

Romero, Migration, and the Grammar of Creation¹

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Abstract: We are witnessing an era of unprecedented migration across the Americas, as people are forced to flee due to hunger, political and criminal violence, and climate change. This essay draws on the wisdom of the martyred and sainted archbishop of San Salvador, Óscar Romero, as well as Catholic social teaching, to understand how Romero responded to the migration of his era—and how Christians and people of good will might respond to migration today. We show that today’s migration is not entirely unlike the context in which Romero was writing. In his work, we find a powerful articulation of both the right not to migrate—the right to live in dignity in one’s home and the right to migrate when such conditions cannot be met. We also trace echoes of Romero’s vision in the pontificate of Pope Francis and in the myriad ways Christian communities in Latin America and the United States are responding to today’s migration.

WE ARE AT A MOMENT OF UNPRECEDENTED MOVEMENT of peoples throughout the world. The most recent *World Migration Report* of the UN’s International Organization for Migration estimates that there are about 281 million international migrants, amounting to approximately 3.6 percent of the world’s population, with increasing numbers being displaced (both within countries and beyond their borders) because of conflicts, political and economic instability, and climate change and related disasters.²

In the Americas, migrant encounters at the southern US border increased dramatically in 2019 and reached record highs in 2022 after

¹ Research funding was provided by the Honors College and Office of the Provost at Baylor University. We are indebted to Jazmine Fajardo, Elizabeth Lemann, and Lydia Pehlman for research assistance and two anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on previous drafts.

² International Organization for Migration, *World Migration Report* (International Organization for Migration, 2024).

years of steady decline.³ In Mexico, asylum petitions increased one hundred-fold from 2013 to 2023,⁴ making Mexico one of the largest recipients of asylum applications in the world.⁵ Migration through the treacherous Darién Gap between Panamá and Colombia has seen a similar, dramatic rise.⁶ Since 2010, the Latin American and Caribbean region has seen the greatest increase in international migration of any region in the world, with most of that migration being internal.⁷ These numbers are expected to rise further still as violence and political instability continues and the ravages of climate change become more acute. Indeed, the World Bank is projecting as many as seventeen million internal climate refugees (2.6 percent of the region's population) in Latin America by 2050 and the development of "climate in-migration hotspots," particularly in parts of Mexico and Guatemala.⁸

At the same time, even as we are in the midst of an unprecedented movement of peoples, there has also been a global resurgence of nationalisms and anti-immigrant political movements.⁹ Current conversations about migration are not only increasingly polarized but focused on preventing influxes of migrants and punitive policy measures, such as border militarizations, crackdowns, and deportations. In the Americas, Panamanian President José Raúl Mulino took office in July of 2024 promising to deter migration through the Darién Gap and vowing that he would not "allow Panama to be an open path for

³ "US-Mexico Border Patrol Migrant Encounters," Some Graphics on the Border and Migration, WOLA, updated March 14, 2025, borderoversight.org/files/wola_migration_charts.pdf https://borderoversight.org/files/wola_migration_charts.pdf.

⁴ Mexico received 1,295 asylum petitions in 2013 and 140,854 in 2023. "Asylum Requests in Mexico by Nationality," Some Graphics on the Border and Migration, WOLA, updated March 14, 2024, borderoversight.org/files/wola_migration_charts.pdf.

⁵ Andrew Selee, Valerie Lacarte, Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, Diego Chaves-González, María Jesús Mora, and Andrea Tanco, "In a Dramatic Shift, the Americas Have Become a Leading Migration Destination," Migration Policy Institute, April 11, 2023, www.migrationpolicy.org/article/latin-america-caribbean-immigration-shift.

⁶ "Annual Migration Through Panama's Darién Gap," Some Graphics on the Border and Migration, WOLA, updated March 14, 2024, borderoversight.org/files/wola_migration_charts.pdf.

⁷ Selee, Lacarte, Soto, Chaves-González, Jesús Mora, and Tanco, "In a Dramatic Shift."

⁸ World Bank Group, "Internal Climate Migration in Latin America," *Policy Note* 3, Jan 1, 2018, documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/983921522304806221/pdf/124724-BRI-PUBLIC-NEWSERIES-Groundswell-note-PN3.pdf.

⁹ Roger Cohen, "The Nation Resurgent, and Borders, Too," *The New York Times*, June 23, 2024; Léonie de Jonge, Vasiliki Georgiadou, Daphne Halikiopoulou, Cristóbal R. Kaltwasser, and Talita Tanscheit, "Is the Far Right a Global Phenomenon? Comparing Europe and Latin America: A Scholarly Exchange," *Nations and Nationalism* 31, no 1 (2025): 7–24, doi.org/10.1111/nana.13074.

thousands of people who enter our country illegally.”¹⁰ In the Dominican Republic, Luis Abinader rose to power marshalling anti-migrant and anti-Haitian animus.¹¹ In the United States, President Donald Trump has begun rolling out an immigration crackdown and mass deportation effort, which has already included the US-born children of undocumented immigrants with little due process.¹²

Far too often, the current structures, systems, and policies governing immigration exacerbate the suffering of migrants rather than alleviate it. In the United States, Customs and Border Protection (CBP) detention facilities are so notoriously cold that they are known colloquially as “hieleras” (“ice chests” or “freezers”) and reports of mistreatment, including lack of adequate food and healthcare, are common.¹³ There are extensive reports of abuse of migrants by border authorities, with little accountability.¹⁴ Facilities for children are especially problematic, with reports of widespread sexual abuse in privately-run Department of Health and Human Services shelters for unaccompanied minors.¹⁵ The recent passage of Trump’s budget reconciliation bill includes a massive increase in funding for immigration detention and enforcement.¹⁶

Similar abuses happen in Mexico as its National Migration Institute (INM for its name in Spanish, the Instituto Nacional de Migración) “retains a reputation for corruption and weak observance

¹⁰ Juan Zamorano, “José Raúl Mulino Sworn in as Panama’s New President, Promises to Stop Migration through Darien Gap,” *AP News*, July 2, 2024, apnews.com/article/panama-mulino-immigration-darien-gap-31f214b8c9885c6e9f943c5ed9cc9ac1.

¹¹ Jordi Amaral, “5 Migration Trends in the Americas to Watch in 2025,” *Americas Migration Brief*, December 12, 2024, www.migrationbrief.com/t/special-editions.

¹² “ICE Deports 3 US Citizen Children Held Incommunicado Prior to the Deportation,” ACLU Press Release April 25, 2025, www.aclu.org/press-releases/ice-deports-3-u-s-citizen-children-held-incommunicado-prior-to-the-deportation.

¹³ See for instance Guillermo Cantor, “*Hieleras* (Iceboxes) in the Rio Grande Valley Sector: Lengthy Detention, Deplorable Conditions, and Abuse in CBP Holding Cells,” American Immigration Council, December 17, 2015, www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/hieleras-iceboxes-rio-grande-valley-sector.

¹⁴ “‘They Treat You Like You Are Worthless’: Internal DHS Reports of Abuses by US Border Officials,” Human Rights Watch, October 21, 2021, www.hrw.org/report/2021/10/21/they-treat-you-you-are-worthless/internal-dhs-reports-abuses-us-border-officials; and Adam Isacson and Zoe Martens, “Abuses at the US-Mexico Border: How to Address Failures and Protect Rights,” WOLA and Kino Border Initiative Research Report, August 2023, www.wola.org/analysis/accountability-for-abuses-at-the-u-s-mexico-border-how-to-address-failures-and-protect-rights/.

¹⁵ See Paul J. Weber and Valerie Gonzalez, “Largest Housing Provider for Migrant Children Engaged in Pervasive Sexual Abuse, US Says,” *Associated Press*, July 19, 2024.

¹⁶ Juliana Kim, “How Trump’s Tax Cut and Policy Bill Aims to ‘Supercharge’ Immigration Enforcement,” *NPR*, July 3, 2025.

of migrant protections.”¹⁷ Mexico’s increased migration enforcement is being led by its National Guard. Created in 2019 and made up of mostly military personnel and under military command, the National Guard has been the subject of numerous human rights complaints, including for torturing,¹⁸ killing,¹⁹ and abusing²⁰ migrants. Such abuse by the INM, the National Guard, and the Mexican military is widespread. Mexico’s Catholic Bishops condemned the October 2024 killing of six migrants by Mexican soldiers in the state of Chiapas, noting that the killing was not an isolated incident but instead “a consequence of the militarization of immigration policy and the increased presence of armed forces on the country’s southern border, which has been a constant.”²¹

The region’s immigration-related institutions are also simply overwhelmed. In the United States, the immigration court backlog stands at more than 3.5 million cases.²² Mexico’s migrant shelter network is under-resourced and vastly overcrowded, and its refugee system has the capacity to process half as many asylum claims as it receives each month.²³ In the midst of all this, much of the work of migrant protection falls on faith communities. As Dylan Corbett of the Hope Border Institute has recently and powerfully argued, “faith-

¹⁷ Clare Ribando Seelke and Ramon Miro, “Mexico’s Immigration Control Efforts.” Congressional Research Service, March 12, 2023, www.crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10215.

