

Inspiration and Affirmation in Hard Times: Óscar Romero to Pope Leo

2026 Annual Romero Lecture

I would like to start my talk with a passage from Pope Leo, taken from a homily he gave to the College of Cardinals the day after his election as pope:

Even today, there are many settings in which the Christian faith is considered absurd, meant for the weak and unintelligent. Settings where other securities are preferred, like technology, money, success, power, or pleasure. These are contexts where it is not easy to preach the Gospel and bear witness to its truth, where believers are mocked, opposed, despised or at best tolerated and pitied.

Yet, *precisely for this reason*, they are the places where our missionary outreach is desperately needed. A lack of faith is often tragically accompanied by the loss of meaning in life, the neglect of mercy, appalling violations of human dignity, the crisis of the family and so many other wounds that afflict our society. (Pope Leo XIV, [Homily to the College of Cardinals](#), May 9, 2025—my emphasis).

At the heart of this passage is a very basic insight: Christian faith must be lived out in *the world as it is*; it must respond to the *actual challenges* we face, not simply ignore them. And indeed, it is only in seeing the wounds of our world that we can know where the Gospel is most needed. The challenges that Leo lists can make us despair—“the loss of meaning in life, the neglect of mercy, appalling violations of human dignity, the crisis of the family and so many other wounds”—but instead they should be received with a sense of mission. This is where the Gospel is most needed.

This framing from Pope Leo is a perfect way to begin our journey this evening with St. Óscar Romero. The biography of Romero can be found in many places, so I won't give extensive background here. He served as Archbishop of San Salvador from 1977-1980 and remains famous as an advocate and defender of the poor. Though he had been seen as a safe choice by the rich and the powerful, he became a prophetic preacher who stood against the injustice that marked Salvadoran society.

Pope Leo has already commented on Romero at least twice. Here is how our current pope has remembered Romero's saintly life and witness:

“The martyrdom of Saint Oscar Romero, the Archbishop of San Salvador, was a powerful witness and an inspiration for the Church. He had made his own

the plight of the vast majority of his flock and made them the center of his pastoral vision” (*Dilexi Te*, 89).

“[he] preached that our God ‘is a God who wants to be with men, a God who feels the pain of those who are tortured and killed, a God who gives new confidence to the Church. He is a living God, who feels, acts, works, and leads this history, and in him we hope, in him we trust’” (Commemoration of the martyrs of the 21st century).

This evening I want to walk through Romero’s preaching in three stages. The *center* of the talk will be an account of Romero’s positive vision for our Church and our world, a picture of the hope that inspired him. I will follow that in part *three* with the concrete practices of love Romero insisted upon as demanded by Christian hope. But I will have to first start with wounds that Romero saw in his own day, the same wounds that continue to mark our world.

Part I: A Lenten Saintⁱ

It is fitting that the feast day of St. Óscar Romero almost always falls during Lent.

In many ways, Romero had a spectacularly positive vision for human life. His preaching was filled with hope to the end. For example, literally just minutes before his death, he proclaimed: “This is the hope that inspires us as Christians. We know that every effort to improve society, especially when injustice and sin are so widespread, is an effort that God blesses, that God wants, that God requires of us...Our work does not remain here; it is gathered and purified by the Spirit of God” (March 24, 1980). These gems of hope are plentiful in Romero’s preaching. And yet, Romero’s far more dominant note is an urgent, prophetic call for conversion.

It is as if Romero, looking at the violence, oppression, suffering, and disunity all around him, again and again found himself repeating the message of Ash Wednesday: “*Repent and Believe in the Gospel!*” Certainly, Lent is a journey towards Easter, a journey in hope. Romero will frequently describe it as a time of renewal, as a time of remembering our true identity and dignity as those baptized into Christ. But “renewal” sounds too weak and frankly too *nice* compared to the actual content of Romero’s preaching.

