

Microphones of Christ: Lessons from the Pulpit of Oscar Romero

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Abstract: *From the beginning of Latin American history, the pulpit has been the first line of defense of human dignity. This paper presents Oscar Romero as a distinguished witness to this tradition. His preaching life and death offer a short primer on the liberating message of the gospel. Romero's Augustinian Christology coupled with the radio broadcasting of his sermons in the face of state resistance led him to express the preaching task in terms of the metaphor of a microphone. Christ is the best microphone of God; the church is the best microphone of Christ. For Romero, preaching Christ requires reading the Scriptures, the life of the church, and the signs of the times. When this happens the voice coming from the microphone sounds like many voices, like the voice of the voiceless, like the voice crying in the wilderness, and like the voice of the shepherd.*

Introduction

On the fourth Sunday of Advent, December 21, 1511, Father Antón de Montesinos stepped to the pulpit of the church in Santo Domingo.¹ Montesinos was known as a powerful speaker and his fellow Dominicans had spread news around town that he was preaching so as to have as large a crowd as possible, especially from among the city elites. The lectionary text for the day was from the gospel according to John, the first chapter. The congregation heard of how the Jewish authorities sent priests and Levites on a fact finding mission regarding the identity of John the Baptist. Who are you? His reply to their questions was simple: *Ego vox clamantis in deserto*. The lesson was read and Fray Antón began to preach by making some general remarks about the significance of Advent before turning to the theme for his sermon: the humanity of the indigenous.

I have come here to tell you that I am the voice of Christ in the wilderness, and that therefore, it would behoove you to pay attention, not casually, but with your whole heart and senses. You are about to hear the strangest news that you have ever thought you would hear. This voice declares that you are all in mortal sin. You are living and dying in sin on account of the cruelty with which you use these innocent peoples. Explain yourselves. By what right and justice do you hold these Indians in such horrible and cruel bondage?...Are these not humans? Do they not have rational souls? Are you not required to love them as you love yourself? Do you not understand? Do you not feel? Are you asleep?²

The sermon did not go over well.

If, as Herman Melville says, the pulpit is the prow of the world,³ then in its passage through Latin American history that prow has plunged to the abyss of genocide time and again. And yet from the belly of the big fish of empire, a chorus of voices spoke a different word. There was Montesinos. There was Bartolomé de las Casas. The vision of seeing Christ being whipped and crucified a thousand times in the Indies, led him to become the defender of the indigenous

¹ A version of this paper was presented at the *Festival of Homiletics* in Atlanta in May, 2016. This fact accounts for the, at times, colloquial tone of the text.

² *Historia de las Indias*, editor André Saint-Lu (Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1986), 3.4:13–14.

³ Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1994), 33.

and eventually of the African.⁴ There was Antonio de Valdivieso, one of Las Casas's pupils and the first bishop of Nicaragua. He was stabbed to death in his house by a group of mercenaries hired by the governor.⁵ Valdivieso was martyred out of hatred for the inconvenient truth of his preaching: God loves the Amerindian and hates their enslavement. Page limits would fail me to write of Guaman Poma, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Francisco José de Jaca, Epifanio Moirans, Miguel Pro, and so many others.⁶ Instead I skip centuries to speak of Óscar Romero.

Oscar Romero became Archbishop of San Salvador during a turbulent time for people in Central America. Vast income inequality, failed attempts at land reform, and rumors of a Cuban style revolution sowed unrest. Some expected the Church to serve as a bastion of national stability while others dreamed of a Christian guerilla movement. In this context, Romero was seen by many a safe choice, a pastor who would not rock the already tipsy boat. His election to the country's premier ecclesial post was greeted with a mixture of dismay and relief. However, both reactions misread the man and the moment. On March 12, 1977, his friend, Father Rutilio Grande was murdered while driving to El Paisnal. There was now no doubt about it. He was the pastor of a persecuted church. Paramilitary forces were devouring his sheep. Romero himself would be cut down by the death squad's scythe on March 24, 1980 while preaching from John 12:24, "unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

There is much that Christians can learn from this modern-day Church Padre. In this article, I hope that we can harvest lessons from his pulpit. In Monseñor (as he was and still is affectionately called) we have one more inductee to the great company of American preachers which God inaugurated in Santo Domingo in 1511.⁷ Montesinos was the voice crying in the wilderness. Romero was the voice of the voiceless. In every aspect of his ministry, from what he drove (a small Toyota Corona), to where he lived (not in the episcopal residence but in a small bungalow next to a cancer hospice center), to how he lived (he firmly refused offers of sanctuary), Romero felt with the oppressed, but never more so than at the pulpit, for then he became a microphone of Christ.

The homily, actualization of the Word of God

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. The bomb was an attempt by henchmen of the oligarchy to muzzle the church. Technicians worked hard to make repairs and they were able to finish just in time for Monseñor's Sunday sermon on January 27. The gospel lesson prescribed by the lectionary came from Luke 4:14–21. This is the story of Jesus' homecoming sermon. Reflecting on the events of the day in light of Jesus' words, Romero says,

⁴ Isacio Pérez Fernández, O.P., *Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, O.P.: De defensor de los indios a defensor de los negros* (Salamanca: Editorial San Esteban, 1995).