¹⁸ Stephanie Brewer and Ana Lucía Verduzco, “Transformación militarizada: Derechos humanos y controles democráticos en un contexto de creciente militarización en México,” WOLA, September 6, 2023, www.wola.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Transformacion-militarizada.pdf.

¹⁹ “Mexico’s National Guard Kills Cuban Migrant, Wounds Four Others as Caravan Advances,” *Reuters*, updated November 2, 2021, www.reuters.com/world/americas/mexicos-national-guard-kills-cuban-migrant-wounds-four-others-caravan-advances-2021-11-02/.

²⁰ Mexican Soldiers and Immigration Agents Violently Detain Asylum Seekers, *Human Rights Watch*, September 8, 2021, www.hrw.org/news/2021/09/08/mexican-soldiers-and-immigration-agents-violently-detain-asylum-seekers.

²¹ David Agren, “6 Migrants Killed by Mexican Military Shooting at Vehicle Evading Checkpoint,” *National Catholic Reporter*, October 4, 2024, www.ncronline.org/news/6-migrants-killed-mexican-military-shooting-vehicle-evading-checkpoint.

²² “Backlog of Pending Cases in Immigration Courts, Some Graphics on the Border and Migration,” WOLA, updated March 14, 2025, borderoversight.org/files/wola_migration_charts.pdf; “Immigration Court Quick Facts,” TRAC, 2025, tracreports.org/immigration/quickfacts/eoir.html.

²³ “Claims Backlog Strands Growing Numbers of Asylum-Seekers in Southern Mexico,” United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, May 30, 2023, www.unhcr.org/news/stories/claims-backlog-strands-growing-numbers-asylum-seekers-southern-mexico.

based organizations in particular have been picking up the pieces of a broken system for decades.”²⁴

In the face of this reality, the moral theological traditions informing the work of people of faith are an important source to return to and draw upon. In this article, we propose looking to a neglected source of such wisdom for guidance: the martyred and sainted archbishop of San Salvador, Óscar Romero, along with the Catholic social tradition he drew upon and worked within.

While we are aware of no scholarly treatment of Romero’s thinking on migration, Romero is nevertheless widely considered a kind of unofficial patron saint for migrants and their advocates. The many murals along the US/Mexico border of San Romero de las Américas, as he is often known throughout Latin America, are a testament to this status.²⁵ The numerous shelters for migrants that bear his name are another. A particularly prominent one was opened by the Diocese of Brownsville in 1982. Known as Casa Romero, it provided food, clothing, and hospitality to more than 10,000 refugees from Central America’s civil wars (most from El Salvador and Guatemala), before closing in 1986.²⁶ Another shelter, still operating to this day, is Albergue San Oscar Romero de las Américas (ASOR), run by Annunciation House in El Paso and one of numerous borderland shelters extending hospitality to migrants, immigrants, and refugees.²⁷

Further bolstering Romero’s status as patron of migrants and their advocates was a landmark August 2023 meeting of bishops and representatives of Central American, Mexican, North American, and Caribbean conferences, all of whom gathered in at Romero’s burial site: the crypt of the Metropolitan Cathedral of the Divine Savior of the World in El Salvador. There, the bishops and others gathered pledged to “defend the dignity and rights of all human beings regardless of their origin or immigration status,” advocating for organizing a regional effort to address both the underlying reasons for migration and the dangers migrants too often face. Significantly, they said they sought solutions “so that each person is free to migrate or

²⁴ Dylan Corbett, “Telling the Truth About the Border: A Humane Vision for Border Management,” webinar, February 21, 2024, posted February 22, 2024, by Center for Migration Studies, YouTube, 39:32.

²⁵ Scott Wright, “St. Oscar Romero and the Drama at the US/Mexican Border,” *Independent Catholic News*, November 5, 2018, www.indcatholicnews.com/news/35938.

²⁶ “Church Shelter for Refugees in Texas is Closed,” *Los Angeles Times* Archive, October 31, 1986, www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1986-10-31-mn-8399-story.html.

²⁷ “Home,” Romero House, 2024, romerohouse.org/; Arelis R. Hernández, “This Catholic Leader Shelters Migrants. Texas Says He Runs ‘Stash Houses,’” *The Washington Post*, June 6, 2024, www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2024/06/06/texas-border-abbott-immigration-shelters/.

stay.”²⁸ That last phrase—about the right or freedom to migrate or not—is especially important and offers insight into the deep pattern of Romero’s thinking about migration, as well as that of Catholic social teaching more generally.

In this article, we draw on Romero’s thought to help elaborate upon the historical context and theological significance of this twofold right, along with some of its practical implications for us today. We show that attention to the historical context of Romero’s ministry, as well as his theological engagement with that context, evidences a profound theological understanding of and response to migration from which we still have much to learn. In the first part of this article, we interpret Romero as an archbishop who inherited and responded to a crisis related to the dispossession, forced migration, and impoverishment of the rural peasantry that affected El Salvador and Latin America more broadly (we will return to the language of “migration crisis” below). We show that while conflicts related to major demographic movements of peoples in El Salvador, as in Latin America generally, were well underway long before Romero became archbishop, the situation had grown especially acute in El Salvador during the time of Romero’s tenure. The resulting social unrest was one of the primary reasons for the civil war that began just after his death in 1980. Close consideration of this crisis not only sheds important light on the history of migration in the region, but also helps contextualize more recent migratory movements as part of a longer history of violence and injustice, an ongoing “crisis” that has only deepened and complexified.

Our primary purpose in what follows is to understand better Romero’s response to the crisis he faced and distill some important lessons that can be learned from it. We argue that Romero’s response is rooted in the doctrine of creation and witnesses to what Christians believe to be true about the earth and all else that God has made, a belief essential to any properly Christian response to migration in our own time. Drawing on what the Catholic social tradition calls “the common destination of earthly goods” (*Gaudium et Spes*, nos. 69–71), Romero helps us see that God gives the earth to humankind as a common gift, meant for the use and enjoyment of the whole human community. The common destination of earthly goods thus points to the imperative to share the earth God has given as a matter of basic justice. But it also and at the same time points to the unity of humankind, both in terms of common origin, and ultimately, common

²⁸ Diego López Colín, “In Front of the Tomb of St. Óscar Romero, Bishops Pledge to Care for Migrants,” *National Catholic Register*, August 31, 2023, www.ncregister.com/cna/in-front-of-the-tomb-of-st-oscar-romero-bishops-pledge-to-care-for-migrants.

destiny in heaven. These interrelated theological convictions about the commonality of the earth and the unity of the human family are why, as the Catholic bishops put it in their press conference near Romero's burial site, people should be free to decide whether to migrate or stay. We will also show that Romero's understanding of creation's commonality leads to a trenchant and still-relevant social analysis of violence, along with an account of related, though distinct, types of violence affecting and rending social life.

OSCAR ROMERO'S MINISTRY IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE "MIGRATION CRISIS"

As indicated above, our contention is that Romero as archbishop inherited a migration crisis and his whole ministry from 1977 to 1980 can be interpreted as a response to that crisis. However, this is not a lens through which scholars typically interpret Romero, and his thinking about migration remains unstudied. We therefore begin by filling out these claims further and clarifying why it makes sense to understand Romero in this manner.

In a seminal article, "Land and Labor in Latin American Agriculture from the 1950s to the 1980s," agricultural economists Alain de Janvry, Elisabeth Sadoulet, and Linda Wilcox Young analyze available statistical information across the region, contending that during this time the Latin American peasantry became "a great refugee sector." Peasant households faced a "double squeeze."²⁹ On the one hand, they increasingly lost access to land, and the average size of the land they did retain declined precipitously. On the other hand, the labor market in rural areas grew slowly, and landholders increasingly replaced permanent workers with seasonal ones. The effects of this double squeeze were various and complex. For our purposes, this squeeze meant peasant households were forced into off-farm work, with many becoming migrant laborers in agriculture. Another effect was a rural exodus, a vast demographic shift across the region from rural to urban areas. Poverty among this group also rose.³⁰

While Janvry, Sadoulet, and Young use the language of "refugee," the language of migration is more precise, and for two main reasons. First, as typically understood in international law, refugees flee their

²⁹ Alain de Janvry, Elisabeth Sadoulet, and Linda Wilcox Young, "Land and Labor in Latin American Agriculture from the 1950s to the 1980s," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 16, no. 3 (1989): 396.