It is often said that a preacher really only has one homily, repeated in various ways week after week. For Romero, if we bring together his constant rejection of violence and hatred, his constant call for mercy and justice for the poor, his constant desire that the Church would simply carry out its mission here on earth, his one

homily would be: “a shout like that of Christ who says, ‘be converted, return to the good path’” (May 12, 1977). Or as he says elsewhere, “I will never tire of shouting this word to you, brothers and sisters: conversion!” (August 21, 1977). In this moment, he recounts a story of a *campesino* who, having heard Romero speak so often of “conversion,” asked the archbishop what the word meant. Romero explained that conversion is not a one-time event. It is a daily invitation and demand. Each of us, he said, is called upon to draw closer to God each day, to ask ourselves each day, “what does God want from me?” This is conversion.

Lent is the opportunity to embark again on a journey, and Romero-the-prophet will paint this journey as the stark choice between two paths. He is like Moses at the end of Deuteronomy: “I have today set before you life and good, death and evil” (Deut 30:15). Or the opening of one of our earliest Christian texts, the Didache: “There are two ways, one of life and one of death; but a great difference between the two ways.” Or Jesus’ stark pronouncement in the Sermon on the Mount: “No one can serve two masters. He will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon” (Mt 6:24; cf. Lk 16:13). For Romero, Lent is a time to hear and respond to such prophetic provocations: “Lent gives us the opportunity to dethrone every idol that is not the true God. This is the moment to review your life and the way you judge things, to see if you value anything more than God” (March 18, 1979).

Compared to most preaching, it is striking how often Romero speaks of idols and idolatry—in nearly half of his homilies and increasingly as he comes closer to his death. On average, he speaks of “sin” over eight times per homily. Of course, he knows that there are many Christians who will bristle, who “want to hear the priest speak words sweet to my ears and not touch my wounds” (July 16, 1978). But as a poor *campesino* once told Romero, the Gospel is like salt water: if your hand is wounded, it will hurt when you put it into the water (May 29, 1977). Yet, the sting may be the beginning of healing, because the wound must be exposed and cleansed.

All of this leads Romero to a provocative conclusion, proclaimed on Trinity Sunday 1978: “The divinizing of money and the idolatry of power create false idols which take the place of the true God. *Sadly, we live in an atheistic society*” (May 21, 1978). Notice here that Romero’s point has very little to do with whether or not people say they believe in God. The question is, what do we really worship? What is the governing center of our lives as individuals and as societies? If we look around us, can we honestly say that Romero’s words would not apply to today?

For Romero, all this talk of sin and idolatry would never be to simply make us feel guilty or to have us beat ourselves up. Instead, his point is that the first step forward must be an honest, humble, and firm diagnosis. In this way, Romero's preaching is like a continual Lent, one that demands an honest appraisal of our society *and* of our own heart. Romero's vision of Lent as a time to "dethrone every idol that is not the true God" thus remains fitting; it is an enduring call for personal and societal conversion: "Repent and Believe in the Gospel."

Part II: The Path of Life and Communion

If Romero's preaching places us within a Lenten journey, what are we going toward?

As I continue to immerse myself more deeply in the life and preaching of Romero, I see two phrases, held together, as encapsulating the core of Romero's vision for the Church.

The first phrase originally comes from St. Irenaeus, a 2nd century bishop and martyr. Irenaeus had a breathtakingly positive vision of how God transforms all things in Christ, how nothing of creation will be left untouched—everything will truly have *life*. For St. Irenaeus, everything centers on the Son of God taking on our flesh to bring life to every human being, to bring us back into a life-giving communion with God. Thus, he famously says, "*Gloria Dei, vivens homo,*" or as it is typically translated, "the glory of God is the human person fully alive."

This simple idea captures much of what drove Romero's ministry and preaching. Just as Pope Leo told us at the beginning, it is challenging to truly live out the Gospel in a wounded world. We need to know the path. At the center of this path was this simple truth: each human person has been created, redeemed, and called by God; each person has an inviolable dignity and is called into the fullness of life. As he says a week before his death: "*This is the fundamental theme of my preaching: nothing is more important to me than human life*" (March 16, 1980). This basic point touches nearly everything in Romero's preaching.

It is hard to do justice to an idea that he unfolded week after week, so here I simply want to give a glimpse of his vision by means of five times when he addressed particular audiences, seeking to help them adopt this vision of human life.

