

Rutilio Grande's Miracle

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Beatifications and canonisations can be pointers to the way the Church is moving. On 22 January 2022 in the Central American country of El Salvador, the Jesuit Rutilio Grande will be beatified, along with his lay companions, Nelson Rutilio Lemus and Manuel Solórzano and the Franciscan Cosme Spessoto: they will be declared martyrs. They represent the new start the Church made after the Second Vatican Council. They represent a missionary Church that has gone to the peripheries, the social and existential edges. They represent a persecuted Church, which has produced numerous martyrs for faith and justice.

At the Second General Conference of Latin American bishops in Medellín, Colombia, in 1968, Vatican II was creatively transposed into the Latin American context. In this process the bishops recognised as the most important sign of the times the poverty on the subcontinent that cried out to heaven. Inspired by the Gospel and the emerging theology of liberation, they made the preferential option for the poor the Church's programme. Rutilio Grande put the option for the poor at the centre of his new concept of a missionary rural ministry.

Rutilio was born in 1928 into a poor family in the little village of El Paisnal in El Salvador. In 1945 he joined the Jesuits. He followed the order's normal training in philosophy and theology in Venezuela, Ecuador, Spain, France and Belgium. Subsequently, until 1972 he worked in priestly formation in El Salvador's national seminary in the capital, San Salvador. There he tried to include in formation the spirit of the Second Vatican Council and the Medellín conference. His biographer, Rodolfo Cardenal, writes: 'Rutilio's aim was to train priests that would be at the service of the people and not clerical bosses.' This was one reason why he was not appointed rector of the seminary. Consequently, in autumn 1972 he decided to engage in direct parish work in the community of Aguilares, which included his birthplace.

In Aguilares Rutilio, with a team of Jesuits and women religious, began to implement a ministry of awareness-raising and liberation. In so doing he was bringing about the Church's shift of position to the side of the poor, which had been decided at the bishops' assembly in Medellín but was far from being accepted by the whole Church in Latin America. In the same spirit, the Jesuit order had in 1975 redefined its mission in the world of its time in terms of the need to combine the preaching of the faith and the fight for justice. In Aguilares the overwhelming majority of the population lived in the harshest poverty. The land was in the possession of a few large landowners. It was clear to Grande that God was not indifferent to

this situation. He often said in his sermons: ‘God is not far away in heaven lying in a hammock, but he is in our midst. For God it matters whether the poor down here are in distress or not.’

Rutilio Grande based his pastoral approach on popular piety. This reflected the ‘popular theology’ developed in Argentina by Lucio Gera, a distinct position within liberation theology that also strongly influenced Pope Francis. But Grande realised that popular piety needed to be freed from magical elements and evangelised. He described his approach by saying that he ‘removed the rosary from the faithful and replaced it with readings from biblical passages with a commentary’. By reviving the November maize festivities, Rutilio Grande showed respect to the ancestral indigenous traditions while inculturating Christian faith.

An essential element of Rutilio’s pastoral approach was the active involvement of the laity. The secret, the heart, of the new departure was the base communities, which read the bible in their groups. The point of this was to connect the word of God with people’s lives. The groups did this by following the three-step ‘See – Judge – Act’ process associated with the Young Christian Workers, which was also the central approach of liberation theology. Out of his pastoral team Rutilio trained men and women to be ‘delegates of the Word’, messengers of the Word who went around to create new groups. Aguilares began to move. When the peasants of Aguilares judged the lives they lived in the light of the Word of God, it was really illuminating. They discovered that poverty and oppression are a recurring theme in the bible, and that, through the prophets and through Jesus, God took the side of the victims.

In this way faith developed a social and political impact. Grande encouraged the peasants to organise in unions and to demand their rights to a decent life and just wages. Other priests followed this example. But the large landowners saw this as a threat to their interests, and so began the persecution of the Church in El Salvador. Foreign priests, and Jesuits in particular, were accused of stirring up unrest and promoting communism. At the beginning of 1977 the first priests were tortured and expelled, among them the Colombian Mario Bernal, parish priest of Apopa, near Aguilares.