³⁰ Janvry, Sadoulet, and Young, "Land and Labor in Latin American Agriculture," 396–424.

countries because they fear persecution.³¹ In contrast, the article does not describe the persecution of peasant households as much as the disintegration of the agricultural institutions and labor arrangements upon which they depended, such that peasant households became, as the authors write elsewhere in the article, “a residual category”³²—more discarded than persecuted by their societies. Second, as typically understood in international law, refugees flee their countries—their given political community—because they cannot count on its protection, whereas the authors describe a hemisphere-wide movement of peoples because of large-scale processes of dispossession, in which that movement mostly happened *within* countries, rather than *between* them.

In Latin America, the migratory dynamics Janvry, Sadoulet, and Young describe differed in their specifics from country to country. Let us look more closely at the case of El Salvador. There, an especially important development occurred prior to the 1950s-1980s period with the privatization of landholdings in the late nineteenth century. Primarily due to the Salvadoran state’s desire to expand coffee production, congress passed a series of laws abolishing various forms of communal landholdings that had developed in the wake of colonialization. The new legislation replaced these longstanding customary arrangements with a nationwide system of land tenure based exclusively upon individual and exclusive private ownership.³³

One significant consequence of these developments was the generation of new forms of vulnerability for the Salvadoran peasantry, particularly in terms of the risk of land loss and forfeiture. The new market in land also led to a rush to take and title claims, and many who acquired land were not farmers but speculators. During the early decades of the twentieth century, the process of land concentration was well underway, as larger, better capitalized coffee producers captured smaller farms.³⁴ A 1928 newspaper article described the situation this way: “The conquest of territory by the coffee industry is alarming. It has already occupied all the high ground and is now descending to the valleys, displacing maize, rice, and beans. It moves

³¹ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Text of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*, Article 1.

³² Janvry, Sadoulet, and Young, “Land and Labor in Latin American Agriculture,” 397.

³³ See Aldo Lauria-Santiago, *An Agrarian Republic: Commercial Agriculture and the Politics of Peasant Communities in El Salvador, 1823–1914* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999).

³⁴ An expanded version of this story is told in Robert G. Williams, *Export Agriculture and the Crisis in Central America* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1986), and in Charles D. Brockett, *Land, Power, and Poverty: Agrarian Transformation and Political Conflict in Central America* (Westview, 1998).

in the manner of the conquistador, spreading hunger and misery, reducing the former proprietors to the worst conditions.”³⁵

Those dispossessed by the expansion of coffee production had to migrate.³⁶ Most of those affected migrated within El Salvador. Some found a level of permanence as *colonos* or resident laborers on coffee *fincas* elsewhere in the country. Others relocated to the hot and humid coastal plains or to Salvadoran urban centers. A smaller but significant number left El Salvador for neighboring Honduras, where there was abundant work in the banana and sugar plantations, as well as plenty of unclaimed land upon which they could settle informally. By the 1960s, estimates are that up to 300,000 Salvadoran immigrants were living in Honduras.³⁷ In short, at this point in Salvadoran history, in the first decades of the twentieth century, these migratory movements were mostly internal to the country, as well as regional.

Later in the mid-twentieth century, a second wave of export-agriculture production occurred, centered upon the production of crops like sugar cane and cotton, as well as livestock. The coastal plain—where many dispossessed by the spread of coffee settled—was the principal site of the cultivation of these new crops, which meant those who had migrated there were once again dispossessed and so had to move. Aggravating this situation was the disintegration of the *colonato* or tenant farming system throughout El Salvador in the 1950s. Landowners evicted *colonos* and replaced them with migratory wage laborers, much as Janvry, Sadoulet, and Young describe in Latin America generally, forcing tens of thousands of peasant households to leave lands they had previously farmed and depended upon for their livelihoods.³⁸

These developments in El Salvador further intensified the migration of peasant households to urban centers, swelling informal settlements in the cities. Migrants rented or squatted on land that belonged to others, with obvious implications for their security, because they could be forced to move at a moment's notice. They increasingly found seasonal wage work in the Salvadoran agro-export economy, following the harvests in order to support themselves and their families. And finally, they also continued to migrate to Honduras.

³⁵ Quoted in Everett Alan Wilson, “The Crisis of National Integration in El Salvador, 1919–1935” (PhD diss., Stanford University, 1970), 122.

³⁶ This and the subsequent paragraphs of this section draw on Williams, *Export Agriculture and the Crisis in Central America*, and Brockett, *Land, Power, and Poverty*. When relevant to specific topics, additional sources are cited.

³⁷ William Durham, *Scarcity and Survival in Central America: Ecological Origins of the Soccer War* (Stanford University Press, 1979).

³⁸ For more on the *colonato* system and its disintegration, see Marcelo Germán Posada and Mario López, “El Salvador 1950–1970: Latifundios, integración y crisis,” *Revista de historia de América* 115 (1993): 37–62.

In 1969, the situation dramatically deteriorated. The Honduran government reversed its policy of tolerating undocumented Salvadorans who had arrived over previous decades and began expelling them in large numbers, effectively treating Salvadorans as scapegoats for the agrarian conflicts intensifying in the Honduran countryside at the time.³⁹ The Honduran government thus sent approximately 300,000 Salvadorans back to El Salvador. Relations between Honduras and El Salvador significantly worsened, and the two countries fought a brief war—known as the Soccer War—because the timing of the hostilities coincided with three contested matches in the qualifying rounds for the 1969 World Cup.

The return of so many Salvadorans to El Salvador only inflamed an already tense situation. El Salvador's being the smallest country in Latin America was an important factor contributing to social unrest. Migration to Honduras over previous decades represented a kind of pressure release valve, helping to prevent widespread turmoil related to lack of access to farming land. Thus, with the arrival of so many dispossessed, "pressure" built up rapidly that El Salvador could no longer escape.

It is therefore no coincidence that around this same time calls for agrarian reform in El Salvador grew in intensity, as did repression of those advocating for such reform. An historic Land Reform Congress in 1970 convened by the Legislative Assembly of El Salvador was a harbinger of what was to come. At the Congress, Ricardo Urioste and José Inocencio Alas (among others) represented the archdiocese of San Salvador. After his intervention, Alas was abducted, beaten, drugged, and left to die.⁴⁰ Over the course of the 1970s, those who argued for land reform and other structural transformations to address lack of land and livelihoods for the Salvadoran peasantry encountered a similar fate to Alas, and repression of reformers of all stripes intensified. By the end of the decade, repression had grown considerably in strength, ferocity, and organization.⁴¹ So did the calls for revolution, as more Salvadorans perceived the absence of a peaceful path toward reform. The intensity of the repression was thus closely related to the rise of left-wing insurgent groups, such as the Farabundo Martí Popular Liberation Forces (FPL) and the People's

³⁹ Such is the argument of Durham's *Scarcity and Survival in Central America*, 164.

⁴⁰ José Inocencio Alas, *Iglesia, tierra, y lucha campesina: Suchitoto, El Salvador, 1968–1977* (Algier, 2003).

⁴¹ Segundo Montes, *El Agro Salvadoreño: 1973–1980* (Universidad Centroamericana, 1980), 153–173.

Revolutionary Army (ERP), which advocated for violent revolution because they believed reform was no longer an option.⁴²

In *Romero: A Life*, James Brockman notes that Romero became archbishop “in the midst of a storm,” and that storm first formed and then broke because of the developments we have been tracing related to these migratory dynamics.⁴³ That storm was still surging in the final days of Romero’s life. As violence spread throughout the country in the early months of 1980—violence primarily tied to the government’s rollout of a long-sought agrarian reform and the militarization of the countryside that accompanied it—Romero directed archdiocesan churches to open their doors in order to shelter migrants streaming into San Salvador seeking refuge from the violence. “Our church,” he says about this situation in his final Sunday homily, “is fully aware that one of its principal obligations is to protect with charity those who are suffering, without regard to creed, politics, or way of thought.”⁴⁴

For these reasons, as we noted above, it makes sense to understand Romero as facing a migration crisis, by which we mean an unstable and conflictive time resulting from the dispossession, forced migration, and impoverishment of the country’s peasantry over previous decades. It is important to be both careful and precise here. The language of “migration crisis” has rightly been the subject of critique, among other reasons, because of the selective construal of certain large-scale movements of peoples as crises and others not, as well as because of how this language can feed into anti-migrant political sentiment.⁴⁵ Particularly important with regard to the migration under examination here and Romero’s understanding of it is how the language of “migration crisis” can easily obscure the conditions that produced the movement in the first place and generated the conflicts through which Romero guided his people. In other words, we cannot neglect how the “crisis” long antedated the late 1970s and had been felt by the rural peasantry in El Salvador and across Latin America.