To those who see prayer or belief in God as childish: "You have a great capacity! The most beautiful part of the human vocation is to speak with God,

to enter into dialogue with your Creator... Those who do not pray because they kneel down before the god of materialism—be it money or politics or anything else—have not understood the true greatness of being a human person” (May 29, 1977); “prayer will not diminish you and make you smaller!” (September 4, 1977).

To those who adore money: “So, let us not grow weary of denouncing the idolatry of wealth, which makes the true greatness of the human person consist in having and having—and forgets that true greatness is in being. A person is not worth what he or she has, but what he or she is... [this is] the greatest moral underdevelopment, because idolatry destroys the human person and offends God” (November 4, 1979).

To the poor: “And thanks be to God, we are seeing many workers, peasants, and marginalized people coming to know their own dignity. And to the extent that they come to know their dignity, they also awaken to the great injustice that is pushing them to the margins” (July 24, 1977).

To the middle class: “who have already assured a minimum of dignity... Jesus points out that there are many who still do not have enough to live on. He urges [you] to support the poor and not to be content with simply making [your] own gains secure. *Listen to him!*” (3rd pastoral letter).

To the armed forces: “Brothers, you are part of our own people. You are killing your own brother and sister campesinos... In the name of God, then, and in the name of this suffering people, whose laments rise up each day more tumultuously toward heaven, I beg you, I beseech you, I order you in the name of God: stop the repression!” (March 23, 1980)

Romero offers a clear challenge to the armed forces, but all of these passages also offer a challenge to each one of us: Look around and look within: what do you see? What do you *truly* see? Do you see God’s image? Do you see your brother or sister in Christ?

St. Augustine once said: “The entire life of a good Christian is in fact an exercise of holy desire. You do not yet see what you long for, but the very act of desiring prepares you, so that when he comes you may see and be utterly satisfied.” Romero could agree—*we should long for the human person fully alive*. The Christian life is a journey of learning to see and respond to human dignity—our own and all those around us.

The second phrase that I would like to lift up is one that pops up again and again in Romero’s preaching at key moments when he is defining what we most seek as Christians, what we should most long for. That we might “*sentirnos hermanos*,” that we might “*experience ourselves as brothers and sisters*.” When Romero looked at the violence and disunity all around him, he said that we must long for and work for the Kingdom of God, a Kingdom he defines *as the place where we are truly brothers and sisters to one another*.

Given our world, he notes that this proclamation is a “hard word.” If I’m honest, there are many people that I don’t want as my brother or sister. Romero recognized this, but also insisted that the Kingdom of God that we claim to serve is nothing short of this. Thus, he explains:

The Good News that Christ brought was the announcement of a great hope: the shaping of a humanity in which all come to experience themselves as brothers and sisters, and God as the Father of all. And as we strive to know that true God, *we come to recognize that every human brother and sister is the image of God*. And as we strive to love one another—and not be divided into social classes, into hatred, into vengeance—we draw near to God... [people find] in Christ the joy of *experiencing themselves as brothers and sisters* without distinctions—nothing more, and nothing less, than children of the same Father. This is what the Church continues to preach (August 6, 1977).

Romero’s summary of our task as Christians is quite straightforward even as it is challenging: cultivate a genuine longing and commitment to build up the Kingdom, a Kingdom in which we all experience ourselves as brothers and sisters to one another.

We thus have two key ideas that, together, form the orienting vision of Romero’s preaching and life: “the glory of God is the human person fully alive” and to seek a Kingdom “in which we experience ourselves as brothers and sisters.” These two ideas can be seen as our goal and our path. They also challenge us to adopt radical forms of love.

Part III: The Challenge of Radical Love

I would like to start the third and final part of my talk with another quote from Pope Leo, this time from a reflection he offered on the Nicene Creed, the Creed that Catholics and many other Christians confess weekly in their worship. For Leo, this Creed is at the heart of what it means to be a genuine *community* of faith, united in faith and hope. He says:

“The Nicene Creed invites us to examine our conscience. What does God mean to me and how do I bear witness to my faith in him? Is the one and only God truly the Lord of my life, or do I have idols that I place before God and his commandments? Is God for me the living God, close to me in every situation, the Father to whom I turn with filial trust? Is he the Creator to whom I owe everything I am and have, whose mark I can find in every creature?”
(Pope Leo, XIV, “In Unitate Fidei,” [November 23, 2025](#)).