On 13 February 1977 there was a protest demonstration in Apopa against the expulsion of Mario Bernal with over 6000 people taking part. In the mass at the end Rutilio delivered a sermon that contained fiery language. Fearlessly he asserted: ‘It is dangerous to be a Christian round here! It is dangerous to be a real Catholic! It is practically illegal to be a genuine Christian in our country.’ He quotes statistics about the injustice and extreme poverty in El Salvador. Then he went on: ‘But we dress all this up with false hypocrisy and lavish constructions. Woe to you hypocrites! You go around outwardly getting a reputation as Catholics, but within you are filthy evil! You are Cains and crucify the Lord when he goes around under the name of

Manuel, under the name of Luis, under the name of Chabela, under the name of an ordinary rural worker!'

The sermon culminated with the image of Jesus returning to El Salvador: 'I am very much afraid, dear brothers and sisters and friends, that very soon the bible and the Gospel will not be able to cross our borders. We'd get the covers, nothing else, because all the pages inside are subversive – subversive of sin, naturally! ... I am very much afraid, brothers and sisters, that if Jesus of Nazareth were to come back as in that time, coming down from Galilee to Judea, that is, from Chalatenango to San Salvador, he would not in our time get as far as Apopa with his preaching and actions. I think they would stop him up there, on Guazapa Hill. There they would arrest him and throw him into prison.... They would bring him before many Supreme Courts for violating the Constitution and being a subversive. They would accuse him, God made man, the model of humanity, of being a revolutionary, a foreign Jew, of confusing people with outlandish foreign ideas, opposed to "democracy", that is opposed to the minority. Anti-God ideas, because they belong to the clan of the Cains. There can be no doubt, brothers and sisters, that they would crucify him once more.'

It must have been this sermon that was Rutilio Grande's death sentence. On 12 March 1977 – with two companions, 70-year old Manuel Solórzano and 15-year old Nelson Rutilio Lemus – as they were travelling to a liturgy, he was murdered in an ambush by members of the National Guard. The murder was ordered by the large landowners. The three bodies were wrapped in cloth and laid in front of the altar in the church of Aguilares. Late that night the newly appointed archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero, arrived.

Even though Rutilio Grande was a friend of Romero's, Romero was somewhat critical of his pastoral approach in Aguilares: there is a remark to this effect in one of his reports to the Pontifical Council for Latin America in Rome. But as he stood before Rutilio Grande's corpse, Oscar Romero was shaken to the core. He asked to see the priest's simple room and muttered to himself: 'He really lived in poverty.' He decided to celebrate a mass in the middle of the night. As the text for his sermon he chose this verse from John's gospel: 'No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends' (Jn 15.13).

The three bodies were taken to San Salvador, where on 14 March Romero celebrated the requiem mass in the cathedral. The mass was broadcast on radio. Romero thought that the murderers might be listening to the broadcast in their hiding-place and addressed them in these forceful words: 'Criminal brothers, we love you, and we ask God to move your hearts to repentance, because the church is incapable of hatred; the church has no enemies.'

The murder of Rutilio Grande and his companions brought about a profound change in Romero, which some people have even described as a ‘conversion’. A timid, conservative bishop became a prophetic defender of the poor. In popular tradition this change was described as ‘Rutilio’s miracle’. Looking back later Romero himself described his intuitive insight in front of Rutilio Grande’s body in these terms: ‘If they killed him for what he did, then I have to follow the same path. Rutilio opened my eyes.’ The Jesuit Salvador Carranza, who belonged to the Aguilares pastoral team, compared the significance of Rutilio Grande for Romero with that of John the Baptist for Jesus. John regarded himself as the forerunner who was to prepare the way for someone greater who would come after him. It was after John’s imprisonment and murder that Jesus began his public activity.