⁴² Carlos Rafael Cabarrús, *Génesis de una revolución: Análisis del surgimiento y desarrollo de la organización campesina en El Salvador* (Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social (CIESAS), 1983).

⁴³ James Brockman, *Romero: A Life* (Orbis Books, 2005), 2.

⁴⁴ Óscar Romero, *Homilias*, ed. Miguel Cavada Díez, 6 vols. (UCA, 2005–2009), 6:444–445. All citations from Romero’s homilies are from this edition, citing volume and page number(s).

⁴⁵ J. McAdam, “Conceptualizing ‘Crisis Migration’: A Theoretical Perspective,” in *Humanitarian Crises and Migration: Causes, Consequences, Responses* (Routledge, 2014), 28–49. Cecilia Menjivar, Marie Ruiz, and Immanuel Ness, “Migration Crises: Definitions, Critiques, and Global Contexts,” *The Oxford Handbook of Migration Crises* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 1–18.

The language of “migration crisis” can also obscure how the conditions faced by rural peasant households in Romero’s day have not only continued but worsened across time, leading to novel but also interrelated movements of peoples today. The migratory movements of our own time are closely related to the history we have just recounted. They represent a continuation and exacerbation of its underlying dynamics. With the outbreak of civil war in El Salvador in 1980, new patterns of Salvadoran migration emerged. Those displaced by war not only settled in refugee camps, both within Salvadoran territory and in nearby countries. They also increasingly undertook the long and risky journey to the United States. As Cecilia Menjivar notes, this new migratory pattern to the US beginning in the 1980s “was dramatically larger [than previous waves] and included a wider spectrum of Salvadoran society: peasants, the urban proletariat, and members of the middle and upper classes.”⁴⁶

More recent migratory movements from El Salvador and the rest of the Northern Triangle (which also includes Guatemala and Honduras)—driven by hunger, climate change, and gang violence—are also complexly bound up with this history. For, as we will argue, the injustices suffered by Salvadorans—which Romero understood as a distinct form of violence—was not ameliorated by Romero’s advocacy, nor by the brutal civil war in which the revolutionaries fought the Salvadoran government to a standstill, nor by the peace accords that followed. Instead, drawing on Romero’s thought, we contend that while these older forms of violence remained, new forms of violence began to emerge and interact with older ones. That is, at least, how Romero would have us read our reality today.

THE RIGHT *TO* AND *NOT TO* MIGRATE

While Romero does not use the same terms we do today to speak about migration, his ministry as archbishop took place in the midst of deep and intractable conflicts related to migration. Our contention is that Romero’s response to the dispossession, forced migration, and impoverishment of the country’s peasantry—a response that, as we will see, draws heavily on Catholic social tradition just as it also carries it forward—warrants examination and remains one from which we can learn. For our purposes, we want to draw attention to two fundamental claims that shape Romero’s response—claims that derive from Catholic social tradition and, specifically, from the theological grammar of creation as a common gift.

⁴⁶ Cecilia Menjivar, “Salvadoran Migration to the United States in the 1980s: What Can We Learn About It and From It?” *International Migration* 32, no. 3 (1994): 375.

The first claim is that people have what Armando Bartra calls “the right not to migrate.”⁴⁷ All people have “the right to conditions worthy of human life,” in the formulation of *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*, the 2003 pastoral letter from the bishops of Mexico and the United States (no. 29).⁴⁸ While Romero himself does not use these phrases, his life and ministry are unintelligible apart from a commitment to what they convey: the right of people, in justice, to remain where they are and have access to land and livelihood there. As we will see below, this claim underpins Romero’s own advocacy for agrarian reform.

While it is well known that Romero was a champion of the impoverished and defender of their dignity, it is less well known that in El Salvador, among those who most needed such championing and defense were peasants, migrant workers, and their families. Comments like this one, from his December 24, 1978, homily, offer insight into this reality:

This Christmas, we are extremely concerned about the situation of so many peasant farmers and their children, who have no place to rest their bodies. Fleeing from the cold, they have no shelter for their bodies, finding nothing more than improvised hammocks amidst the agricultural fields and coffee plantations [to which they have migrated looking for work]. We have to believe that the Good News is for everyone in El Salvador. The Lord, who has created us to bring about his salvation in all things, wants happiness for us all. (4:103)

As this passage makes clear, the situation of peasant families and their children—the phrase Romero uses is *tantos campesinos y sus niños*—is that of *migrant* farmworkers and their children. These workers migrate in the first place because they have been dispossessed and so lack land to farm, as well as employment. They thus move in search of and in accordance with the rhythms of occasional, seasonal labor. Indeed, even though Romero does not often use the word “migration,” many of the dominant themes in his homiletical and literary corpus as archbishop—the *campesinado* (the peasantry), work, just wages, and the defense of worker organizations and associations like unions (especially in rural areas)—are inextricably tied to this theme. More specifically, his homilies, pastoral letters, and

⁴⁷ Armando Bartra, *Cosechas de ira: Economía política de la contrareforma agraria* (Istituto Maya, 2003), 33–54.

⁴⁸ Catholic Bishops of Mexico and the United States, *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*, January 22, 2003, www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/immigration/strangers-no-longer-together-on-the-journey-of-hope.

other writings continually return what he calls their “simple vital need to subsist” (*simple necesidad vital de subsistir*).⁴⁹

In response to the impoverishing consequences of migration, Romero not only advocates for improved wages and working conditions for peasant households, as well as the right of rural agricultural workers to organize and even unionize (rural unions were illegal in El Salvador at the time), he also critiques the exclusionary institutions and structures that have dispossessed so many and forced them to migrate. For instance, Romero characterizes the internal and regional migratory patterns discussed in the previous section as “fruit of the injustice in the rural areas.”⁵⁰ In other words, the fact that in El Salvador, as elsewhere in Latin America, the conditions for living a decent and happy life do not exist, effectively forcing people to have to exchange their land, is an injustice that, in turn, produces further forms of injustice.

This is the underlying rationale for the church’s advocacy for an authentic agrarian reform under Romero’s leadership—an agrarian reform that, as he characterizes it, “supports the efforts of rural peoples . . . to gain access to land and favorable conditions for its cultivation.”⁵¹ For Romero, rather than a simple redistribution of land, agrarian reform aims at a more fundamental social transformation, addressing the roots of injustice that produces migration in the first place. In his homilies, Romero hopes such reform will enable people to live a decent and happy life, provide for themselves and others, and participate more fully in the life of their communities.

Once again, it is crucial to see that Romero’s advocacy for agrarian reform is wedded to a more comprehensive critique of an exclusionary political and economic system, capable of “expos[ing] the social mechanisms that marginalize workers and *campesinos*” and force them to have to move to make ends meet.⁵² In Romero’s words, what is needed is a break from business as usual under a regime that allows “wealth to continue to accumulate and be concentrated in few hands.” This regime, Romero continues, wants “to put *campesinos* back to sleep and prevent them from continuing to organize and to increase their participation in social, political, and economic life.”⁵³ Instead, Romero wants them to wake up—or be *concientizado* or critically aware of their situation. This theme of *concientización* (conscientization)

⁴⁹ Romero, “Iglesia y Organizaciones Políticas Populares” in *La voz de los sin voz: La palabra viva de Monseñor Romero* (UCA, 1986), 99.

⁵⁰ Romero, *Homilias*, 6:396–397. Throughout this section of the homily, Romero engages the document of the Brazilian Bishops, *Igreja e problemas da terra* [*The Church and Land Problems*] (1980).

⁵¹ Romero, *Homilias*, 6:396–397.

⁵² Romero, *Homilias*, 6:60–63.