⁵ Cf. Enrique Dussel, *A History of the Church in Latin America: Colonialism to Liberation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), 52–53.

⁶ Cf. José Tomás López García, *Dos defensores de los esclavos en el siglo XVII* (Marcaibo: Biblioteca Corpozulia, 1981).

⁷ With all proper deference I disagree with Pedro Casaldáliga's division of the history of the Church in Latin America to before-Romero and after-Romero. Cf. Jon Sobrino, *Archbishop Romero: memories and reflections*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 49. Romero belongs to a long line of witnesses of Christ. Yes, his witness is unique and unrepeatable. In that sense, he marks a turning point in Church history, but this can be said of the life of every true witness of Christ.

The best microphone of God is Christ, and the best microphone of Christ is the Church, and you are the Church; each one of you in your location, from your vocation: the religious, the married, the bishop, the priest, the kindergartener, the college student, the day laborer, the construction worker, the woman selling in the market. Each one of you, wherever you are, needs to live the life of faith fiercely because you are a true microphone of God our Lord in your context. Thus, the Church will always have preaching. The Church will always be a sermon... But on the day that the forces of evil deprive us of this wondrous means of communication which they have in abundance, and the Church is reduced to nothing, know that they have done us no real harm. On the contrary, then even more will we be living microphones of the Lord declaring his word everywhere.⁸

As the voice of Romero rides the airwaves, he is not preaching from the cathedral. Members of labor unions have occupied the building to protest the closing down of their factories. While negotiations were going on, the Archbishop moved his Sunday masses to the Basilica of the Sacred Heart. The Basilica was no mighty fortress shielding Romero from trouble. On March 9, a bomb was set to detonate during mass right next to the altar of the Basilica where Romero was preaching. For unknown reasons, the bomb did not explode. It is from this perilous pulpit that Romero preaches a sermon titled “The homily, actualization of the Word of God.”

Romero was accused of being a partisan polemicist. However, Monseñor always insisted that he was first and foremost a preacher of the gospel. His main purpose in preaching was not to call the government to account for its failed and fatal policies (important a goal as this was), but to unfold the paschal mystery of Christ’s passion, death, and resurrection.⁹ On January 27 the unfolding of this paschal mystery took a decidedly homiletical turn as Romero read the lectionary readings of Ezra’s sermon in the eighth chapter of Nehemiah and Jesus’ sermon in the fourth chapter of Luke as a warrant for turning the Basilica into a preaching academy. I invite us to enroll for a little while in this school.

As was his custom, Romero divides his sermon into three points. First, Jesus is the Father’s living sermon. Second, the Church is the working and actualizing prolongation of Jesus’ sermon. Third, the effects of preaching are various; some accept Christ and some reject him.

First, *Jesus is the Father’s living sermon*. In Jesus, the revelation of God reaches its culmination, God’s plan of salvation literally puts on flesh. The incarnation is the Father’s most eloquent sermon. Jesus preaches the most sublime sermon ever heard when he sits to speak at the

⁸ Óscar Romero, *Homilías* VI, 231f. For citations from Romero’s sermons I am using the critical edition edited by Miguel Cavada Diez, *Homilías: Monseñor Óscar A. Romero*, Volumes I-VI (San Salvador: UCA Editores, 2005-2009). All translations from Spanish are my own.

⁹ Cf. Michael E. Connors, CSC, “Romero: A Homiletic Saint for our Times,” in *Archbishop Romero and Spiritual Leadership in the Modern World* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), 93–97. Connors states that “Romero mystagogically linked his preaching with the liturgy, and in so doing he mystagogically linked Catholic Social Teaching with the liturgy” (96). On Connors’ reading, Romero can help bridge the gap between ethics and spirituality, the *lex vivendi* and the *lex orandi*, by promoting a more mystagogical approach to preaching. This seems right to me, but his suggestion that Romero attained these homiletical insights by in some way moving beyond the tradition of the Church Fathers and the Council Fathers seems stuck in a static reading of tradition as “archival” (96) and “mechanically deductive” (94). Connors says that “While he loved and honored the texts of Scripture, and loved and honored the tradition from the early Fathers to the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, he intuitively arrived at the understanding that a new day demands a new word” (96). The contrast is overdrawn. If anything, Romero’s own claims of undying fidelity to the magisterium and the Pope show that being deeply traditional and radically open to the movement of the Spirit are not to be seen as radically opposed commitments.

synagogue in Jerusalem. And Jesus preaches through his miracles, his deeds, his death. Jesus preaches when he casts out demons and when he heals the sick. The multiplication of the bread is a sermon. The resurrection is a homily. He preaches in life. He preaches in death. And he preaches in life beyond death by sending the Spirit, another sermon. “Christ,” says Romero, “is God’s best microphone.” His human flesh modulates the eternal will to the audible range. In Christ the God that seemed far off becomes intimately near in him, as if he were speaking right next to one’s ear. The chief purpose of the sermon is to make Jesus present here and now. “The main thing,” he says, “is not the preaching, this is only the path, the main thing is the moment when, illumined by this word, we adore Christ and our faith surrenders itself to him. And from there, we go to the world to make this word real.”