Romero reacted to the murder of Rutilio Grande with an announcement that he would not take part in any other official government event until the crime was solved. He gave another sign on 20 March: across the whole of the archdiocese of San Salvador only one mass would be celebrated, in San Salvador’s cathedral. In the tense situation the military government was afraid that masses of people would attend and did all it could to prevent the mass. The nuncio too was against the idea, but Romero was not swayed. Over 100,000 people gathered for the mass. In his sermon Romero was clear: ‘Anyone who touches one of my priests touches me.’ In Catholic schools instead of the normal classes, passages from the bible, Vatican II and Medellín were read and discussed with the students.

For Pope Francis the beatification of Rutilio Grande was particularly important, as had been the canonisation of Oscar Romero in 2018. As provincial of the Argentine Jesuits he had followed their story carefully. In an address to the Central American bishops at World Youth Day in Panama in 2019, he proposed Oscar Romero as the model of a bishop, who gave his life for his flock. He knew the life of Rutilio Grande from a book by Rodolfo Cardenal, of the Jesuit Central American University in San Salvador, which appeared shortly after his murder. In 2015, when he met Cardenal in Rome, he said: ‘Rutilio Grande’s greatest miracle is Archbishop Romero.’

Rutilio Grande’s beatification comes at a time of new movements and changes in the Church of Latin America and the Caribbean, comparable with the transformation of the Church following the Medellín bishops’ conference in 1968. An important reference point is the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops in Aparecida, Brazil, in 2007 with the motto ‘Disciples and Missionaries of Jesus Christ – so that our peoples may have life in him’, which called for a new missionary impetus. The drafting of the final document was coordinated by the then Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio.

It was at Aparecida that Bergoglio first became aware of the significance of the Amazon region and its indigenous population, and the threats they faced. With Pope Francis' encouragement, in 2014 the Church Amazonian Network, REPAM, was set up, with a particular concern for the preservation of the rainforest. In 2019 the Amazon synod was held in Rome; this, with its vision of a Church with an Amazonian face, suggested 'new paths for the Church and an integral ecology'. An important further step was the creation of the new ecclesial conference for the Amazon region, CEAMA, with the task of carrying out the synod's decisions. The new conference is made up of bishops, priests, deacons and members of indigenous peoples from all nine Amazon countries.

An important event of a new kind took place in Mexico from 21 to 28 November 2021, the First Ecclesial Assembly for Latin America and the Caribbean. Strictly, following the five previous General Conferences of Latin American and Caribbean Bishops, it was time for the Sixth Episcopal Conference. Pope Francis, however, expressed a wish, not for a bishops conference to be held, but an ecclesial assembly including priests, religious and lay people. The assembly took place in hybrid form, with around 80 participants physically present in Mexico and virtually, with around 1000 further participants across the whole continent. They included 200 bishops, 200 priests, 200 religious and 400 laypeople.

The assembly was preceded by a wide-ranging consultation process based on a preparatory document with the programmatic title: 'We are outgoing missionary disciples.' From 70,000 contributions by individuals and groups emerged a 'narrative synthesis' that in its turn became the basis for the deliberations in Mexico and across the continent. The Ecclesial Assembly approved a final declaration and identified twelve challenges for the Church in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The Ecclesial Assembly showed clearly that the old hierarchical structures in the Church have outlived their usefulness. For the Church to survive into the future laity and especially women must have responsibility in the Church's mission. This requires the ending of clericalism and the participation of the whole people of God in discussion and decision-making processes and brings up again the issue of the access of married men and women to ministries in the Church. Christians of African heritage and young people, who are relatively badly represented, have been winning a greater hearing. A further important topic was the preservation of the Amazon rainforest. Nevertheless the Ecclesial Assembly also showed that these processes of change are difficult and will take time.

Much of what is today on the renewal agenda of the Church in Latin America and the Caribbean was anticipated by Rutilio Grande in his ideas for a missionary rural ministry in

Aguilares: the new emphasis on mission, the new involvement of the laity, respect for indigenous traditions, the Church's prophetic contribution to political and structural change. This makes the beatifications set for 22 January 2022 an encouraging sign for the Church on its road to social, cultural, ecological and synodal conversion.