⁵³ Romero, *Homilias*, 6:74.

pervades Romero's writing, like much Latin American social thought of this period, and it speaks to Romero's desire to help his people awoken to a sense of their own dignity and thus participate in the struggle against their own oppression and dehumanization.⁵⁴

Rather than succumbing, the rural peasantry of El Salvador by this time had long been organizing themselves and advocating for agrarian reform led, among others, by Romero's friend and fellow martyr, Rutilio Grande and Romero followed suit.⁵⁵ What this movement sought was a revitalization of rural life by way of better distribution of land and other goods, which Romero gave voice to in a late homily: "Agrarian reform in El Salvador should have a broad perspective. It should involve the redistribution not only of land but of social resources. All *campesinos* and all poor people should have access to doctors, schools, hospitals, electricity, water, and all the rest. In a word, agrarian reform aims at what the [Second Vatican] Council described so beautifully as 'the development of the whole human being and of all human beings' (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 64)."⁵⁶

Romero is clear that the Salvadoran people have been the protagonists of the process of agrarian reform, struggling to realize it "from below." Romero is speaking in 1979, when a proposed agrarian reform "from above" was finally rolled out by the Salvadoran state, hence Romero's belief that the reform was not a "gift" the government was giving to the people but something owed to the people as a matter of basic justice, for which the Salvadoran people had long struggled and even shed their blood.⁵⁷

In these and other ways, Romero is clearly working to realize the right of his people in justice not to have to migrate, not to be forced to move from one place to another in order to find land and livelihood. He wants them to have access to productive property like land, as well as other material goods like adequate food, potable water, medical care, and education. He thinks access to such goods is indispensable to human survival and flourishing, which he describes in the passage

⁵⁴ On the theme of conscientization, see Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Penguin, 1996).

⁵⁵ For more on Grande's ministry, see Rodolfo Cardenal, *Rutilio Grande: Mártir de la evangelización rural en El Salvador* (UCA, 2015). For Romero's own advocacy for agrarian reform, see Matthew Philipp Whelan, *Blood in the Fields: Óscar Romero, Catholic Social Teaching, and Land Reform* (Catholic University of America Press, 2020); Matthew Philipp Whelan, "Like a Thorn in Our Sleeping Flesh: Changes in Óscar Romero's Reading of Catholic Social Teaching," in *Óscar Romero and Catholic Social Teaching*, ed. Todd Walatka (University of Notre Dame Press, 2024), 71–101.

⁵⁶ Romero, *Homilias*, 6:73.

⁵⁷ Romero, *Homilias*, 6:73.

above, drawing on *Gaudium et Spes*, in terms of integral or holistic human development.

However, as we have also seen, Romero does not simply want to give people what they need; he most wants to enable and support the agency of those suffering from impoverishment and other forms of injustice. Rather than being forced to move as a consequence of injustice, the rural peasantry, he thinks, should have the right not to have to move. They should have the freedom and available options to be able to decide for themselves.

Given that they were in fact forced to move, Romero wants to accompany them in recovering the agency taken from them. In the context of Romero's El Salvador, this meant that those forced to move should be involved in the struggle against all that oppresses and dehumanizes. Ultimately, Romero wants them, like all people, to have sufficient access, not just to material goods, but also to immaterial ones crucial to human flourishing—like the dignity, satisfaction, and sense of common belonging that comes from contributing to the good of the community. In one homily, Romero imagines people whose agency has been taken learning to say to themselves, "I am also a child of God; I also have to wake up to injustice; I also have to participate in the politics of the common good of my country."⁵⁸ Romero then proceeds to comment on the significance of their learning to speak in this way: "All people have received from God a capacity to contribute to the common good. Preventing people from pursuing such fulfillment, preventing them from contributing to the common good, is also an abuse of power. It is also a way of hoarding of goods that God has given for all."⁵⁹

To this day, others have similarly noted the right not to migrate as it emerges in Catholic social teaching, arguing that, in addition to attending to the rights of migrants in transit or political communities in which they eventually arrive, the tradition urges us to attend also to the underlying injustices that give rise to emigration.⁶⁰ For instance, in their 2003 pastoral letter mentioned above, *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*, the bishops of Mexico and the United States state that: "All persons have the right to find in their own countries the economic, political, and social opportunities to live in

⁵⁸ Romero, *Homilias* 1:217.

⁵⁹ Romero, *Homilias* 1:217.

⁶⁰ Mary M. DeLorey, "Economic and Environmental Displacement," in *Driven from Home: Protecting the Rights of Forced Migrants* (Georgetown University Press, 2010), 240, 243; Marvin L. Krier Mich, *The Challenge and Spirituality of Catholic Social Teaching* (Orbis Books, 2011), 133; Randy K. Lippert and Sean Rehaag, *Sanctuary Practices in International Perspectives: Migration, Citizenship, and Social Movements* (Routledge, 2013), 75, 87; David Bacon, *The Right to Stay Home: How US Policy Drives Mexican Migration* (Beacon, 2014).

dignity and achieve a full life through the use of their God-given gifts. In this context, work that provides a just, living wage is a basic human need” (no. 34).

At the same time, Romero simultaneously advocated for the *right to migrate* and consistently defended those forced to do so, as we have already begun to see. In Romero’s El Salvador, the vast majority of those in this category were the rural peasant households described above, on the move internally. Long before becoming archbishop of San Salvador, Romero spoke out forcefully about the treatment of migrant farmworkers, advocating for just wages, dignified living conditions, and the ability to organize without facing repression. As bishop in Santiago de Maria (from 1974 to 1977), he housed hundreds of farmworkers in church buildings and helped organize evening meals for them.⁶¹ Once again, while these forms of advocacy and works of mercy might not appear directly connected to migration, in Romero’s context, they were deeply tied to upholding the dignity and fair treatment of people who had been displaced. As archbishop, in a context of increasing governmental repression, Romero even mediated tense standoffs between squatters and landowners, defending those occupying lands illegally in order “to have a place to plant and give food to their families,” as he put it in one homily.⁶²

But more than simply defending the dignity and just treatment of migrants, he worked for their reception and integration within the community. Admittedly, Romero has less to say about the right to migrate than about the right not to migrate. He is primarily focused on the rights of those who move within El Salvador, rather than those who leave for other countries. However, this is not due to his lack of support for the latter but rather reflects the historical context in which he wrote. As noted earlier, large-scale Salvadoran migration to the United States did not begin until the 1980s—after Romero’s death.

Nevertheless, even on the subject of international migration, Romero advocates for a safe and orderly process through which people can move to another country and secure a livelihood that enables them to support themselves and their families. He suggests not only that people should have the right to migrate when necessary, but also that both sending and receiving governments should facilitate that movement when the need arises. As Romero explains his position in one homily: “God has made the earth for everyone, and if in El Salvador we’re all crowded together while other countries have unused land, people must arrive at an understanding so that the population is distributed more justly.”⁶³ When it is not possible to

⁶¹ Brockman, *Romero: A Life*, 54–55.

⁶² Romero, *Homilias*, 1:408.

⁶³ Romero, *Homilias*, 3:78.

establish conditions that allow people to live in safety and dignity in their own lands, their right to migrate to other lands should be recognized and actively supported by political communities.

What is especially significant about Romero's observation is its implicit rejection of the artificial divide between "economic" concerns—such as the use of the earth and its gifts by all peoples—and "political" concerns, like the regulated movement of people across borders and their reception within new political communities. In *Towards a Politics of Communion*, Anna Rowlands's apt characterization of later developments in Catholic social teaching on migration also apply to Romero's thinking here: "Claims for political membership relate to a wider set of economic questions—insofar as 'economic' is understood in its widest sense as connected to questions of access to, exchange, and distribution of goods."⁶⁴

THE GRAMMAR OF CREATION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR MIGRATION

At first glance, the two claims we have been examining that emerge out of Romero's thought seem to be in tension, if not contradiction. How do people simultaneously possess both a right not to and a right to migrate? In much scholarship on Catholic social teaching, these principles are often presented and explained without a deeper exploration of their underlying rationale. Can more be said about how Romero and the broader tradition of Catholic social teaching understand the relationship between these two rights?

What reconciles them is a fundamental, theological conviction, which we find in the statement from Romero quoted above: that "God has made the earth for everyone." For Romero, this belief about creation's grammar is axiomatic, structuring his thought both explicitly and implicitly.⁶⁵ In Catholic social tradition, this claim is oftentimes called the common or universal destination of goods. Arguably, the most authoritative, recent exposition of this doctrine is found in *Gaudium et Spes*:

God intended the earth with everything contained in it for the use of all human beings and peoples. Thus, under the leadership of justice and in the company of charity, created goods should be in abundance for all in like manner. Whatever the forms of property may be, as adapted to the legitimate institutions of peoples, according to diverse and changeable circumstances, attention must always be paid to this

⁶⁴ Anna Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion: Catholic Social Teaching in Dark Times* (Bloomsbury, 2021), 77.