Romero supports his christological account of preaching by appealing to a document from Vatican II on divine revelation titled *Dei Verbum*. Anybody reading Romero’s sermons will be quickly struck by how often he cites from the official teachings of the Catholic Church. You can find more references to the writings of the councils and the popes than to all the Church Fathers, Scholastics, and Liberationists combined. Only Scripture is referenced with greater frequency. The appeals to the magisterium are an effective rebuttal of the charges that he was preaching communism. Romero is no Marxist; he is Catholic. But more than this, Romero actually believes that the most prophetic denunciation of the current situation in El Salvador is found in the tradition of the Church, in particular in the tradition of Catholic Social Teaching. It was Leo XII who, at the end of the nineteenth century, claimed that one of the tasks of the church is to “improve the conditions of the proletariat.”¹⁰ It was John Paul II who said that “a social mortgage weighs on all private property.”¹¹ It was the Latin American tradition which taught that the poverty of the continent demanded “justice, solidarity, witness, commitment, effort, and overcoming,” in effect a “preferential option for the poor.”¹² Tradition and prophecy are often set against each other. Tradition is presented as old, conservative, backwards, static, dead; while prophecy is seen as new, liberal, progressive, dynamic, alive. There may be some truth to this characterization, but when applied wholesale to the Christian tradition and Christian prophecy the characterization becomes a caricature. Romero is a case in point. The reason that he is called a martyr is because he was killed out of hatred for the faith that is taught by the Church. He was a “martyr for the magisterium.”¹³ In the words of Salvadoran theologian Jon Sobrino, the Archbishop’s homilies show that “the magisterium should not be exposed in *concepts*, but should

¹⁰ The quote comes from the Spanish language version of the 1891 encyclical *Rerum novarum*, paragraph 12. Curiously, the English translation of the Latin text prefers to translate *proletarius* as labor. In any case, Romero references this particular text from Leo XIII in his homily of November 11, 1977 (*Homilías* I, 453-454). Incidentally, this first Catholic social encyclical on labor informed the work of César Chavez who lifted and paraphrased entire sections of its message for the farmworker union paper *El malcriado*. See Frederick John Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003): 49; Edgardo Colón-Emeric, “Dare We Be Human? César Chávez and the Challenge of Christian Humanism” *Apuntes*, 32 (2012): 84-103, 89-91.

¹¹ John Paul II, “Opening Address to the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops” *Las Cinco Conferencias Generales del Episcopado Latinoamericano* (Bogotá, Colombia: San Pablo, 2014): III, 4.

¹² The first citation comes from the second general conference of Latin American bishops which took place at Medellín in 1968 (Medellín 14, 2). The phrase “preferential option for the poor” was utilized at the third general conference of Latin American bishops which took place at Puebla in 1979.

¹³ Ricardo Urioste, Romero’s vicar general, interpreted the Archbishop’s martyrdom in these terms in an interview with Douglas Marcouiller which took place on December 7, 2002. Marcouiller recalls that according to Urioste “Romero would never have been so bold had he not believed the teaching of the Church demanded it of him” [Douglas Marcouiller, “Archbishop with an Attitude: Oscar Romero’s *Sentir con la Iglesia*” *Studies in the Spirituality of the Jesuits* 35 (2003): 1-52, 51].

rather be used to illumine and change *reality*.”¹⁴ From the pulpit, Romero modeled a prophetic appropriation of the tradition.¹⁵ Second, *the Church is the working and actualizing prolongation of Jesus’ sermon*. From the Christology of preaching, Romero turns to the ecclesiology of preaching. The Church is Christ’s best microphone. The Church can say with Isaiah, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.” It can say with Jesus, “today this Scripture is fulfilled” on Sunday, January 27, 1980, in the Basilica of the Sacred Heart at 8:00am. The time may be one of national crisis, even so now is the day of salvation. The microphone of Christ that is the Church is an open mic. Romero tells his congregation that “the word of God is present here, because you are the Church, I am the Church, we are the continuation of the living sermon that is Christ, our Lord.” In other words, preaching is a communal act. Monseñor invites his listeners to consider the origin of the four gospels. Each was composed for and in community. No one should be surprised at the differences among them. The gospels are not personal biographies, they are communal sermons and as such deeply contextual.

Third, *the effects of preaching are various; some accept Christ and some reject him*. Preaching has messianic and saving implications. Every sermon has as its goal eliciting an Amen from the congregation. A preacher soaked in the Spirit announces the love of God, and the people of God, also soaked in the Spirit, respond with an Amen of repentance, an Amen of thanksgiving, an Amen of wonder, an Amen of compassion. Even so, the Amen to the sermon is still not the full congregational response. Romero reminds his listeners that in the lesson from Nehemiah, after hearing the Law being read, the priests instructed the people to “Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD” (Neh 8:10). This is the kind of Amen that Romero longs to draw from the people of El Salvador, an Amen of justice and joyful sharing. Of course, a heartfelt Amen is only one of the possible responses to a sermon. The people of Nazareth rejoiced when they heard Jesus preaching until he started denouncing their incredulity and false piety. Then, the mood of the congregation turned bitter and hostile.