Leo follows this up with a description of a *four-fold love* that should mark the life of every Christian and every Christian community. The first two are from Jesus’ giving of the greatest commandment: to love God with all our being and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. But then Leo names two other radical forms of love of neighbor that are at the heart of the Christian life. They are two forms of love demanded by Romero’s vision of the human person fully alive and a community in which we experience ourselves as brothers and sisters. We’ve all heard both of them many times; the challenge is to truly live them.

Love of the Poor

In his apostolic exhortation *Dilexi Te*, Pope Leo insists on the centrality of love of the poor within the Christian life: “I am convinced that *the preferential choice for the poor* is a source of extraordinary renewal both for the Church and for society, if we can only set ourselves free of our self-centeredness and open our ears to their cry” (Pope Leo, *Dilexi Te*, 6). We should note here both the Lenten language—“free us from our self-centeredness”—as well as the radical form of love demanded by the preferential option. True Christianity cannot be indifferent to the suffering and struggles of the poor and marginalized.

Let’s return to one of our key moments in Romero’s preaching described above: *Gloria Dei, vivens homo*—“the glory of God is the human person fully alive.” When Romero quotes St. Irenaeus here, he does not stop with the original line. Indeed, he makes a stunning adjustment to this famous phrase. He continues: “We could make that more concrete by saying: *Gloria Dei, vivens pauper*—‘the glory of God is the poor person fully alive’...by taking the side of the poor and trying to give them life, we will come to know what the eternal truth of the Gospel is” (February 2, 1980).

“To make concrete” is one of the most important ideas in Romero’s preaching. He’ll also call this the demand to “incarnate”—to give flesh—to the Gospel in our world. In short, we cannot love the poor in the abstract; this must not remain an idea that fails to actually touch our world. Many other passages in Romero insist on this

point with great force. Here I will give just one: “Because the Church values the human person, and cannot tolerate that an image of God be trampled by another who degrades himself by trampling another human being. The Church wants precisely to make that image beautiful again” (August 14, 1977). Christians *claim* to believe that each and every person is the image of God. However, how do we respond when that image is trampled upon? We can see this terrible reality on the international news, in the structures of our countries, and in our local communities. In the face of this, Romero insists, *we must not tolerate the image of God being trampled upon!* We are obviously called to love everyone, but true universal love must preferentially come to the aid of those who most suffer, it must preferentially fight for justice on behalf of those who are oppressed.

The previous passage from Romero, however, also points to another reality. The one who tramples upon another actually “degrades himself.” That fact brings us to a second form of radical love.

Love of the Enemy

This second form of love is also described by Pope Leo: “Love is above all a way of looking at life and a way of living it. A Church that sets no limits to love, that *knows no enemies to fight but only men and women to love*, is the Church that the world needs today” (Pope Leo, *Dilexi Te*, 120—my emphasis). Leo and Romero agree that a committed struggle against injustice is demanded by the Gospel. *However*, there is another form of radical love that is at the heart of the Gospel and that stands in stark contrast to the values of our age. This form of love puts no limit on whom we seek to bring into the work of God’s Kingdom. Even our enemy is welcome.

Romero knew that such acts of love must often start small:

Nothing can be born if it is not sown; you cannot harvest what you have not sown. How are we going to harvest love in our republic if we sow only hatred? Let us sow love. Let us make use of every circumstance—the most difficult, such as forgiving an enemy; and the smallest, such as doing the most ordinary things. (July 10, 1977)

To listen to Romero’s preaching is to hear a *constant rejection of violence, vengeance, and hatred*. He says this again and again, week after week. In contrast, he said that the Gospel seeks genuine reconciliation grounded in justice, fairness, and love. If we truly long to experience ourselves as brothers and sisters, this must extend even to the people we find most annoying, dangerous, and despicable.

