

It had been a long wait since early in 2020 when Pope Francis proclaimed as martyrs the Jesuit, Rutilio Grande, his two lay companions, Nelson Lemus and Manuel Solórzano, and the Italian Franciscan missionary priest Cosme Spessotto - all killed out of hatred of the faith. More than 40 years after their assassinations, on Saturday January 22nd at 5.00pm local time (11.00pm GMT), the beatification of this quartet took place in the Plaza Salvador del Mundo in San Salvador.

We witnessed a beautiful ceremony as nightfall descended, with a huge socially-distanced crowd of lay folk in attendance – and an impressive assemblage of concelebrating clergy, bedecked in martyrial red vestments custom-made for the occasion. COVID measures prevented a significant international presence in the Square. But thousands more from the U.S. and across the globe attended virtually and became part of the live-streamed celebration. Happily, I found myself seated amongst the family members of Rutilio Grande and Manuel Solórzano - nieces, grandchildren, and distant cousins, one of whom I had last met in Los Angeles twenty years ago – at a time when this beatification was simply unthinkable!

The local Salvadoran Cardinal, Gregorio Rosa Chavez, was delegated by Pope Francis to preside. He delivered a highly appreciated homily, placing the four martyrs in the context of the country's conflict and civil war in the 1970s and 1980s, which ended with the peace accords in 1992. To widespread disbelief and dismay, El Salvador's current president, Nayib Bukele, has recently attacked the accords and rejected them as worthless. For the Salvadoran Church, therefore, to place the peace accords centrally in the new martyrs' story on this extraordinary national occasion provided a great boost to the adrenalin of all those striving for social peace in El Salvador. President Bukele was not present at the ceremonies, having arranged a visit to Istanbul to his Turkish homologue, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, to coincide with the beatification date.

In the days that followed, there were Masses of Thanksgiving in San Juan Nonualco, the town where Fr Cosme had served as parish priest for 27 years until his killing; in San Salvador's cathedral; and in the parish church in El Paisnal, where Rutilio Grande the Jesuit martyr is buried, alongside his companions Manuel, the sacristan-catechist martyr and Nelson, the teenage martyr. This was a simpler and more intimate liturgy for the people from the surrounding area where Rutilio had served and for the Jesuit communities and their friends.

Everyone's attention was immediately drawn there to a new picture of the three martyrs painted by a young local artist, Cristian Lopez, and unveiled that weekend. It is full of symbolism with Rutilio's bible and catechism highly visible, with spent bullet shells on the ground, their overturned vehicle in the background and various signs of their martyrdom. This depiction of the three presents their faces and their campesino dress faithfully - taking advantage of a previously unseen family photograph. Hopefully the painting will now bring closure to the nagging unhappiness in the diocese at the loss of Rutilio's famous 'Table for All' mural which was peremptorily removed from this same church some years ago.

These four new martyrs are undoubtedly symbols of the Vatican II Church – lay and clerical missionary disciples. At the Angelus in St Peter's Square on the day after the beatifications Pope Francis declared:

"They stood by the poor, bearing witness to the Gospel, truth and justice, even to the shedding of their blood." He continued "May their heroic example arouse in everyone the desire to be courageous agents of fraternity and peace. Let us applaud the new blessed!"

It was a reminder that without Pope Francis's commitment to Archbishop Romero and Rutilio Grande, and his intervention on their behalf, El Salvador's cloud of martyrs would still be waiting in the cold at the back of the Vatican's sainthood queue.

And yet, there was still more good news to emerge in El Salvador. The Bishops' Conference of El Salvador, meeting just before the beatification ceremonies, decided that they would launch a collective cause for the canonisation of 'The Martyrs of El Salvador' as a process of the whole Salvadoran Church. It will likely be led by Mgr Rafael Urrutia, the diocesan postulator for both Archbishop Romero and Rutilio Grande.

This initiative would be akin to the '40 Martyrs of England and Wales' or 'The Martyrs of the Spanish Civil War'. It has not yet been decided exactly who will be included in this bumper cause. Nevertheless, it is certain that it will include the four U.S. women missionaries assassinated in December 1980, Fr Octavio Ortiz and the four young men killed with him in El Despertar, and the other priests and religious murdered during the civil war. The names of some 500 potential lay martyrs - catechists and Delegates of the Word - have been brought together, region by region of the country, by a team coordinated by the Irish Franciscan missionary, Ciaran O' Nuanain. It is hoped and expected that a selection of these will be included in the final list.

Finally, the search has already begun for a miracle to secure the canonisation of Blessed Rutilio Grande and companions, and another for Blessed Cosme Spessotto.

Alleluia, Amen.