⁶⁵ Whelan, *Blood in the Fields*, 85–139.

universal destination of earthly goods. In using them, therefore, [we] should regard the external things that [we] legitimately possess not only as [our] own but also as common in the sense that they should be able to benefit not only [us] but also others. (no. 69)

In this passage, we read that God creates the heavens and the earth and all they contain for the use and enjoyment of all peoples. While property takes diverse forms across time and space, this does not abrogate God's giving of the earth for common use and enjoyment. Rather, the whole rationale and purpose of property is to facilitate and subserve common use, a rationale and purpose upon which we must insist and to which property must constantly be called back. "All other rights, whatever they may be, including the rights of property and free trade, are to be subordinated to this principle" (*Populorum Progressio*, no. 22). The same can be said about the borders between nations.

This passage from *Gaudium et Spes* also implies that such common use and enjoyment is not the case in the world in which we actually live, and that the reason for this is sin. On this view, the vast inequalities between people and persistence of extreme poverty in the midst of excessive wealth is a scandalous injustice. As Romero puts it, "There are not two categories of people. There are not those who have been born to have everything and leave the rest with nothing . . . and cannot enjoy the happiness that God has created for all."⁶⁶ Rather, there is only one category of people, one community—humankind—whose members are meant to share the gift of God's creation in common. Such sharing, according to the document, is a matter of elemental justice, of what is due to all people as members of the human community. However, in a world damaged by sin, the work of charity is also necessary to ensure that all people have what is theirs in justice.

For these reasons, as Rowlands shows, Catholic social tradition on migration as it develops from the 2000s onward repeatedly foregrounds human dignity and the common destination of goods "as the two foundational principles for guiding a Catholic social response to the ethics of migration."⁶⁷ The tradition regards the failure to realize the universal destination of goods as a key factor behind migration, just as it also influences the reception—as well as rejection—of migrant claims by political communities.⁶⁸ Moreover, as Rowlands also reminds us, "This failure also has a history; it exists as a structural reality that shapes moral agency and requires more than a presentist

⁶⁶ Romero, *Homilies*, 6:61.

⁶⁷ Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion*, 77.

⁶⁸ Matthew Desmond argues that widespread economic anxieties have led many Americans to scapegoat immigrants. While these anxieties are real and deeply felt, blaming immigrants for economic hardship is a misleading and false narrative (*Poverty, By America* [Crown, 2023], 33–36).

analysis.”⁶⁹ A central aim of this article has been to recount that history as it relates to Latin America, while offering an analysis that moves beyond presentism.

A number of further implications follow from this belief about creation’s commonality that point to lessons we can learn from Romero’s theological understanding of and response to migration. For instance, as noted above, this belief about creation radically relativizes the borders habitually erected around both property and nation. Let us begin with property. As *Gaudium et Spes* states, the commonality of creation unsettles ordinary understandings of what belongs to me and what belongs to others. What we possess is common, in the sense that our possessions are not just meant for our own exclusive use, but that of others as well. Once we use what we possess to meet our needs and those of our dependents, what we have in excess is due to others as a matter of justice. In this way, property has an inherent “social sense,” “function,” or “mortgage,” as Catholic social teaching variously describes it, the implication being that the institution of property, including property in land, should always be ordered to the common use of creation. Thus, as in Romero’s case, if people have much more land than they need, that excess should be relinquished so as to meet the needs of others, especially those who lack what they need, for the sake of the common good.

While this is the underlying theological logic of Romero’s advocacy for agrarian reform, it also funds a more expansive politics of common use, prioritizing access of all people to God’s gift of creation that has important implications for migration.⁷⁰ According to this politics, it is the responsibility of all people, including the impoverished themselves, to ensure that the laws and policies of our societies facilitate a widespread distribution of land, property, and wealth in order to ensure such common use, resisting the tendency of the few to hoard what belongs to all. Moreover, as *Gaudium et Spes* goes on to state explicitly, when people are in extreme necessity, they do not need to wait for others to give them what they need. Rather, they have “the right to procure for [themselves] what [they] need out of the riches of others” (no. 69). This statement not only challenges the institution of property as it is often understood today, but also implies that when people are forced to migrate due to extreme necessity, they do so not as trespassers but as rightful claimants to the created goods required for their survival and dignity.

This theological logic thus illuminates Romero’s efforts to realize the right of his people not to migrate—that is, to be able to live in dignity and safety in their lands, having access to what they need to

⁶⁹ Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion*, 78.

⁷⁰ This is a central argument of Whelan, *Blood in the Fields*.

survive and flourish—as well as the right to migrate. People should be able to enjoy what is their due and should not be forced to migrate in search of such conditions. At the same time, this conviction about creation's commonality also relativizes the borders we habitually erect around nations. Where people cannot access what is due to them as beneficiaries of God's gift of creation in a particular land, those people should be able to migrate in order to find those conditions in a different one. Doing so is an implication of the belief that God created the earth for the use and enjoyment of all people, and that working together to facilitate this common use and enjoyment is essential for realizing God's purposes for creation. The inner logic of Romero's view is that a sufficient share of created goods belongs to those in need—not because of what they have done or failed to do, not because of who they are, and not because of their membership in a particular political community. It belongs to them because they are members of the human community to whom God gives the gift of creation for common use. The basis of this belonging is their bodily need.⁷¹ People's right to the created goods due to them in justice is a right without borders.

The belief about creation's commonality thus points to another implication we can draw from Romero's thinking, concerning what it means to be human. As powerful and important as are the ties of nationality, local community, family, and other forms of identity in shaping our lives, Romero insists that God gives the gift of creation to humankind as a whole. It is a gift that, by transcending and relativizing national borders, underscores the unity of humankind. To reiterate Romero's words cited above: there are not different categories of people. There are not those who have been born to have everything and others, the rest, to be left with nothing, for God gives the gift of creation to all. This belief applies not simply within but also across particular countries. This common origin and destiny leads Romero to speak of an equality among us rooted in the dignity we all share, or relatedly, in the human rights that belong to all of us.⁷²

A final lesson we can learn from Romero, one that derives from his belief about creation's commonality, relates to his social analysis of violence. If God gives creation to the community of humankind as a whole, it follows that if some accumulate all the land and leave the rest with nothing, as the oligarchy did in El Salvador, they are implicated in multiple forms of violence. The first and most fundamental form is that, on Romero's way of thinking, they act like thieves, taking in excess what belongs to all and is due to others in

⁷¹ The formulations of this paragraph come from Whelan, *Blood in the Fields*, 75.

⁷² These theological convictions are foundational to Romero's thought. See, for instance, Romero, *Homilias*, 1:60, 102, 169, 387.

justice. “You are possessing the land that God has given to all Salvadorans,” Romero tells them in one homily.⁷³

This unjust taking of what belongs to others, especially those who lack the created goods they need to survive and flourish, is a violence done to their dignity as human creatures made in God’s image and likeness. As Romero explains in his address at the University of Louvain in 1980:

The poor majorities of our country are oppressed and repressed daily by the economic and political structures of our country. Among us the terrible words of the prophets of Israel remain true. Among us there are those who sell the just for money and the poor for a pair of sandals [Amos 8:6]; those who hoard violence and spoil in their palaces [Amos 3:10]; those who crush the poor [Amos 2:7]; those who bring near the kingdom of violence, while they lie in beds of ivory [Amos 6:3-4]; those who join house to house and annex field to field until they occupy everything and remain alone in the land [Isaiah 5:8].⁷⁴

In this passage, this violence against human dignity is, as Romero puts it, a “daily” (*cotidiana*) occurrence, a violence coterminous with the existing institutions and structures of his country.⁷⁵ Although Romero does not use this exact phrase, we will refer to this violence as “ordinary violence” in order to distinguish it from another form of violence to which it is closely related: what the Latin American bishops at Medellín, Colombia called “institutionalized violence.”⁷⁶ While ordinary and institutional/structural violence are often intertwined, they are in fact distinct forms of violence. Following Romero, we understand ordinary violence as a violation of dignity due to lack of basic goods like food, drink, clothing, shelter, medical care, and in the case of Romero’s El Salvador, land. This violation of people’s dignity can be distinguished from the institutions and structures preserving and perpetuating that violence. Thus, differentiating ordinary violence from the institutions and structures that sustain it helps clarify Romero’s reasoning.

⁷³ Romero, *Homilias*, 6:420.

⁷⁴ Romero, “La dimensión política de la fe desde la opción por los pobres” in *La voz de los sin voz*, 187.