At this point, one might expect Romero to wrap up the sermon. He has fulfilled his promise of offering a short catechesis on preaching. Jesus is the sermon of God. The Church is the sermon of Christ. Both are greeted with either an Amen or a No way. A friend of mine, a member of the Dominican order, told me that in preaching, the first five minutes belong to God, the second five minutes belong to the preacher, the rest belong to the devil. By that reckoning, Romero’s sermons must have been belonged almost wholly to the devil. He has been preaching for about forty five minutes, very deep into Satan’s homiletical territory. And yet Romero is only about half way done. He says that “It is now time to see, if the Church of the Archdiocese, our communities, and our ecclesial work is truly a microphone of God,” and then he preaches for another forty minutes. What follows is one part church announcements, one part newscast, one

¹⁴ Jon Sobrino, “Introducción general,” *Homilías I*, 25. The emphasis is found in the original.

¹⁵ Romero’s prophetic approach to tradition is exemplified in the manner in which he lived out his Ignatian episcopal motto of *Sentir con la Iglesia*. See Douglas Marcouiller, op. cit.; Margaret Eletta Guider, “Sentir con la Iglesia: Archbishop Romero, an Ecclesial Mystic,” in *Archbishop Romero: Martyr and Prophet for the New Millennium*, ed. Robert Pelton, (Scranton, Pennsylvania: University of Scranton Press, 2006); Edgardo Colón-Emeric “Para un verdadero sentir en la Iglesia: lecciones sobre la educación teológica hoy en América Latina” *Cuadernos de Teología* 32 (2013): 156-174; Jon Sobrino, editor, *La espiritualidad de Monseñor Romero: Sentir con la Iglesia* (San Salvador: Fundación Monseñor Romero, 2015).

part identification with the church and one part prophetic reading of the signs of the times.¹⁶

Pick up at random almost any sermon by Óscar Romero and you will find three sections: the exposition of the Scriptures, the life of the church, and the events of the week. *Sola Scriptura* is not enough. The text of the Bible must always be read along with the text that is the congregation and the text that is the present moment.

The preacher needs to interpret the community. The narration of the “Life of the Church” is one way in which Romero expresses his episcopal motto: *sentir con la Iglesia*. That motto, which is Ignatian in origin, is difficult to translate into English. It is most commonly translated as “To think with the Church,” but it can be translated also as “To feel with the Church” or “To perceive with the Church” or even “To listen with the Church.” “*Sentir* with the church” denotes Romero’s irrevocable commitment of love for his congregation. At that preaching academy convened in the Basilica on January 27, 1980, Romero thinks about the ecclesial celebrations of the week: a one year anniversary mass for a priest and four kids, the election of a new leader for a religious community of women, ceremonies marking the week of prayer for Christian unity. Romero perceives the same Holy Spirit that soaked Jesus in Nazareth to be at work in a school for adult vocations to the priesthood. This might seem trivial until one remembers that one of the slogans of the right wing was “Be a patriot, kill a priest.” Listening with the Church means listening to the pope, and Romero reads from John Paul II’s catechesis on Christian unity. He hears in the pope’s words a sermon of Christ encouraging all believers in El Salvador, Catholic and Protestant, to pick up the microphone and speak on behalf of the common good for all rather than seeking the approval of a privileged few. Feeling with the Church means identifying with the poor. Romero reads a letter from a group of *campesinos* who are being threatened with death if they do not join a Christian farmworkers’ union. Since the *campesinos* did not know how to write their names, they signed the letter with their thumbprints.

Preachers need to *sentir* with the Church. They also need to interpret the historical moment. Romero referred to this as “The Events of the Week,” or, more precisely, as reading the “signs of the times.” The phrase “signs of the times” has its origins in Jesus’ denunciation of the Pharisees and the Sadducees for being skilled at reading meteorological signs and missing “the signs of the times.” (Matt 16:3) The phrase is cryptic and its history of interpretation has been mostly apocalyptic. Often the signs of the times are read in terms of God’s imminent judgment of sin in the world. The Second Vatican Council offered Romero an alternative reading. The signs of the times are not billboards along the road to Armageddon but pointers to the God who saves within history.

In El Salvador, the signs of the times are many: poor people demanding liberation, young people longing for equal recognition, overcrowded theological schools and seminaries; the proliferation of grassroots organizations; the unceasing clamor for agrarian reform. These signs are contradicted by the sinful situation in El Salvador. Injustice and violence affect the entire population: extortion, slander, intimidation, kidnappings, tortures, assassinations, massacres. These evil things are also signs of the times. Because of all the contradictions and ambiguities, the signs of the times are not self-interpreting. Their reading is fundamentally an act of communal spiritual discernment.

