

12-1-2022

Questioning Hope at our Borders - 2022 Presidential Address

Victor Carmona
University of San Diego

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.usfca.edu/jhlt>

Recommended Citation

Carmona, Victor "Questioning Hope at our Borders - 2022 Presidential Address," *Journal of Hispanic / Latino Theology*. Vol. 24 : No. 2 , Article 5. (2022) :90-101
Available at: <https://repository.usfca.edu/jhlt/vol24/iss2/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Hispanic / Latino Theology by an authorized editor of USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. For more information, please contact repository@usfca.edu.

Questioning Hope at Our Borders
ACHTUS Presidential Address, June 7, 2022¹

Victor Carmona

University of San Diego

Thank you, everyone, for attending this evening's celebration. I am grateful to Cardinal-designate Bishop Robert McElroy of San Diego for his words of welcome and his presence among us.² Thank you, Dr. Gail Baker, Provost of the University of San Diego, for joining us this evening. I also profoundly thank my colleagues in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies. Their tremendous support personally and institutionally through the Portman Endowment in Catholic Theology, a program of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at USD's College of Arts and Sciences, made this annual in-person gathering possible—our first since the pandemic began. Thank you for supporting the advancement of research in U.S. Latinx Catholic theology. I am also grateful to the Louisville Institute and the University of Notre Dame for their support in making this endeavor possible.

Before I begin, I want to thank the community of scholars that is ACHTUS, especially Virgilio Elizondo: you helped me find a way to bridge my Mexican and American identities through our faith. For that and much more: gracias.

My address this evening has three moments. First, I will acknowledge our communities' wounds. I will then move to reflect on those wounds by questioning our hope. And finally, I will

¹ ACHTUS, the Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians in the U.S., held its 2022 Colloquium, "Crossing Borders: Latinx Catholic Theological Insights," June 5-9 2022 at the University of San Diego, California.

² Bishop McElroy gave words of welcome to the participants prior to this address. This was his first public gathering with theologians after being named cardinal on May 29, 2022, a week before our colloquium began.

conclude with actions I encourage us to take.

Acknowledging Our Communities' Deepening Wounds

In recent days, months, and years we have witnessed the deepening wounds that mark the reality—and more profoundly still, as Ada María Isasi-Díaz would have us see, in lo *cotidiano*—of our communities.³ We have witnessed these wounds at the borders and margins of our families, our society, and its institutions.

Barely two weeks ago, days after a mass shooting left ten dead in Buffalo, New York, the community of Uvalde, Texas, lived the horror of the *matanza* at Robb Elementary School.⁴ Nineteen third and fourth-grade students and two of their teachers were killed; their families and communities are heartbroken. It was an evil act that brought to mind the *matanza* of August 3, 2019, at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, which left twenty-three dead.⁵ Those are but three of a litany of mass shootings that speak to how we, in the words of Bishop Daniel Flores of Brownsville, have come to “sacralize death’s instruments and then are surprised that death uses them.”⁶

³ Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996).

⁴ The shooting in Buffalo, N.Y., took place on May 14, 2022. The shooting in Uvalde, TX, took place ten days later, on May 24, 2022. “10 People are Killed and 3 are Wounded in a Mass Shooting at a Buffalo Grocery Store,” *The New York Times*, May 14, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/05/14/nyregion/buffalo-shooting#at-least-10-people-are-killed-in-a-mass-shooting-at-a-buffalo-grocery-store-a-local-official-says>. “What we Know, Minute by Minute, about how the Uvalde Shooting and Police Response Unfolded,” *The Texas Tribune*, May 27, 2022, <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/05/27/uvalde-texas-school-shooting-timeline/>.

⁵ “El Paso Bishop: Latinos Feel ‘They have Targets on their Backs,’” *America*, October 13, 2019, <https://www.americamagazine.org/2019/10/13/racism-border-el-paso>.

⁶ Daniel E. Flores [Bishop of Brownsville, TX] (@bpdflores), Twitter Post, May 25, 2022, 4:37 am, <https://twitter.com/bpdflores/status/1529426405305602048>.

