

## **Rutilio and Romero – Martyrs for Our Time<sup>1</sup>**

*Homily delivered by Julian Filochowski at St Martin-in-the-Fields Church, London Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> April 2021*

**“Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”**

John 12: 24

Martyrdom is the supremely Christian death. Rutilio Grande and Archbishop Romero are two inspiring 20<sup>th</sup> century martyrs. They were both executed like Jesus - on the orders of the military rulers of El Salvador. Why? For “stirring up the people” - as Luke chapter 23 puts it...

It was Tertullian in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century who gave us the enduring message: - “The Blood of the Martyrs is the seed of the Church.” Whilst bishop Pedro Casaldaliga from Brazil, warned us: - “Woe to that people that forgets its martyrs”. In an era of junk media and bad news we can easily forget the good news of even recent martyrs.

Every year on March 24<sup>th</sup>, the anniversary of his assassination, the Anglican Communion celebrates the Feast of Oscar Romero **and all the Martyrs of El Salvador** too. And there have been many in the repression and killings both preceding and during El Salvador’s civil war. Some 800 names have been collected as ‘anonymous witnesses to the gospel’ and over 500 identified as ‘credible martyrs’. St Oscar Romero is pre-eminent amongst them, and we honour his ministry and martyrdom in this church every year in a special ecumenical liturgy.

Killed prior to Oscar Romero, but yet bound up with him, is the Jesuit priest Rutilio Grande. He is soon to be beatified, as Blessed Rutilio Grande, along with two lay companions. Rutilio is an attractive and energising figure for us Christians, struggling to follow Jesus, in a world, dare I suggest it, of unresponsive structural injustice that is breeding inequality and destitution.

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks and apologies go to Rutlio Grande’s biographers – Rodolfo Cardenal, Thomas Kelly, Rhina Guidos and Ana Maria Pineda whose ideas and words I have brazenly pillaged for this sermon. It is without references and it was never intended for publication. But with the YouTube video of the presentation available online it was decided that the text should be made available too.

I can warmly commend their four English-language biographical volumes on which I have drawn:-

‘The Life, Passion and Death of the Jesuit Rutilio Grande’ by Rodolfo Cardenal SJ  
ISBN 9781947617063

‘Rutilio Grande – A Table for All’ by Rhina Guidos  
ISBN 9780814645642

‘When the Gospel Grows Feet – Rutilio Grande & the Church of El Salvador’ by Thomas Kelly

ISBN 9780814680773

‘Romero and Grande – Companions on the Journey’ Ana Maria Pineda RSM  
ISBN 9781943901043

I never met Rutilio Grande but within weeks of his killing in March 1977 I visited the roadside shrine marking the place where together with his 72-year-old friend Manuel Solorzano, and 16-year-old Nelson Lemus, he was shot dead.

It's widely accepted that it's impossible to understand Archbishop Romero without Rutilio Grande. Rutilio has been aptly described as Romero's precursor, or John the Baptist to Romero's Christ. He prepared the way for Romero; and his killing was a pivotal moment in Romero's development. The scales finally fell from Romero's eyes. It crystallized in Romero his fundamental option for the poor. A grain of wheat had fallen into the earth and died...and was quickly bearing fruit!

Romero and Rutilio were both from relatively poor backgrounds, born in small rural villages, both were constantly aware and proud of their humble roots; both loved the Salvadoran people and remained close to them. Both were ordained priests and had deep faith in Jesus Christ; and they both loved the Church.

Yet both had fragile personalities with nervous frailties; and both had the great gift of prophetic preaching; the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council guided their pastoral activities; both are martyrs killed by agents of the Salvadoran security forces – both assassinations were covered up without anyone brought to justice in El Salvador.

Rutilio was born in 1928 into a large dysfunctional Catholic family; there's obscurity around his parents' separation which greatly affected young Rutilio who was brought up by his grandmother. The family fell into serious poverty. His health was always problematic – physically he was not strong; and there was intermittent nervous illness with two serious crises. But in 1966, during his retreat, he reflected on the weakness of his nervous system. He accepted himself and promised himself not to be an obsessive perfectionist. He wrote that he would 'learn to swim by swimming'. "This is My Cross. But I am confident with the help of God I will triumph." And he did!

His health weakness was compensated by his undoubted pastoral charism and his gift as a preacher. He spoke the colloquial language of the people with popular idiom and all the simplicity of the peasant culture. He tried to make biblical characters and gospel teachings accessible to everyone – as such he resembled the greatest spiritual teacher of them all – Jesus of Nazareth.

In 1968, the Latin American bishops meeting in Medellin took the conclusions of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council and sought to interpret them for their continent, with a dramatic change of direction - advocating the preferential option for the poor. This had profound implications for El Salvador, for Rutilio and for Romero.

Rutilio began to question various Jesuit educational institutions, their exclusive schools and the top-class University, very close to the country's wealthy social elites. He argued that his Jesuit brothers needed to engage in direct experience, and identify more closely with the rural poor.

So, at the end of 1972, Rutilio was appointed to head a pastoral programme in the parish of Aguilares, which included his birthplace, El Paisnal. It was a conflictive zone, the epicentre of a cauldron of injustice. Huge sugar cane plantations and 3 enormous sugar mills in the area. Big issues of exploitation on

the sugar estates of Christian landowners, and with a landless and impoverished rural peasantry all around. Army-backed militias were in action to suppress protest.

