depth to the original text. The prayer beautifully expresses:

“Hail, Queen and Mother, Mother of mercy, life, sweetness, and our hope,  
our life, our sweetness, and our hope;

Hail God.

To You do we, the banished sons of Eve, cry out;  
to You do we sigh, groaning and weeping  
in this vale of tears.

Therefore, O Lady, our advocate,  
turn to us those merciful eyes of Yours,  
and after this exile, show us Jesus,  
the blessed fruit of your womb.

O clement, O merciful, O sweet Virgin Mary!

Pray for us, Holy Mother of God.

That we may be worthy to attain  
the promises of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.”

Within this prayer, which is a source of daily inspiration for Latin American women, “our hope” embodies a collective spirit. This united hope finds its heartbeat in Jesus, the blessed fruit. The women’s plea to “attain the promises” of the Lord Jesus reflects their yearning for a better life, affirming their belief that change and improvement are within reach.

I would like to propose that this prayer illuminates why Oscar Romero remained steadfast amidst the war in El Salvador. He discovers “the treasure” of Latin American women: this treasure embodies the life of Jesus and his promises.

Jesus of Nazareth, as a human, could have chosen to evade confronting the adversaries of God's saving plan. The worker from Galilee might have surrendered the vision of a life filled with dignity for everyone. Yet, Jesus forged ahead. Why? Because he was supported by a community—a network of friends who shared in his faith and stood together to denounce the injustices wrought by the religious and political elites, who twisted God's name for their own profit.

Jesus faced the heart-wrenching loss of his beloved friend John the Baptist, yet he pressed on. Herod stifled John's powerful message with violence, but Jesus embraced the risk of announcing a new world. Though troubled by John's murder and perhaps shaken for a time, he found his strength to continue.

This Jesus, who persists in the face of hardship, embodies the hope for Latin American women. From the margins, they have learned to rise above adversity, overcoming food shortages, lack of access to healthcare and education, and the struggle for a living wage.

Monsignor Romero experienced a profound hope, profoundly visible in the lives of the peasant women of his time. This hope was a precious gift from the hands of Salvadoran women and a sacred mission entrusted to him. To receive hope is to embrace a calling and welcome the humble essence of Jesus. Hope is a divine gift, something not born of our will but graciously given, and it must be sought with earnest prayer.

Where can we find this hope in today's world? Through Romero's eyes and ears, we can observe it in the resilient mothers of Mexico who tirelessly search for their disappeared children.

These working-class women, often without prior political experience, boldly take to the streets to voice their children's disappearances, courageously denouncing the government's inaction. They dig into the earth with their own hands, uncovering clandestine graves and discovering bodies and human remains they lovingly refer to as treasures.

Today, we acknowledge that over 50,000 bodies and remains await identification, highlighting one of the most critical humanitarian crises in recent history—a crisis of security and forensic support. As we face this reality, we must remember that in the last 18 years, more than 120,000 sons and daughters of God have disappeared in Mexico, a silent tragedy calling for our attention and action.

One of the remarkable leaders of this movement is Doña María Herrera, a devoted mother of four children who have disappeared. For Doña Mari, the search for the missing starts with God, whom she sees as the first to seek out those who are lost. She likens God to the Good Shepherd,

tirelessly searching for the literally lost sheep. She once shared, "God goes out to search. He doesn't know where to go, but he goes." This profound belief inspires her to look for her children. She has even founded a national network of women's groups committed to finding their loved ones.

In times of great need, it is the community that can provide salvation, and I have felt this deeply through the collective action and unwavering spirit of these women. Within their communities, they create a rich tapestry of friendship and support that is truly inspiring. Marta, one of the mothers I spoke with, shared her anguish when her son disappeared. She felt as though she would die from the heartbreak; she stopped eating and could not sleep. Yet, everything changed when she joined a group of women dedicated to searching for their children. This newfound sisterhood helped her "come back to life." Marta expressed, "I started to feel hope again. Every time we go out to look for our children and find a body, it brings my soul back to my body. God is with us."

These brave mothers know that the road ahead is tense with danger and uncertainty, but together, they find the strength to persevere. The reality is harsh: in Mexico, over 23 relatives searching for their loved ones have tragically lost their lives. This makes the quest for missing persons exceptionally dangerous.

Yet, despite the risks, these mothers continue their search with fierce determination. In my heartfelt conversations with more than a hundred women, nearly all of them mothers, I discovered that their search is fuelled by a deep and long-lasting spirituality rooted in God. They spoke of the profound sense of companionship they feel from God during this arduous journey. Like Doña Mari, they find in God a source of strength and a solid hope.

In this way, God becomes a tangible force within their community, manifesting through the networks of solidarity and self-help that they weave together. The principles of reciprocity and mutual aid flourish, blossoming as beautiful expressions of their shared hope and resilience.

Let's return to the beginning of our discussion. I want to talk about the concept of excavating hope, which involves building community. Excavating hope means working together and organizing locally to address our shared challenges. If we approach this process with faith and draw inspiration from great figures like Oscar Romero, we will discover the treasure we seek.

Luis Orlando Pérez Jiménez SJ, Romero Week 2025

Today, I invite you to join in building a community. Without a sense of community, we cannot effectively tackle the issues that affect us. In the midst of community, we will encounter God, the source of our hope.

Human beings need one another. Reciprocity can revitalize us. It is time for us to come together once more and act as a united community. As we commemorate the anniversary of Saint Oscar Romero, the prophet of hope, let us earnestly ask for the gift of hope to be bestowed upon us. Let us seek it together; this is not a moment for individual pursuits, but rather a time for collective action.

Thank you very much.