In mid-May, our country marked over one million COVID deaths. Our communities have experienced the pandemic in ways that reflect the structural inequalities that mark our nation's life. The *New York Times* reports that “Latino people between the ages of 40 and 59 have been infected at five times the rate of white people in the same age group . . . [Centers for Disease Control] data shows. The differences are even more stark when it comes to deaths: Of Latino people who died, more than a quarter were younger than 60. Among white people who died, only 6 percent were that young.”⁷

The pandemic has also pushed back our dream of immigration reform even further. As in Brownsville, El Paso, and Tucson, here in San Diego, we have seen how our government's branches wield Title 42 of the U.S. Code to curtail the ability of foreigners, particularly Mexicans, Central Americans, and Haitians, to seek asylum in the U.S., even after COVID vaccines became widely available.⁸ (The federal government granted an exemption to Ukrainians when they began arriving in Tijuana to seek asylum at the San Ysidro Port of Entry.)⁹ According

⁷ “The Fullest Look Yet at the Racial Inequity of Coronavirus,” *New York Times*, July 5, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/05/us/coronavirus-latinos-african-americans-cdc-data.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

⁸ The order authorizes the government to expel migrants at our land borders to curtail the spread of a communicable disease into the US. “On March 20, 2020, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) issued an emergency regulation to implement a specific aspect of U.S. health law. Section 265 of U.S. Code Title 42 permits the Director of the CDC to ‘prohibit . . . the introduction’ into the United States of individuals when the director believes that ‘there is serious danger of the introduction of [a communicable] disease into the United States.’ The HHS regulation allows any customs officers—which includes officers of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) such as Border Patrol agents—to implement any such order issued by the CDC.” American Immigration Council, *A Guide to Title 42 Expulsions at the Border* (Washington, DC: American Immigration Council, 2022), https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/sites/default/files/research/title_42_expulsions_at_the_border_0.pdf.

⁹ “Advocates say Ukrainian Title 42 Exemption Should be Expanded to Others,” *KJZZ, Fronteras*, March 22, 2022, <https://fronterasdesk.org/content/1766001/advocates-say-ukrainian-title-42-exemption-should-be-expanded-others>.

to the Migration Policy Institute, until February of this year, the government had conducted 1.7 million expulsions under title 42, “1.2 million of them under the Biden administration.”¹⁰ The policy may be in place for years. In her undergraduate research, Anna Salvestrin shows that the US government invoked title 42, from 1987 to 2010, to bar “HIV-positive people from entering the United States and [to permit] the deportation of permanent resident immigrants if they tested positive.”¹¹

Migrant shelters in our Mexican twin-border sister cities, many of them operated by groups that are part of the Catholic Church, are struggling under mounting logistical, economic, political, and social pressures, including pressure from organized crime. Last May 18, José Guadalupe Rivas, a priest of the Archdiocese of Tijuana who directed the migrant shelter in nearby Tecate, was murdered.¹² He is not the only one. Others, mostly lay people doing right by migrants, have lost their lives or have received threats.¹³ Migrants themselves have also been murdered, including seventy-two undocumented people in Tamaulipas, Mexico, on August 22,

¹⁰ “Controversial U.S. Title 42 Expulsions Policy Is Coming to an End, Bringing New Border Challenges,” Migration Policy Institute, March 31, 2022, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/title-42-expulsions-policy>.

¹¹ Salvestrin is a 2022 graduate of USD’s Theology and Religious Studies major. Anna Salvestrin, “Cultivating Compassion in Catholic Teachings: An Invitation to Relationship with Immigrants and Refugees with HIV/AIDS” (Bachelor of Arts in Theology and Religious Studies University of San Diego, 2022).

¹² See “Killing of Mexican Priest in Tecate Prompts Calls for Greater Security for Migrant Advocates,” *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, May 23, 2022, <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/border-baja-california/story/2022-05-23/mexican-priest-tecate>.

¹³ Case in point: The article referenced above states that “Since 2005, at least 47 pastoral workers within the Catholic Church have been killed in Mexico.”

2010.¹⁴

Our colloquium has also highlighted the reality of the borders and boundaries that mark the lives of our families and communities and the violence that we visit upon ourselves as a result. We visit racism, misogyny, homophobia, even the violence of our immigration system, upon each other. We see this inside our families, parishes, and community centers. We see it in our LGBTQ centers, hospitals, prisons, and detention centers. And as Fernando Alvarez Lara suggested during our second *en conjunto* session at this colloquium, we see this in our classrooms, where “we receive the sacred stories of our students.”¹⁵

Unending mass shootings, COVID’s mark on our communities, an immigration reform deferred yet again, migrants and their shelters under threat, the violence that we visit upon ourselves in our families, parishes, and communities. These are but some of the wounds that mark our communities’ reality at the borderlands and beyond. How can we not lose hope? How can we not desire to turn our gaze away?