Turning to the Events of the Week, Romero focuses his attention on a massacre that occurred on the previous Tuesday, January 22. Various leftist organizations staged the largest

¹⁶ Mariano Imperato, “Romero Predicador,” in Rocca, Roberto Mororozzo della (2013-01-16). Óscar Romero. Un obispo entre guerra fría y revolución (Spanish Edition) (Kindle Locations 1300-1302). Editorial San Pablo España. Kindle Edition.

march that the country had ever seen. As they drew near the national palace, the marchers were met with machine gun fire. An untold number were killed. Many more were wounded. The crowd dispersed and sought shelter where they could. Around three hundred found refuge in the Cathedral. The Archbishop quickly appointed a special commission to investigate the events. Romero reads ten points from the report of this commission. In brief, the government version of events is false. Romero's recitation of the facts is frequently punctuated by massive bursts of applause from the congregation. Following the reading of the report, Romero offers his pastoral judgment, his interpretation of the signs of the times. First, he turns to the victims and their relatives. He offers to them the hope of the gospel, the prayers of the church, and his pastoral solidarity. Second, he addresses the government. He asks them to cease the repression and rein in their security forces. Finally, he speaks to the popular organizations. He praises them for their restraint in the face of the government's provocative actions and exhorts them to definitively renounce violence.

Monseñor concludes by affirming his conviction that the homily has done its work, it has illumined reality in light of the word of God. He invites his listeners to join themselves to Christ's Eucharistic sacrifice and to cry to God out of the depths of their souls for their country and its people, so that all might find the paths that God wants rather than those marked by blood and suffering. As the two-hour preaching mark draws near, Romero invites his congregation to stand and profess the Nicene Creed.

John the Baptist, paradigm of the person committed to the reign of God

Romero's sermons were broadcast all over the nation. It is estimated that 73% of the rural population and 47% of the urban one heard his sermons. During his years as Archbishop you could walk down the street on any Sunday and not miss a single word of his weekly homily. Every house had a radio tuned to YSAX. Even state officials listened to his sermons because their campaign of disinformation was so effective that they did not really know what was happening in the country either.¹⁷ Without a doubt, the *Panamerican Voice* was Romero's microphone. But "the Church is Christ's best microphone." All Christians are called to be little radio stations broadcasting the love of God to their communities. The more the government blows up radio stations the more each person must become "living microphones" declaring Christ everywhere. This is more than a metaphor. When the *Panamerican Voice* was destroyed by another bomb on February 17, many parishioners showed up to the Basilica the following Sunday carrying tape recorders so that they could rebroadcast the sermon when they returned to their communities.¹⁸ The community, not YSAX, was Romero's best microphone. To better understand how this microphone works, we need to turn to the prophetic preacher par excellence, John the Baptist, the voice crying in the wilderness.

As a lectionary preacher, Romero preached on John the Baptist several times during the year. His most extended reflection occurred in the context of the feast day of John the Baptist's birth, June 24 in 1979. The title of the sermon was "John the Baptist, paradigm of the person committed to the reign of God." There is a tradition of theological reflection on the concurrence of John the Baptist's birth and the summer solstice. John the Baptist is born on the longest day of the year. As the days begin to shorten following his birth, Christians remember that John the

¹⁷ Rocca, Roberto Morozzo della (2015-08-12). Oscar Romero: Prophet of Hope (Kindle Locations 1404-1407). Pauline Books and Media. Kindle Edition.

¹⁸ Óscar Romero, "Cuaresma, triunfo del proyecto Salvador de Dios en la historia" (24 Feb 1980), *Homilías: tomo VI ciclo C, 22 de noviembre de 1979, 24 de marzo de 1980* (San Salvador, El Salvador: UCA Editores, 2009), 305.

Baptist must decrease so that Christ may increase. Jesus is born on the shortest day, the winter solstice. After he is born, the days begin to lengthen. The signs of the times that Romero was reading were not in the sky but in a bloodstained street in Santa Tecla where the body of Father Rafael Palacios was found. The death of Father Palacios becomes an occasion to listen again to the Baptist's call to repentance and to invite the assassins to convert. It also presents an occasion to reflect further on the voice that is picked up by the microphone of Christ, the voice of the preacher. As usual, Romero preaches a sermon divided in three points: John the Baptist the person, the forerunner, and the martyr.

In speaking of John the person, Romero draws our attention to his naming story and the naming story of Jesus in Luke. These stories are brought into conversation with the passage from Isaiah: "The LORD called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me" (49:1). God called these unique person for service, but it is not only these great saints and the king of saints that are called by God. The call of John the Baptist is a paradigm for the call of all human beings, because all are called to be saints.

As forerunner, John the Baptist was so singularly effective that many confused him with the Christ. This is both a great honor but also a temptation for the forerunner, a temptation that he resisted with his bold admission, "I am not." Jesus is "I am," John is "I am not." Jesus is the light. John is not. Jesus is the Messiah. John is not. Jesus is worthy of all honor and praise. John is not. Romero explores the relation between the bridegroom and his friend by drawing on the Augustinian distinction between the voice and the word.¹⁹

According to Augustine, "A word has full value, even without a voice; a voice is worthless without a word."²⁰ The Word comes first. The voice second. The one Word could be expressed in many different voices: Moses, Elijah, Deborah, Miriam. When all these voices speak into the same microphone, as it were, we have John the Baptist. He is "the sign and sacrament of all voices."²¹ To put it another way, John is the voice made flesh; Jesus is the Word made flesh.

