

Rutilio Grande (1928-77)¹

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In 1985, the Irish Jesuit Province established a small community in the Silloge Road flats in Ballymun, on the northern periphery of Dublin. It was an area where a high degree of socio-economic deprivation marked the lives of many of the people. The new Jesuit community was named in honour of Fr. Rutilio Grande, a Jesuit priest who was little known to most people at the time, SJ. He is still not well known. So, who was he?

An Impoverished Community

On 12 March 1977, at around 5 p.m., Rutilio Grande set out from Aquilares to say Mass in nearby El Paisnal. Aquilares and El Paisnal are part of the parish of Aquilares in El Salvador, Central America. Rutilio knew the road well, as El Paisnal was the little town where he had been born and raised. His father had been the local mayor a number of times and some of Rutilio’s relatives still lived there. In 1972 Rutilio became parish priest of the combined area, which encompassed 30,000 people.

The great majority of the people in El Paisnal were economically poor. They lived in rural areas in very cramped dwellings without electricity, running water or adequate sanitation. This reflected the national pattern in a country where great tracts of land, owned by a few, were dedicated to the export of produce like sugar, coffee and cotton. Since this form of agriculture was in no way able to absorb the number of people seeking employment, the majority of the peasants could only find work for less than half the days available in any one year.

The result was that, while the work in the countryside gave the peasants a small income, in another way it actually added to their poverty. For example, in 1973 the daily consumption of calories per person in this region was 1,683, whereas the minimum necessary for basic living was estimated at 2,200.² These workers, forced to produce food for export in a country where most people were battling hunger, were themselves not even reaching minimum subsistence levels,

¹ Pope Francis has begun the process that could lead to the canonisation of Rutilio in the future.

² *Rutilio Grande: Martir de la Evangelizacion Rural en El Salvador* (San Salvador: UCA Editores, 1978), p. 61.

Liberation Theology

Rutilio was known as the apostle of rural evangelisation. He had formed a team whose approach to pastoral work was inspired by liberation theology. Liberation theology already existed in an incipient form prior to the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and to the Conference of Latin American bishops in Medellín, Colombia (1968), but both of these events gave it considerable impetus in Latin America, where huge numbers of people were both Christian and mired in poverty.

At the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church facilitated the rise of liberation theology by speaking of Christian identity in the modern world, especially in the context of those who are poor. It also spoke about the need to read the signs of the times for the sake of historical fidelity to the desires of God for our world. In Latin America, the growing awareness of the plight of the poor was understood theologically as a sign that God was calling and guiding 'his' people to respond to their historical situation.³

These developments in consciousness, as well as the optimism of the 1960s, led to a belief in the possibility of real social change. They led the Bishops at Medellín to declare that 'by its own vocation Latin America will undertake its liberation at the cost of whatever sacrifice'.⁴ In the eyes of the bishops, the struggle for liberation was a vocation, because it was not simply about seeking to overcome injustice, misery, and oppression; it was, more profoundly, about mediating God's salvation in history on the grounds that such realities were sinful.⁵

The emphasis in liberation theology on giving priority to the economically poor was not only about overcoming such sinful oppression; it was also about how salvific work was to be carried out. Basic Christian communities were to be developed, bringing the economically poor together around the resources of their Christian faith. The poor were to be trusted and encouraged to read social reality, scripture, and Church tradition from the perspective of their own experience of poverty. They were also to be empowered to work together in finding ways of transforming their lives. By engaging in this process, the poor were to be instruments in spreading God's universal saving love at work in history. All of this meant that those who had been used to a clerical model of authority, where certain people were presumed to have the right to tell others how to think, feel and act, now had to adapt to a different way, based on dialogue, solidarity, partnership and mutuality.

³ Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops, *The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council* (Washington, D.C., 1979), p. 19

⁴ Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops, p. 23.

⁵ Second General Conference, p. 33, n. 3; p. 34, n. 4.

Growing Conflict

By assuming this approach, Rutilio and his team found themselves in conflict with those who were afraid the peasants would organise themselves effectively, become self-confident and well-informed, and as a result rise up against their suffering and exploitation. These opponents decided to combat the powerful energy that had been released by using the force of death. The three-mile journey from Aquilares to El Paisnal took Rutilio along a dirt road between two fields of sugar cane. Two companions began the journey with him, Manuel, a 72-year-old man and Nelson, a fourteen-year-old boy who suffered from epilepsy. Forty-eight years old, Rutilio began the journey that would lead him to his tomb.