When I worked with the bishops’ pastoral care of people on the move in Mexico, I learned that it is hard—if not irresponsible—to remain hopeful when seeing such woundedness. Scalabrinian Father Flor Maria Rigoni once told me that hope for immigrants and those serving them is like a stone that one kicks forward each step of the way. His words stung because they were raw with brokenness, but I saw some truth in them. Since then, I have heard similar words from others doing right by those whom our society, its institutions, and our [Catholic] Church

¹⁴ “La Masacre de Tamaulipas: El Sueño Americano Muere en México,” *El País*, February 20, 2021, <https://elpais.com/especiales/2021/la-masacre-de-tamaulipas-el-sueno-americano-muere-en-mexico/>.

¹⁵ Fernando Lara, Second *En Conjunto* Session, at “Crossing Borders: Latinx Catholic Theological Insights,” ACHTUS Colloquium, University of San Diego, California, June 5-9 2022.

(all of us are Church) continue to injure. However, something has changed since then.

Our politics, including inside the Church, have become polarized to the point of disconnecting many from reality, from our communities' wounds. All of us in this room tonight are leaders: in our classrooms and universities, in the academy, the Church, and our communities. The best of U.S. Latine theology calls us to keep our gaze, and the gaze of those who we serve, on our wounds. Otherwise, we will fail to grapple with the fundamental questions that we and those we serve, especially our students, are asking: *¿Dónde está Dios? ¿Dónde está su Pueblo?* Where is God? Where is God's People?

Questioning Our Hope

The question of Jesus' ongoing presence among the wounded is important, I believe, for a spiritually and intellectually honest grappling with the questions at hand: *¿Dónde está Dios? ¿Dónde está su Pueblo?* While I acknowledge that theologians and ministers (lay and ordained) have taken up hope in problematic ways—our colloquium's conversations have rightly warned us against trafficking in hope—I would like to invite us, as U.S. Latine Catholic theologians, biblical scholars, and scholars of religion, not to give up on hope. Let me turn to three reasons why I believe that to be the case.

First reason: we need to be attentive to our communities' wounds. In *Christ Our Companion*, Roberto Goizueta writes that it is there that “the truth of Christ's claims (and the claims of Christians through the ages) is an embodied truth—namely, that of the crucified and risen Lord who continues to accompany us today.”¹⁶ That deeply incarnational and sacramental claim implies, he argues, our need to participate “in the lives of those peoples who are

¹⁶ Roberto S. Goizueta, *Christ Our Companion: Toward a Theological Aesthetics of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2009), 23.

themselves crucified victims, those whose wounded bodies are the mirror of our souls.”¹⁷ To be clear, Goizueta is not aiming to justify Jesus’ suffering or our communities. Rather, what he is gently inviting us to see is that U.S. Christians has a problematic tendency to seek protection from those who are wounded. Those who are wounded threaten “our sense of invulnerability, security, and control”; they uncover our fragility and frailty.¹⁸ We become tempted, to borrow an insight from Greg Boyle’s work with homeboys in Los Angeles, to despise the wounded.¹⁹ As Goizueta suggests, their mere presence implies our being in relationship and poses questions that lead to dangerous memories of actions past: *Why* are you wounded? Have I or we played a part in causing your wounds? Am I helping or hindering your healing? May I or my loved ones suffer similar wounds one not too distant day? Those are dangerous questions leading down dangerous paths. And so, we turn our gaze away from those who are wounded and seek protection from them. That is one of the main functions of borders and barriers. Polarization in our politics, inside and outside the Church, functions in a similar way.

Attempts to deny our fragility and our frailty come at a high cost for Catholics. We are robbing ourselves of the ability to see Jesus’ ongoing presence in our midst. While ecclesial leaders (ordained and lay) debate whether fellow Catholics deserve to enjoy the intimacy of being with Christ in the Eucharist, we seem to be desperately attempting to deny his intimate presence among the wounded.

Second reason: Hope is a challenging—perhaps even dangerous—dimension of our faith, but it is a necessary one. The struggles of the Church in Latin America influenced Gustavo

¹⁷ Goizueta, *Christ our Companion*, 23.

¹⁸ Goizueta, *Christ our Companion*, 17.

¹⁹ Gregory Boyle, *The Whole Language: The Power of Extravagant Tenderness* (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2021).