In the Augustinian distinction between voice and word, Romero finds a theological rationale for the metaphor of the microphone. There is difference between sound and meaning. Microphones pick up sounds (throat clearings, coughs, voices) and amplify them. Microphones do not generate meaning; that comes from the word which is conceived in the mind and delivered by the voice. In preaching, the Word of Christ is conceived in the mind by the power of the Holy Spirit and then born of the voice of the preacher. This is a humbling realization. Every preacher can say with Romero, "I am the microphone, nothing more."²² This is also a liberating realization. Every preacher can also say with Romero, "All who preach Christ are voice, but the voice passes away, preachers die, John the Baptist is gone, only the Word remains. The Word remains and this is the great consolation of preachers. My voice will disappear, but my Word

¹⁹ Tim Denecker and Gert Partoens, "De uoce et uerbo: Augustine's exegesis of John 1:1-3 and 23 in sermons 288 and 293a auct (Dolbeau 3)," *Annali di storia dell'esegesi* 31 (2014): 108. According to the bishop of Hippo, a word while remaining in the mind can be voiced in many ways. "In an analogous way, Christ the Word abided with the Father (John 1:1-3) while many and diverse heralds were sent ahead, and inversely, Christ, the Word that took on the flesh (John 1:14), only came into the world after having been announced by many and diverse preceding heralds."

²⁰ Augustine, Sermon 288, "On the Birthday of John the Baptist," *The Works of St. Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, Vol. III/8 (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 1994), 112.

²¹ Augustine, Sermon 288, 115.

²² Romero, "Santa Catalina de Alejandría" (25 Nov. 1977), *Homilías: tomo I ciclo C, 14 de marzo de 1977, 25 de noviembre de 1977* (San Salvador: UCA Editores, 2005), 489.

who is Christ remains in the hearts of those who have wanted to receive him.”²³ As long as the Word abides, the Church will never want for microphones.

Romero’s reflection on the martyrdom of John the Baptist is brief. The death of the Baptist becomes a lens for interpreting the life of the church and the events of the day. Father Palacios’s corpse preaches a prophetic word. His murder and the murders of Father Grande, Father Navarro, Brother Blanco, and so many others unmask the institutionalization of violence in Central America and call sinners to conversion. It was a bloody week. On the national day of teachers, Romero presided at masses for assassinated teachers. At the same time, funerals are not the only signs of the times. Romero also speaks of various church celebrations, confirmations, and birthdays. As Romero says, “That is what church festivals are like: with blood of martyrdom, with hope of Christianity.”²⁴

Microphones of Christ

Romero’s final letter was written on the date that he died. It was addressed to Pedro Casaldaliga, bishop of Sao Paulo, Brazil. In the letter, Romero thanks Casaldaliga for his show of solidarity at the destruction of the radio station and commits himself to “keep on with our mission of expressing the hopes and anguish of the poor, in a spirit of joy at being accorded the privilege of running the same risks as they, as Jesus did.”²⁵ Romero concludes his brief letter stating his confidence in the triumph of resurrection. News of Romero’s death arrived before the letter. Casaldaliga wrote a poem in reply.

Saint Romero of the Americas,
our shepherd and our martyr,
no one shall ever silence
your last homily.²⁶

Romero’s life and death constituted a coherent and compelling homily.²⁷ His sermon can still be heard, though his voice disappeared, because the Word remains. What would it mean for others to pick up the microphone he dropped and preach as he did? Yes. The context would be different. The language may be different. But the Word is the same. What would this preaching voice sound like? I imagine a sound check would reveal the following.

First, a Romero preaching voice would sound like many voices. The voice crying in the wilderness is always part of a chorus. This was true in the time of Montesinos. The sermon he preached to the congregation of conquistadors was drafted *en conjunto* by all the Dominican friars living in La Española.²⁸ Montesinos was chosen to deliver the message because of his

²³ Romero, “El Verbo se hizo carne y habitó entre nosotros,” (17 Dec 1978), *Homilías: tomo IV ciclo B, 3 de diciembre de 1978, 17 de junio de 1979* (San Salvador: UCA Editores, 2007), 65.

²⁴ Romero, “Juan Bautista, paradigma del hombre comprometido con el reino de Dios” (24 June 1979), *Homilías: tomo V ciclo B* (San Salvador, UCA Editores, 2008), 47. At the heart of any festival is the affirmation of the goodness of life as God’s gift. In spite of everything, Romero exclaims that “with this people it is not hard to be a good pastor.” It is good to be pastor of this diocese even in as it is going through the valley of the shadow of death. It has been said that no Christian martyr died cursing creation. It is all very good. Cf. Josef Pieper, *In Tune with the World*, 27.

²⁵ Cited in Sobrino, *Archbishop Romero*, 40.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 45f.

²⁷ Martin Maier, *Oscar Romero: Mística y Lucha por la Justicia* (Herder Editorial, 2005), 84.