Romero's preaching offers many examples here. I will point to one moment that is particularly striking. On March 14, 1977, Romero presided at the funeral of his friend, Fr. Rutilio Grande. Grande was murdered, alongside two *campesinos*, Manuel Solórzano and Nelson Lemus, two days earlier. Near the conclusion of the homily, Romero turns to address the killers of his friend. He says: "Who knows if those who are responsible for this criminal act (and therefore excommunicated) are hearing these words on a radio there in their hideout and in their conscience? We want to tell them, 'Brother criminals, we love you, and we ask God to pour forth repentance into your hearts because the church is incapable of hatred; the church has no enemies'" (March 14, 1977). True love is both grounded in truth and excludes no one. Romero is clear: those who killed these three innocent men are guilty of a terrible crime—they are "criminals." Yet, the response of the Church is to call for repentance and conversion, to recognize that they are also our "brothers."

This passage from Romero beautifully reflects one of the key ideas that Leo has named many times already in his pontificate. Christians must preach and live an "unarmed and disarming peace" (see, for example, his message on January 1, 2026). True Christian love does not go forth with violence and vengeance. It defends the vulnerable and the marginalized, but in a way that seeks to disarm the aggressor, not intensify the vicious cycles of violence, lies, and slander that mark our world.

Conclusion

I opened this talk by framing Romero as a "Lenten saint," as someone particularly fitting for our journey in Lent. Let us conclude by reflecting more on that idea. In Lent, we traditionally take up the practices of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving as a way to help us cultivate a life of true love. Romero would certainly encourage us here!

Prayer: recall a line from Romero quoted above: "Prayer will not diminish you and make you smaller!" (September 4, 1977). Prayer, rightly offered, should expand our hearts and open our minds. I remember here a moment when I had the privilege of watching Gustavo Gutiérrez, the father of Latin American liberation theology, teach a class to theology students. A student asked him some version of that question, "What can I do as a university student to help the poor?" Gustavo asked the student, "do you believe in prayer?" The student, a bit startled, said yes. Gustavo then asked if the student had prayed in a way that truly opened his heart. The student again nodded. Then the initial step is clear: pray for the poor. *Really* pray. Not as politicians often do after a major tragedy. We can see from the inaction that follows that their "sending of thoughts and prayers" usually does not represent a deep, spiritual act.

Lent calls us to pray deeply. To hold up particular enemies and particular people who suffer. Cultivate a deep longing, a deep desire that the image of God within them would not be trampled upon. “Prayer will not diminish you and make you smaller!”

Fasting: As Romero recommends, “This is the moment to review your life and the way you judge things, to see if you value anything more than God” (March 18, 1979). Lent is a time for honesty: what do we make idols of as a society? What about in our own lives? The Gospel, of course, is not here to beat us up, to make us feel guilty. But neither can we simply ignore the wounds of our world. From Romero to Pope Leo, we receive this call to review our lives, individually and socially. What do we need to fast from in order to grow in true, radical love?

Almsgiving: we are called to offer concrete mercy to those who are in need, to give in such a way that we come into true fellowship with the poor. Here we can simply name again the two phrases at the center of this talk. Almsgiving is the incarnation of what we hold to be true and what we hope to bring to reality: 1) *Gloria Dei, vivens homo*: “The glory of God is the human person fully alive.” 2) *Sentirmos hermanos*: “To experience ourselves as brothers and sisters.”

Let us live this faith out earnestly and together. As we remember Romero, we see that such faith and love is possible; we should be grateful for how he illuminates our path. But it is still *our* path. He can inspire us and give hope, but now we must take up the call each day to journey towards God’s Kingdom.

Todd Walatka is a teaching professor in the department of theology at the University of Notre Dame (Indiana, United States). He has recently published two books on St. Óscar Romero: *Words of Life: The Preaching of St. Óscar Romero* (Orbis Books)—a book written for friends, colleagues, and students who have asked, “if I want to learn more about Romero, where should I start?”; and *Mission to Love: 30 Days with Óscar Romero* (Ave Maria Press)—a devotional centered on Romero’s prophetic preaching, on his call to respond to the dignity of all

ⁱ Portions of this first part of the talk are found in Todd Walatka, “Repent and Believe in the Gospel: The Prophetic Preaching of St. Óscar Romero,” *The Tablet*, forthcoming in March 2026.