⁷⁵ For more on this understanding of violence, see Matthew Philipp Whelan, “‘You Possess the Land that Belongs to All Salvadorans’: Archbishop Oscar Romero and Ordinary Violence,” *Modern Theology* 35, no. 4 (2019). The article briefly explores affinities between Romero’s thinking and scholars from a range of disciplines, who have also attended to forms of violence differentiated from violence as physical force directly wielded against others, which intends injury, destruction, or death.

⁷⁶ Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano, “Paz,” secs. 15–19 in *Las cinco conferencias Generales del Episcopado Latinoamericano* (San Pablo), 103–105.

What makes ordinary violence particularly pernicious precisely is that it is so ordinary, assumed to be part of the normal functioning of social life. Romero thought that the commonplace character of such violence made it particularly difficult to perceive and uproot. As he observes in the same Louvain address, "It has always been among us, but so often hidden, even from the eyes of the Church itself."⁷⁷ Thus, for Romero, while other, more dramatic episodes of violence easily capture people's attention, the ordinary violence people daily suffer too often blends into the background, which makes it difficult to perceive, much less respond to. "It is as if it has become the air we breathe,"⁷⁸ he says elsewhere. In his third and fourth pastoral letters especially, Romero argues that this ordinary violence, along with the institutions and structures that sustain it, is the primary forms of violence with which Christians and people of good will should be concerned.⁷⁹

Also in his third and fourth pastoral letters Romero carefully attends to various forms of violence faced by the people of El Salvador and develops a working typology of violence more generally that shapes his social analysis of the exclusionary political and economic system of El Salvador and beyond.⁸⁰ In addition to the ordinary violence just mentioned, along with institutional or structural violence, Romero names other, more familiar forms of violence. For instance, there is "the repressive violence" of the state and allied actors (murder, disappearances, kidnapping, terrorizing, imprisonment, torture, rape, clandestine killing, and so on), as well as the "revolutionary violence" of other groups that oppose or otherwise seek to topple the state and also often engage in similar forms of violence. Romero also analyzes what he calls "spontaneous violence"—by which he means uncalculated and unorganized violence—as well as the violence of "legitimate self-defense" and what Romero drawing on Medellín calls "the moral force of non-violence."

These other forms of violence—typically carried out by specific persons or groups—involve the direct use of weapons or physical force to harm or kill others. In this sense, they differ from both ordinary violence and institutional and structural violence, where the harm inflicted is often indirect, though no less damaging or deadly. Yet all these forms of violence, each in its own way, violate the dignity

⁷⁷ Romero, "La dimensión política de la fe desde la opción por los pobres," 185.

⁷⁸ Romero, *Homilias*, 5:60.

⁷⁹ Romero, "Iglesia y organizaciones políticas populares" y "Misión de la iglesia en medio de la crisis del país," in *La voz de los sin voz*, 113–114, 156–157.

⁸⁰ The forms of violence that follow are described and discussed in more detail in Romero, "Iglesia y organizaciones políticas populares" y "Misión de la iglesia en medio de la crisis del país," 113–118, 156–159.

of creatures made in God's image and likeness who share a common origin and destiny.

As already indicated, Romero regards ordinary violence and the institutions and structures that sustain it as the most fundamental violence to which followers of Christ must attend. It is, in Romero's words, "the most acute form in which violence appears on our continent and in our own country," "the taproot" (*la raíz principal*) of the other violence.⁸¹ The image suggests that ordinary violence, along with institutionalized and structural violence, is therefore like the central root from which other, lateral roots of violence ramify. In this way, Romero does not deny or minimize the other forms of violence he discusses. Rather, his point is simply that both ordinary and institutionalized/structural violence are primary; other forms of violence are tied to them and therefore should be viewed in relation to them. Consequently, if we are concerned about peace, we must address the central form of violence. Doing so not only defends people against the violence being done to their dignity, but it can also address other forms of violence as well.

Regarding Romero's social analysis of violence, it is crucial to recognize that the very perception of ordinary violence—along with the institutions and structures that perpetuate it—is grounded in his theological understanding of creation as a common gift. Romero's conviction that God bestows creation on the whole of humanity compels him to pay particular attention to those who have been excluded from this gift. This belief also underpins his sharp critique of the people, institutions, and structures responsible for such exclusion.

ROMERO AND MIGRATION TODAY

Romero's understanding of the theological grammar of creation as a common gift continues to be relevant to the realities of contemporary migration. His perspective challenges the tendency—even among advocates of Catholic social teaching—to elevate the "right" of nations to regulate and defend their borders as a foundational principle, as if it holds equal or greater weight than the right of all people to access created goods that are theirs in justice.⁸² Romero helps us see that, in truth, it is this latter right that stands as the true

⁸¹ Romero, "Iglesia y organizaciones políticas populares" y "Misión de la iglesia en medio de la crisis del país," 114, 155.

⁸² See, for instance, Bishop Robert Barron: "It is a Cornerstone Principle of Catholic social teaching that a country has the right and indeed the obligation to defend its borders," *Facebook*, www.facebook.com/BishopRobertBarron/posts/friends-it-is-a-cornerstone-principle-of-catholic-social-teaching-that-a-country/1811134632258989/.

cornerstone of Catholic social teaching on migration and the broader tradition.⁸³ Whatever rights nations have to control their borders must be understood as subordinate and subservient to this more imperious and ancient form of justice (see *Rerum Novarum*, no. 45).

The core insight of Romero's social analysis of violence—that the violation of human dignity is an ordinary occurrence, embedded in and perpetuated by systems that deny access to the goods of creation—also remains profoundly relevant to the question of migration today. Moreover, it is also the case that the ordinary and institutionalized/structural violence to which Romero draws our attention has never been fully addressed, nor has the taproot of the violence been torn out. Today, throughout Latin America and beyond, the violence done to human dignity due to lack of food, clothing, shelter, medical care, and employment takes different forms than it did in Romero's day and differs across the hemisphere. But it remains firmly in place, continuing to drive the movement of peoples across the Americas and beyond. It is therefore crucial to see today's migration as part of a deeper story and to heed Rowlands's insight that the failure to realize the common destination of created goods has a history that implicates our present moment.

The ordinary violence of hunger and impoverishment of those excluded from God's gift of creation remains a cause and consequence of migration in the Americas today. According to the most recent data, 48% of El Salvadorans, 56% of Hondurans, 60% of Guatemalans, and 82% of Haitians are moderately or severely food insecure.⁸⁴ Families in Central America's Dry Corridor frequently report spending more than two-thirds of their income on food.⁸⁵ Hunger is especially severe among the indigenous Mayan population in Guatemala, where poverty rates reach 79% (40% live in extreme poverty), and childhood stunting rates reach 90% in the most impacted areas.⁸⁶

⁸³ In the decade after Romero's death, John Paul II would refer to the common destination of created goods as "the first principle of the whole ethical and social order," "the characteristic principle of Christian social doctrine" (*Laborem Exercens*, no. 19; *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 42).

⁸⁴ "Prevalence of Moderate or Severe Food Insecurity in the Population (%)"—Guatemala, Honduras, Haiti, Venezuela, RB, Mexico, El Salvador, Nicaragua," Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, data.worldbank.org/indicator/SN.ITK.MSFI.ZS.

⁸⁵ World Food Programme, "Food Security and Emigration: Why People Flee and the Impact on Family Members Left Behind in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras," August 23, 2017, reliefweb.int/report/el-salvador/food-security-and-emigration-why-people-flee-and-impact-family-members-left. The Dry Corridor is a strip of land across El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua that is vulnerable to extreme climate events like long periods of drought.

⁸⁶ "Guatemala Country Brief," World Food Programme, August 25, 2021, reliefweb.int/report/guatemala/wfp-guatemala-country-brief-july-2021.

While Romero's social analysis of violence remains relevant to migration today, that analysis needs to be updated to include still other, novel forms of violence that exclude people from God's gift of creation. Two are especially important to single out. The first is the violence associated with gangs, including the forms of violence that produce them. The second is the violence of climate change that especially affects the Dry Corridor of the Northern Triangle.