²⁸ Cf. *Teología en Conjunto: A Collaborative Hispanic Protestant Approach*, edited by José David Rodríguez and Loida I. Martell Otero (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997). The concept of “en conjunto”

oratorical gifts, but all his brothers signed their names to the sermon manuscript. The “voice” crying out “Prepare the way of the Lord” is never alone. The “I” is not individualistic. It is always in surround sound. It was true in the time of Romero. The people were his prophets. He preached to them and they preached to him. All Christian prophecy is but a participation in the prophetic office of Christ, a kind of Pentecostal karaoke. Preaching is not a solo, not an aria; it is *en conjunto*, an ensemble piece. The *conjunto* is not ethnic but baptismal; it is a choral response to the call of Christ.

The call to speak into the microphone of Christ has a number of implications. The call to speak humanizes. According to Romero each baptized Salvadoran can say with Ezekiel, “The Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet” (2:2). Your voice is wanted. When God calls you to step up to the mic and he opens your lips, your mouth will proclaim his praise. The call to speak humbles. God offers the mic to stutterers like Moses, sidelined disciples like Mary, fumbling orators like Paul, and even to asses like Balaam’s *burro*. What made John Chrysostom’s preaching golden was not the agility of his mind or the beauty of his voice but the power of the Word. The call to speak for Christ empowers. The humbling humanization of this call transforms the speaker’s social relations. Romero puts it this way: “A holy matrimony is John the Baptist in the home. A holy lawyer, a holy professional, a holy engineer, a holy wage worker, a holy woman, they are John the Baptist. God uses them to announce that the kingdom of God is already near.”²⁹ The baptized have a prophetic mission that touches all aspects of daily life, a mission to and from *lo cotidiano* (the everyday). The call to speak is often frustrated. According to Romero the injustice and violence in El Salvador is due in large part “to the failure of the prophetic mission in many baptized.”³⁰ If I may paraphrase: What difference does being baptized make to being a Black Lives Matters supporter? What are baptized people doing in congress or the White House? Republicans, where is your baptism? Democrats, where is your baptism? Bishops and pastors, where is your baptism? Deans and seminary professors, where is your baptism? The call to speak for Christ is constantly being drowned out by noise; it needs to be reissued. Romero was not Methodist; if he had been, he might have said: O for a thousand tongues to preach my great redeemer’s praise!

Second, a Romero preaching voice would sound like the voice of the voiceless. The church as microphone of Christ serves as an instrument of the risen savior who still speaks through the Scriptures and who identifies himself with the least, the last, and the voiceless.

Speaking for the voiceless is urgent. In El Salvador, tens of thousands of tongues were silenced. Their bodies disappeared. It was as if they had never been. For Romero it is very important that the voiceless are not nameless. The care he takes in calling the victims of repression by name is a way of giving voice to the voiceless. The act of naming is an empowering act; it restores dignity to those often lost into the anonymity of the poor or the marginalized. Human rights are borne by people who have names. They have faces. They have voices. The Church has a responsibility to speak before these are silenced, defaced, and erased.

carries methodological weight. It is intended to express the theologizing of a group of people who are both diverse in culture and conjoined in purpose. Theology done *en conjunto* aspires to model a collaboration among scholars that is rarely found and even less frequently rewarded by the academy. Justo González also refers to this methodological solidarity as *Fuenteovejuna* theology in remembrance of a play by Lope de Vega, where the people of the town of *Fuenteovejuna* maintain their solidarity in the face of police attempts to divide the community. Cf. *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 28–30.

²⁹ Romero, “Juan Bautista, paradigma del hombre comprometido con el reino de Dios” (24 June 1979), *Homilías: tomo V*, 41.

³⁰ Romero, “El profeta, presencia de Dios en la sociedad” (8 Jul 1979), *Homilías: tomo V*, 87.

Speaking for the voiceless is complicated. Is there not a risk that the voice of the voiceless ends up muting the marginalized? Are not the voiceless in danger of becoming passive amplifiers of the voice of the privileged philanthropist? Yes. Romero is aware of these risks. Romero does not claim to be the voice of the voiceless based on his own knowledge or experience. Romero's representative role is based on the prior initiative of God who calls, anoints, and sends prophets to speak to and for the people of God.³¹ It is because "the Spirit of the Lord is upon him" and upon the people of God in El Salvador that Romero listens and preaches good news to the poor.³²

Speaking for the voiceless will be opposed. "These sermons," preaches Romero, "want to be the voice of those who have no voice. This is the reason why they irritate those who have too much voice."³³ As microphones of Christ, the church amplifies voices which the government would like to silence, and it does so by keeping the mic close to the mouths of the suffering ones. The state has bombs and microphones. Even so, the power of the microphone that is the church and its instruments far exceeds that of the state media, because the voice of the church speaks from the power of truth rather than the truth of power.

Third, a Romero preaching voice would sound like the voice crying in the wilderness. John the Baptist is the paradigm of all prophetic calls. I have been struck by the contrast in homiletical approaches in many mainline churches in the United States compared to that most common in Latin America. In the United States, students learn to preach like Nathan the prophet. The story is well known. Nathan the prophet is sent by God to condemn David's sin with Bathsheba. By telling a parable, Nathan leads David to pass judgment on himself. The Nathan approach is inductive, subtle. It works by misdirection and guile. In Latin America, preachers learn to preach like John the Baptist. He is direct and hard. He speaks of vipers, axes against trees, and one coming who is more fearsome than he. Both approaches are biblical. Both are speaking truth to power, but in different ways and with different risks.