Gutiérrez's insight that a hermeneutic of hope must be at the heart of theological reflections on the meaning of poverty and marginalization, including in the context of forced migrations. Gutiérrez's words on this point are sobering in the U.S. context. He writes: "This does not in any way mean that illusions should be created among the poor and the migrants. That is not hope. Hope is a gift of God that needs to be rooted in the daily life of each person."²⁰ As Jesus' disciples, ecclesial leaders across the Church (we are all Church), including theologians, are called to act in ways that are attentive to the hope with which God graces our communities. Discipleship so conceived is not easy because it poses a challenge to U.S. Catholics and fellow Christians. It is a challenge, Goizueta suggests, that we tend to resist: the challenge of exercising spiritual childhood in our accompaniment with the wounded who struggle for justice.

While striving for a hermeneutic of hope can be dangerous because it may be confused with illusion or delusion, Orlando Espín, in *Idol and Grace*, challenges us to see that Jesus's hope is also dangerous precisely because it *is* subversive.²¹ If we are attentive, we will see that God keeps alive Jesus's subversive hope among those whom many Christians, including many U.S. Latine Catholics, are shunned by our families, our schools, and our parishes because they are queer, undocumented, divorced, or Black or Brown. They have kept Jesus' subversive hope alive through an understanding of prayer to which we desperately need to be attentive—even more so when too many simply say "our thoughts and prayers" in response to the wounds that we visit upon each other. I will quote Espín's definition at length:

Praying is an attitude, a risk, and an openness to the Mystery we call "God." This

²⁰ Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Poverty, Migration, and the Option for the Poor," in *A Promised Land, A Perilous Journey: Theological Perspectives on Migration*, ed. Daniel Groody and Gioacchino Campese (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 84.

²¹ Orlando O. Espín, *Idol & Grace: On Traditioning and Subversive Hope* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2014).

attitude, risk, and openness are radically anti-idolatrous, and radically subversive of all our certainties, because openness to the Mystery cannot be programmed or induced. It is literally a ‘radical’ risk (from the Latin *radix*, root). Openness to the Mystery must also defy our certainties regarding the Mystery and our own openness to it. Openness to the Mystery is neither key nor guarantee of the encounter with the Mystery. At most, openness is just that: a dangerous openness, which is an attitude and a risk before it is a condition.²²

We need prayer that is radically subversive of all our certainties about who we think God is. Espín’s words point to the problematic tendency of U.S. Christianity to idolize European-American cultures, communities, and mores—for example, concerning the Second Amendment—by remaking the compassionate God, and our faith in that God, in their image and likeness. From that perspective, we can appreciate just how polarized and violent a faith Christianity in the U.S. has become; a fate, colloquium conversations suggest, that we are concerned U.S. Latine Catholicism may soon share. In this context, we cannot let go of Jesus’ subversive hope, as Espín argues, that God “is really intervening in this world, transforming it according to God’s compassionate will.”²³

Third and final reason: An eschatological hope nurtures our struggles for justice even as it keeps our hearts open to God’s compassion for all, including those who actively oppose it. Today, we celebrated the tenth anniversary of Nancy Pineda-Madrid’s *Suffering and Salvation in*

²² Espín, *Idol & Grace*, 29.

²³ Espín, *Idol & Grace*, 6.

Ciudad Juárez.²⁴ At the colloquium, Nancy Pineda-Madrid kept us focused on the Reign of God even as we grapple with the reality of suffering. “We are not called to suffer,” she said, “what we are called to do, what matters, is our response to *this* suffering.”²⁵ Many of us do theology and biblical and religious scholarship as an intrinsic part of that response. The witness of Pineda-Madrid, Espín, Goizueta, Gutiérrez, and Isasi-Díaz suggests that for us to be able to do this we must keep our hearts open to God’s compassion for all, even those who wound us so. When I worked with immigrants and refugees, and at times since then, I’ve known that I’ve come close to losing hope because my heart was hardened against those who harm them. Here, an eschatological hope in God and God’s reign may nurture us during such times. In the words of José Antonio Pagola: “*Esto es lo más grandioso del amor de Dios: que tiene poder para aniquilar el mal sin destruir a los malos. Hace justicia a Jesús sin destruir a quienes lo crucifican.*”²⁶ That is the compassionate God of the Reign in Whom we have our dangerous, subversive, and eschatological hope.

