

Grounded on Divine Action to Lead!

Response to Robert Chao Romero

Rev. Dr. Jessica Lugo

Thursday, February 5, 2026

Good morning and thank you for this meaningful gathering.

It is truly an honor to respond to Dr. Chao Romero's conference. This conversation matters, you being here matters... here, now, *hoy y ahora*, because theological work should never be just theory.

Theological work must shape our lives, churches, and futures.

I want to begin by locating myself—not as an explanation, but as a grounding. I come to this response as a woman, as a Latina, as a Puerto Rican, as a pastor, an educator, and a leader. As Ted mentioned... I live and work in more than one world at the same time. Not because I'm divided, but because I'm formed that way.

For a long time, I was told, directly and indirectly, that this was a problem.

Too Latina for some spaces.

Not Latina enough for others.

Too church-centered for the academy.

Too critical for the church.

Too spiritual for activism.

Too strategic for pastoral work.

But here is what I now know, after my second reading of *Mañana*: my dual reality is not something to fix, it is something to steward.

Again, that realization didn't happen overnight. I first encountered *Mañana* during seminary back in 2009, when I was searching for a language big enough to hold faith and questions at the same time. I returned to it fifteen years later as a leader carrying responsibility—not just curiosity. Same book. Very

different posture.

And that difference matters.

From my perspective, *Mañana* was never meant ONLY to affirm those on the margins. As Dr. Romero reminded us, *Mañana* invites us to challenge the idea that one kind of theology, the North Atlantic dominant, was the norm, and everything else was a footnote. That challenge wasn't just about ideas. It was about who gets to lead.

Romero calls *Mañana* a roadmap, not a destination. I would add this: roadmaps are for people who are going somewhere on purpose. Which means the question today is not whether we belong in theological conversations— but whether our institutions are ready for where we are already headed.

As a Puerto Rican woman, my experience doesn't fit neatly into common Latino categories. We are citizens, but not fully sovereign. Not immigrants but shaped by displacement. Deeply rooted in culture, yet living under an ongoing colonial reality.

That complexity is not confusion. It is clarity earned the hard way.

Such spaces allow me to see how power works, how faith adapts, and how people survive, and even flourish, without guarantees. That is not victimhood. That is formation.

When Romero speaks of *mestizaje* as a promise, I resonate deeply. But promises require honesty. Without naming power, *mestizaje* can become romantic instead of liberating.

What *Mañana* invites us to do now is not abandon that vision, but deepen, own it, and act upon it. This is why I now read *Mañana* not only as a prophetic voice, but also as leadership wisdom. The challenges facing the church today, loss of trust, polarization, burnout, and young people

walking away, are not just organizational problems. They are signs that old frameworks can no longer carry the weight of our reality.

And let me say this clearly: *Mañana* is not the end of the story, nor just a book written 35 years ago. It is a call to lead differently.

In my work with pastors and leaders across the Hispanic church, I meet people who are not asking how to survive. They are asking how to be faithful without pretending. They want a faith that holds justice and spirituality together. Tradition and change. Critique and hope.

That hunger is holy and demands divine action.

As a woman, I also want to name what still feels unfinished. Latina theology has opened doors, but opening doors is not the same as sharing authority. *Fuenteovejuna* calls us not just to speak together, but to decide together and experience God's divine action *en conjunto*.

At AETH, this is not theoretical. We are not interested in recreating old hierarchies with new language. We are committed to forming leaders who can think deeply, lead courageously, and build institutions that last.

Romero's image of *Jesús el pelado* stays with me. A Jesus not aligned with power, but with vulnerability. Not abstract, not elite, but deeply human. This Jesus refuses both nationalist Christianity and shallow progressivism. He stands with the disposable, and calls US leaders to do the same.

For many today, the question isn't whether there is something more. It's whether the church is brave enough to live it.

For me, *mañana* is no longer just about the future. It is about responsibility, now.

As a pastor, I hear the call to lead with tenderness and truth.

As an educator, to form leaders with courage and depth.

As a strategist, to build structures worthy of the people they serve.

So I received this conference with gratitude, and with confidence. Not because the work is done, but because we are no longer waiting for permission to continue it.

If *Mañana* taught us anything, it is this: the future of theology belongs not to those who guard it, but to those who live it, here and now. Because if we want a better *mañana*, we must lead faithfully today.

Thank you.

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