On the one hand, there is more John the Baptist in Romero than Nathan. Romero challenges his listeners to compare the manner of John the Baptist's preaching to contemporary preaching. Which preaching resembles that of John the Baptist the most? The preacher that denounces injustices and abuses in the world? Or the one who preaches a flabby gospel that makes no social demands?³⁴

On the other hand, there is more to prophetic preaching that denunciation. The voice crying in the wilderness does not only says "repent," but it also says "behold." The vision of the new creation comes first. And in light of this vision comes the rejection of the anti-kingdom. Preaching eternal life and the new creation are not opiates which dull the people's sensibilities. On the contrary, the vision of the new creation is the high caffeine drink that urges people on because it gives meaning and permanence to transitory deeds.

³¹ Cf. Mark Lewis Taylor, "Subalternity and Advocacy as Kairos for Theology," in *Opting for the Margins: Postmodernity and Liberation in Christian Theology*, Joerg Rieger, ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 23f. Accessed through Oxford Scholarship Online.

³² Cf. Puebla, 1145: "By drawing near to the poor in order to accompany them and serve them, we do what Christ taught us, to make ourselves into our brother, who is poor like we are. For this reason the service of the poor is the preferred, though not the exclusive, measure of our attempts to follow Christ. The best service to one's brother is the preaching of the gospel, which readies him to recognize himself as a child of God, which liberates him from injustice and promotes his welfare comprehensively."

³³ Romero, "El Divino Salvador, solución de todos nuestros problemas" (29 Jul 79), *Homilías: tomo V*, 155.

³⁴ Cf. Romero, "Juan Bautista, paradigma" (24 Jun 1979), *Homilías: tomo V*, 42.

Fourth, a Romero preaching voice would sound like the voice of the good shepherd. In his *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, Reinhold Niebuhr remarks on how it is difficult to be prophetic with a congregation once you get to love them.³⁵ Romero did not experience this tension between the prophetic and the pastoral. When Romero preached at the funeral for his friend Rutilio Grande, the first of many priests killed in El Salvador, he preached of love, a love that can conquer all evil and quell all desires of revenge. To the killers, whom Romero imagines may well be listening to the radio broadcast of the sermon, he says, “Brother criminals, we want to tell you that we love you and that we are praying to God for your heartfelt repentance.”³⁶ Brother criminals, this is the voice of the shepherd, prophetic and pastoral.

The voice of the shepherd is a human voice, but the presence of the Word makes it more than a human voice. The divine origin of the words riding on the human voice is also the reason why the voice should not sound like the voices of the world. Romero was and still is hard to locate on ideological maps. He preached against sin in all its forms, personal and structural. He listened to the pope and to the poor. He preached strong messages against consumerism and militarism and he also preached against abortion and adultery. He refused to let the voice of the Church be commandeered by any of the social agendas of the day. Not because all the agendas were the same. They were not. And some like that of the oligarchy, he preached against. But no agenda can capture the kingdom of God. The kingdom is not built from below; God’s plan does not come from the right or from the left. The New Jerusalem comes down from above. For these reasons, he was attacked from all sides. Preaching may be polarizing but it cannot be partisan.

Conclusion

We could learn many more lessons from the pulpit of Romero, but let us turn for a moment instead to the University of Central America in San Salvador; there is a chapel known as the Chapel of the Martyrs. In it are buried six Jesuit priests who were murdered by death squads on November 16, 1989. The Chapel was built in 1985. Its construction and design were guided by the rector of the University, Ignacio Ellacuría, one of Romero’s collaborators and one of the martyred priests. As with many church buildings in the tropics, it has open walls except at the front and back. The wall behind the altar bears brightly colored panels showing scenes of the civil war in El Salvador. Romero’s own martyrdom is featured along with mass graves. And yet the scene is a hopeful one. The light of the resurrection illumines the history with hope. This is the view of the worshipping congregation. The preacher has a different view. The priest can see the congregation and behind them on the back wall, by the entrance, a set of fourteen black and white sketches of tortured, naked, corpses. These were commissioned by Ellacuría, who wanted to have a set of stations of the cross that represented the passion of the people of El Salvador. Each station was associated with a text from one of Romero’s sermons, and marked another step of the crucified people journeying through history. The entire building can be interpreted as a posthumous celebration of Romero’s preaching. As microphones of Christ, we, the Church, preach resurrection in the face of crucifixion. Tortured truths in a culture of pleasant lies. Hallelujahs and woes. Repent and Behold. “That is what church festivals are like: with blood of martyrdom, with hope of Christianity.”³⁷

³⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/Knox Press, 1990), 47.

³⁶ Romero, “Una motivación de amor (Funeral del P. Rutilio Grande)” (14 Mar 1977), *Homilías: tomo I*, 35.

³⁷ Romero, “Juan Bautista, paradigma” (24 June 1979), *Homilías: tomo V*, 47.