At one time, Rutilio had suffered terrible doubts about his own worth, doubts that had tortured him for years and had made him hesitate to present himself for priestly ordination as a Jesuit. He had overcome these doubts, however, just as he subsequently overcame the disillusion he experienced when he was dismissed as formator, lecturer and director of social action in the Major Seminary. The authorities had taken this step because he was too outspoken on behalf of the economically poor, and because he refused to reflect a clerical model of the Catholic Church. Not alone in their fears and concerns, the authorities were persuaded more by the voice of caution than by the prophetic faith of Rutilio, and those whose concerns he represented.

Appointed parish priest in Aquilares in 1972, Rutilio quickly came into direct conflict with rich and powerful people. He was vulnerable and he knew it. He had been warned that his life was in danger. On the very day he set out to say Mass in El Paisnal, suspicious people had been spotted around the parish. He was also acutely aware of what they had done to Jesus in his day, as he reminded the people in a homily he preached a few weeks before his death.

If Jesus were to enter through the border...they would detain him. They would take him to many courts and accuse him of being unconstitutional...of being a foreign Jew, of intrigues through exotic and strange ideas...they would crucify him again...Many prefer a Christ with a muzzle on his mouth. Many prefer a Christ made for our own whims and who acts according to our own interests. This is not the Christ of the Gospels.⁶

Clearly, Rutilio realised that to be called to be a companion of Christ in the circumstances of that time in El Salvador, meant running the same

⁶ *Rutilio Grande, SJ: Homilies and Writings*, edited, translated, and annotated by Thomas M. Kelly (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2015), p. 120.

risks as the historical Jesus, The implication of his words was that if you experienced yourself called to be a companion of the Christ of the Gospels in your own time and place, then you ran the same risks as the historical Jesus. But Rutilio was not deterred by this realisation. The people would be waiting. He would go to them.

Final Journey

On that final earthly journey, Rutilio stopped his car to give three young children a lift. As he drove off again it became apparent that a pickup truck was following them. Ahead they saw a blue car with California registration plates. The car was stopped and there were men on either side of the road with weapons by their sides. The pickup accelerated and came up menacingly behind them. Rutilio and his companions were clearly in danger.

One of the men by the side of the road lit a cigarette. This was the signal for murder. The bullets came from both sides as well as from behind. They pierced Rutilio's neck, head, lower back and pelvis. The elderly Manuel, who tried to shield Rutilio, was also killed. The children in the back of the car survived. They were allowed to run away. As they did so, they heard a further shot being fired. It killed young Nelson, who had suffered an epileptic seizure, and was unable to escape the car.

Today three small crosses mark the spot along the road where Rutilio and his companions were killed.⁷ Scripture reminds us that no greater love is possible than to lay down one's life for one's friends (Jn 15:13). Rutilio Grande died for love of God and of some of the poorest people in the world. The three bodies were brought to the church in El Paisnal, and if you go there today you will see three slabs on the ground marking their graves. The Jesuits wanted all three to be buried side by side.

A Spate of Murders

At 10.30 p.m. that evening, the new archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero, arrived to say Mass for the 3 who had been killed. He had known Rutilio for many years, and a large photo of him was hanging in his simple home when I visited in 1991. Cautious and traditional up to that point, Romero was converted by the assassination of Grande to take a consistently daring public stand on behalf of the poor. Three years later during Mass in a cancer hospital, as he held his arms open at the

⁷ I celebrated the Easter ceremonies in the open air in the hills of Chalatenango in 1992. The economically poor people with whom I celebrated the ceremonies came from the area where Rutilio had grown up and been parish priest. They told me about having to leave their dead to the dogs in order to keep ahead of the military that were pursuing them.

offertory, Romero was fatally shot through the heart and slumped to his death under the large cross hanging above the altar.

The death of Grande and his companions marked the beginning of a spate of murders in El Salvador. Best known among those killed were Jean Donovan, who had studied in Cork a year earlier, and her three missionary companions from the US (1980), and Ignacio Ellacuria and his five Jesuit companions from the University of Central America (1989). That said, countless numbers of so-called ordinary people were also targeted, people like Elba Julia and her daughter, Celina, who had taken refuge with the Jesuit community in 1989, but were murdered with them.

All these stories make us aware that it can be dangerous to be an authentic Christian in this world. They also make it seem that ‘the world has escaped from the hands of God’.⁸ But the greatest evidence against such appearances is the testimony of those who, like Rutilio, have found themselves so taken over by God’s love that they are ready to offer everything in return. Let us never forget Rutilio and his courageous faith, hope, and love. And let us be inspired by him to play our part in standing up for and with those whose struggle for faith and justice reflects God’s dream for the world.

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⁸ Luis Espinal, SJ, *Oraciones a Quemarropa* (La Paz: Asamblea Permanente de Derechos Humanos, 1981), p. 85. Luis was assassinated on 22 March 1980 in Bolivia, two days before Romero in El Salvador.