The gang violence pervasive in parts of Central America today is an outgrowth of the account we have been offering here, a consequence of the failure of Romero and so many other reformers throughout the hemisphere at that time to realize the right not to migrate by fostering greater sharing of God's gift of creation. As Jonathan Blitzer has powerfully shown, the ruthless street gangs operating in El Salvador and elsewhere—the MS-13 and Barrio 18 (18th Street Gang)—are profoundly linked to El Salvador's civil war and US immigration policy.⁸⁷ Undocumented refugees from Central America's civil wars, and especially from El Salvador's, poured into Los Angeles in a context of complicated social conflicts between African Americans, Mexican Americans, and their respective gangs. The 18th Street Gang, which began as a largely Mexican American gang in the late 1950s and early 1960s, gets its name from a three-block area in the Pico-Union area of LA.⁸⁸ MS-13 similarly began in LA in the early 1980s and largely comprised new arrivals from Central America.⁸⁹ Then, in the late 1980s, the Immigration and Nationalization Service started working with local police to crack down on gang violence by deporting undocumented members of MS-13 and Barrio 18. By 1989, they had deported roughly nine thousand, mostly to El Salvador, without warning the Salvadoran government. As Blitzer argues, "American deportation policy [therefore] . . . turned local street gangs from LA into an international criminal network."⁹⁰

The gangs, themselves a product of the violence we have been examining, in turn produce abundant violence. Throughout the region today, gang violence forces young men to flee forced recruitment and young women and girls to flee sexual coercion. Gangs force migration in another way as well: through pervasive extortion rackets. Oftentimes, families simply cannot pay the extortion demanded by the gangs and still meet food and other essential needs. In one Guatemalan neighborhood, a community member told researchers, "[In my community], everyone pays extortion. There is no one that does not

⁸⁷ Jonathan Blitzer, *Everyone Who Is Gone Is Here: The United States, Central America, and the Making of a Crisis* (Penguin, 2024).

⁸⁸ Blitzer, *Everyone Who Is Gone Is Here*, 159.

⁸⁹ Blitzer, *Everyone Who Is Gone Is Here*, 160.

⁹⁰ Blitzer, *Everyone Who Is Gone Is Here*, 262.

pay,” to which another community member added, “Even the grannies pay!”⁹¹

Another, novel form of violence that drives migration today is climate change. As Kevin O’Brien and others have argued, climate change is an assault on life and its future on earth. It is both a “natural” phenomenon—manifesting in more extreme and frequent weather events, such as hurricanes, droughts, and floods—and a profoundly “social” one—rooted in a tangle of decisions and policies disproportionately made by the privileged and disproportionately suffered by those who are not.⁹² Central America’s Dry Corridor is a good example of this. It is an impoverished region extraordinarily vulnerable to such change, even as its inhabitants have contributed historically very little to its causes.⁹³ Many smallholders throughout the Dry Corridor continue to depend on seasonal rains for agricultural production, and those rains have become increasingly infrequent and unpredictable. When the rains do come, they are often more extreme, leading to flooding and landslides. The effects of climate change and climate extremes in the region therefore put additional pressure on households dependent upon agriculture. Many of those who migrate today, like those who migrated in Romero’s day, are agricultural workers whose lands no longer sustain them and can no longer provide a viable livelihood. Climate change has thus emerged not only as a new form of violence but one that amplifies and intensifies older forms, deepening the exclusion of already impoverished and vulnerable people from what God gives for the benefit of all.

CONCLUSION

In light of these realities, where can we discern echoes of Romero’s legacy today? One powerful example is the late Pope Francis, for whom migration lay at the heart of his pontificate. In 2013, Francis’s first papal visit was to Lampedusa, Italy, the closest part of Europe to North Africa and the landing site of thousands of migrants who make the perilous journey across the Mediterranean. In his homily, Francis drew attention to a then-recent tragedy, in which a boat capsized and resulted in the death of over three hundred and fifty people. Echoing

⁹¹ José Miguel Cruz, Johnathan D. Rosen, and Josué Sánchez, “Understanding Intervention Programs and Gang Governance at the Local Level: The Case of Northern Central America,” Florida International University, August 2021, lacc.fiu.edu/research/the-street-gangs-in-central-america-research-initiative-scrain/understanding-intervention-programs.pdf.

⁹² Kevin O’Brien, *The Violence of Climate Change: Lessons of Resistance from Nonviolent Activists* (Georgetown University, Press, 2017), 2–4.

⁹³ International Organization for Migration, *La movilidad humana derivada de desastres y el cambio climático en cCentroamérica* (IOM, 2021).

Romero's understanding of ordinary violence, Francis observed that such events "happen all too frequently," fading into the background of our concerns. "In this globalized world, we have fallen into globalized indifference," he continued. "We have become used to the suffering of others."⁹⁴

In 2023, for the National Migration Week in September, which culminates in the World Day of Migrants and Refugees, Francis chose the theme "Free to choose whether to migrate or to stay." In his message before the United Nations, Francis observed:

The decision to migrate should always be free, yet in many cases, even in our day, it is not. Conflicts, natural disasters, or more simply the impossibility of living a dignified and prosperous life in one's native land is forcing millions of persons to leave. Already in 2003, Saint John Paul II stated that "as regards migrants and refugees, building conditions of peace means in practice being seriously committed to safeguarding first of all the right not to emigrate, that is, the right to live in peace and dignity in one's own country."⁹⁵

While Francis says that "the principal responsibility falls to the countries of origin and their leaders, who are called to practice a good politics—one that is transparent, honest, farsighted and at the service of all, especially those most vulnerable," he also acknowledges that ensuring the freedom to stay "must be seen as a shared responsibility on the part of all States with respect to a common good that transcends national borders. Indeed, since the world's resources are not unlimited, the development of the economically poorer countries depends on the capacity for sharing that we can manage to generate among all countries." Ensuring the freedom to stay will also involve, Francis notes, stopping much of what we are currently doing, including "halt[ing] the arms race, economic colonialism, the plundering of other people's resources and the devastation of our common home."⁹⁶ Indeed, as Francis has insisted elsewhere, ensuring the right to stay means addressing the ordinary violence against human dignity, as well the institutions and structures that sustain it. It also means working together to create conditions where people can stay and live in safety

⁹⁴ Pope Francis, Homily of July 8, 2013, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130708_omelia-lampedusa.html.

⁹⁵ Pope Francis, *Message for the 109th World Day of Migrants and Refugees*, May 11, 2023, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/20230511-world-migrants-day-2023.html, citing Pope John Paul II, *Message for the 90th World Day of Migrants and Refugees*, December 15, 2003, www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/migration/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20031223_world-migration-day-2004.html.

⁹⁶ Pope Francis, *Message for the 109th World Day of Migrants and Refugees*.

and dignity in their homes and where the common destination of created goods is a reality.⁹⁷

Francis's words not only echo Romero's concerns, but also point to all those who are, in manifold ways, working to make real the right not to migrate. Throughout the Americas, faith communities and people of good will are responding to the drivers of migration. From large Christian NGOs like Catholic Charities and World Vision, to the Red Comparte⁹⁸ network of Jesuit communities working with producer communities facing impoverishment and exclusion, to the "barrio evangelicals"⁹⁹ doing the slow, difficult work of helping men leave Central America's gangs, we see faith communities, like many others, working to realize the right to remain.

In much the same way, we see echoes of Romero's right to migrate in Francis as he argues that "even as we work to ensure that in every case migration is the fruit of a free decision, we are called to show maximum respect for the dignity of each migrant" and to "[expand] channels for a safe and regular migration."¹⁰⁰ Or, as Francis writes in *Fratelli Tutti*, "Our response to the arrival of migrating persons can be summarized by four words: welcome, protect, promote, and integrate" (no. 129).

We also see this right to migrate being respected and honored in how churches in Latin America and the United States is responding to the needs of today's migrants—from the vast networks of Catholic migrant shelters in Mexico doing work the state cannot or will not do, to organizations along the US-Mexico border, such as Catholic Charities Rio Grande Valley in Brownsville, the Hope Border Institute and Annunciation House in El Paso, and the Kino Border Initiative along the border in Arizona. Across Mexico, the United States, and beyond, churches and organizations are working to welcome, protect, promote, and integrate migrants and refugees into their communities and congregations, making newcomers, in the words of the Mexican and US bishops, "strangers no longer." For all these reasons, it is fitting that Romero is remembered as a patron saint of migrants and their advocates, as well as of all who bear witness to the shared gift of creation and to rights that have no borders. **M**

⁹⁷ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, nos. 38, 118–120, 129, 132, October 2, 2020, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

⁹⁸ "Who We Are," Comparte, 2024, www.redcomparte.org/en/quienes-somos/.

⁹⁹ Robert Brenneman, *Homies and Hermanos: God and Gangs in Central America* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 57–62.

¹⁰⁰ Pope Francis, "Message for the 109th World Day of Migrants and Refugees."

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