Responding in Light of Our Hope *Desde Nuestras Fronteras*

So what is our response to be as U.S. Latine Catholic theologians in light of our hope, from our borders? Where do we stand as a portion of God’s people? This coming year, I encourage us to do three things.

²⁴ Nancy Pineda-Madrid, *Suffering and Salvation in Ciudad Juárez* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011).

²⁵ Nancy Pineda-Madrid, “Aniversario Conversation: Suffering and Salvation—Ten Years On,” paper delivered at ACHTUS Colloquium, “Crossing Borders: Latinx Catholic Theological Insights,” University of San Diego, June 5-9 2022.

²⁶ “This is what is greatest about God’s love: that God has the power to annihilate evil without destroying those who are evil. That God vindicates Jesus without destroying those who crucify him.” Translation mine. José Antonio Pagola, *Jesús. Aproximación Histórica* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: PPC Cono Sur, 2013), 449.

First: We need to begin to be in regular conversation with our colleagues at our sibling organizations, the Black Catholic Theological Symposium (BCTS) and the College Theology Society (CTS). Let us explore the possibility of holding regular joint gatherings so that we may nurture each other's hope in the Reign of God, as we struggle for justice, within and across our communities. As U.S. Latine theologians we must continue facing up to the reality of racism, misogyny, and homophobia in our families, communities, and classrooms. Many simply respond to these challenges by either leaving their faith at the door or closing the door of our faith. Dialogue with colleagues at BCTS (which meets here at USD in October) and at CTS may nurture ways forward. I will reach out to our colleagues with that invitation in mind and listen to where the Spirit leads us all.

Second: I encourage all members of the Academy to participate in the Synod on Synodality at our parishes, dioceses, colleges, and universities. The experience, for me, has been meaningful because it has nurtured my ability to challenge our siblings in faith in the broader Catholic community *and* it has nurtured my ability to *listen* to them and *their* sense of hope in the Reign of God. I am grateful to leaders at the diocese of San Diego, including our bishop, Cardinal-designate Robert McElroy, and Marioly Galvan, our Chancellor and Director of Pastoral Ministries, for welcoming my service to the Church in that space.²⁷ I acknowledge that in some contexts, diocesan leaders across our country have not welcomed or nurtured the

²⁷ Bishop McElroy attended the banquet, where he gave words of welcome to the participants in what was his first public gathering with theologians after being named cardinal on May 29, 2022, a week before our colloquium began. The Diocese of San Diego has made its preliminary reports on the first year of the synodal process publicly available on its website. For the English version, please see "Synthesis: The Synodal Process," Diocese of San Diego, updated June 2022, https://sdcatholic.org/wp-content/uploads/synod/2022-reports/Synod_ProcessReport_A_Eng.pdf. For the Spanish version, please see "Síntesis de Proceso Sinodal," Diocese of San Diego, updated June 2022, https://sdcatholic.org/wp-content/uploads/synod/2022-reports/Synod_ProcessReport_A_sp.pdf.

participation of theologians and biblical scholars—and even less so the ones who are U.S. Latine. In those cases, let us reach out to each other for solidarity, support, and *solertia* to find ways of participating alongside other members of U.S. Latine communities.

Third: Let us remain attentive to the worsening polarization in our politics. With many of our members, I am concerned by the question of whether mainline U.S. Catholic media is sufficiently nurturing U.S. Latine Catholic reporters, writers, and editors. To nurture a Church and a polity grounded in our service to the Good News of God’s compassionate love, we must keep our gaze firmly focused on our communities’ wounds—more so when we want to turn our gaze away from those wounds. Here, I am also keeping in mind the witness of the *Black Catholic Messenger*.²⁸ Perhaps we should not wait for mainline Catholic media. I will be reaching out to our membership to identify how ACHTUS can be a part of the solution.

So, I close with this short prayer: May we, U.S. Hispanic Catholic theologians, biblical scholars, and scholars of religion, not give up on the need for hope in our work. May we be true to the compassionate God of the Reign, in Whom we have our dangerous, subversive, and eschatological hope. ¡*Gracias!*

²⁸ See, for example, this piece by Mary McConner, which “makes the case for a more full-orbed witness to social justice in the life of the Catholic Church, a witness that includes more robust opposition against racist and anti-immigrant policies: Mary McConner, “Analysis: How U.S. Catholic Leaders Can Make Equity and Justice Their Priority,” *Black Catholic Messenger*, May 31, 2022, <https://www.blackcatholicmessenger.com/mcconner-case-study-oped/>.