Rutilio embarked on a team-based evangelization "Mission". The pastoral team created living base Christian communities and trained pastoral agents who became real movers and shakers. They, and in particular the women, quickly began to set the direction of parish activity. It was a new way of being Church – a non-elitist, non-clericalist approach - aspiring to be a servant Church with servant leaders.

Rutilio led with the Gospel but he didn't shy away from speaking on social and political questions. He was prophetic on issues of land reform, the relationship of rich and poor, and workers' rights. He was fond of saying "the Gospel must grow little feet" if Christ isn't to remain in the clouds. It was a "pastoral" liberation ministry that began in scripture and allowed lay people to work for social transformation without resorting to Marxist analysis.

Over the next 4 years, peasant political organisations developed rapidly in the area. The pastoral team had no political agenda, and as Rutilio himself put it, "We come to put leaven in the dough, not to give them a plan!" (*In parenthesis it reminds me of Pope Francis's recent warning to Catholic clergy that "the Church is called to form consciences - not replace them."*)

But there was voluble opposition to Rutilio's work from many quarters – the pastoral team were described as "little angels with red wings and machine-guns under their cassocks." They were labelled as 'Communists, agitators, preachers of the bloody revolution of hate and violence'. And there were death threats.

When, in February 1977, Fr Mario Bernal, pastor of nearby Apopa, was deported to his native Colombia, Rutilio preached at a great open-air Mass to lament his expulsion. His words were an audacious challenge to the government.

*I'm afraid that very soon the Bible and the Gospel will not be allowed to cross our borders. All that will reach us will be the covers, since all the pages are subversive.... So if Jesus of Nazareth returned, at this time...with his preaching and actions. They would accuse him,.. of being an agitator, arrest him and put him in jail, ....and they would undoubtedly crucify him again. Because many prefer a Christ of undertakers and morticians. They want a mute Christ without a mouth. They want a God who will not challenge them – one who will not say those tremendous words "Cain, what have you done to your brother Abel?"*

It likely sealed his fate.

And on Saturday March 12<sup>th</sup>, 1977, with Manuel Solorzano and Nelson Lemus sitting beside him, and three young children in the rear, he set out again in his VW Safari along the dusty road from Aguilares to El Paisnal to celebrate Mass. As they drove by the hamlet of Los Mangos, a hail of bullets killed all three. The panic-stricken children were allowed to escape; but they recognised one of the killers. The perpetrators were a death squad under army command.

In the country named after Christ the Saviour, a priest assassinated had until then been unthinkable. Open persecution of the Church had now begun. This '**notorious**' assassination was the opening shot of barbaric incidences of torture and martyrdom. The early stages of what would become a brutal 12-year civil war.

Rutilio's life could be described as dramatic. Serious health limitations; an obsession with fidelity to his vocation as a priest, left him in strange places, walking in the dark; the cruel doubts and disquieting uncertainties tested his faith and trust in God. And in those moments, he put himself in God's hands. In his weakness, he found his greatness.

Oscar Romero too had suffered from scrupulosity and also from an obsessive-compulsive cycle of behaviour. It's my belief that he and Rutilio recognised one another as two peas out of the same pod who had a certain psychological fragility and that this became a bond, perhaps an unspoken bond, between the two of them. As the late Dean Brackley commented in a throwaway line "For all of us neurotics, Romero and Rutilio are a genuine inspiration!"

Romero's installation as archbishop, in February 1977, coincided with a massive presidential electoral fraud, followed by killings and unprecedented national tension. Romero had scarcely moved in when his friend Rutilio, was murdered. Romero drove out to Aguilares and spent most of the night praying beside Rutilio's body. He was tearful and filled with compassion. He saw in his mind's eye where it would inevitably lead him if he followed this through - **and he assented**. He said yes! His initial disbelief at what had happened became prophetic determination. Bishop Rivera Damas, Romero's successor, said of that night of prayer and discernment:

*"One martyr gave life to another martyr. Kneeling before the body of Rutilio Grande, Monsignor Romero, on his 20th day as archbishop, felt the call from Christ to overcome his natural human timidity and to be filled with apostolic courage. From that moment on Archbishop Romero left behind the pagan lands of Tyre and Sidon and marched boldly towards Jerusalem."* Towards his death.

Three years later, on that fateful evening of March 24<sup>th</sup> Romero's final homily was a poignant reflection on John 12 -

*"Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains just a single grain; but if it dies it yields a rich harvest"*.

Minutes later he was shot dead at the altar.

As they say, Romero, like his friend Rutilio, 'talked the talk and walked the walk'. And both of them would surely endorse the words of another Latin American martyr, Lucho Espinal, "Whoever does not have the courage to speak on behalf of human beings has no right to speak of God."

In the words of Rutilio's biographer, Thomas Kelly, which I heartily endorse: -  
"In promoting Rutilio for sainthood, Pope Francis is lifting up a model of the servant-leader priest who freed himself from the trappings of the elite clergy and served among the marginalised in their struggle against systemic evil. Not only

martyrdom, but a life lived in solidarity with the poor and challenging the forces of oppression that damage their humanity – a message to the whole church that the gospel’s preferential option for the poor, and those who live it, will be glorified.”

With Rutilio, God passed through Aguilares. God left martyrs like him as signs of credible love - and therefore signs of hope amidst cynicism and despair. And credible love **inspires us** to carry on the cause that was expressed in that love.

Lord God, please continue to grant us serenity; the serenity to accept the things we cannot change. But also, Lord, please grant us the grace to change the things we cannot and should not accept. **Amen!**