Rutilio Grande: A Challenge to the Church

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This translation follows the Spanish text closely while aiming for natural, readable English. Quotations and emphases are retained as they appear in the source.

> *"Friends, let us return to the Gospel; let us return to the poor people. There things become clear to us when the horizon of our pastoral journey looks clouded."*

We begin these brief reflections on Rutilio with these words, which make him very relevant today. In a way scarcely known before, different pastoral approaches, groups and movements, music and songs with Christian themes are proliferating in the Church. The Church is present on radio and television stations. Papal journeys break every record for attendance. And canonizations have multiplied to such an extent that, from being extraordinary events, they have become everyday news. Jose Comblin speaks of a kind of new Christendom. Not like the old one, but with a certain resemblance to it in what is happening and, above all, in what people would like to happen: a massive public presence of the Church, though in very diverse forms, and harmony between civil powers and the ecclesiastical hierarchy, shaping society from above.

And yet one senses that something important is missing in the Church. There is no clear compass to mark the way, no ideal to bring people together, no cause worth committing oneself to and suffering for, no hope that gives rise to joy. As in Rutilio's time, although in a different way and after years of brilliance, the ecclesial horizon looks clouded. It is in this context that we remember him twenty-five years after his martyrdom and listen to words which in his day were vigorous amid the bustle of his work in Aguilares, and which remain so today, for his martyrdom has given them the strength of what no longer passes away.

"O truth, ever ancient and ever new!" said Augustine. Something similar happens with the words of martyrs, and certainly with Rutilio's words: "Friends, let us return to the Gospel; let us return to the poor people." We shall now offer some brief reflections on them, allowing Rutilio to speak and freely quoting words from the homilies published later in this booklet. Our reflections are, as it were, glosses on a small selection of what his companion in Aguilares, Father Salvador Carranza, has called "the little gospel of Rutilio Grande".

Jesus of Nazareth

What Jesus do we have today, and what Jesus did Rutilio Grande have? I fear they are not the same. Rutilio spoke of Jesus with joy, but also with seriousness. We begin with the latter because today there is no shortage of complacent, sugary presentations of Jesus.

In Rutilio's time too, Jesus could be presented as someone far removed from the daily reality of the worker and the peasant woman. And still less need be said of the Christ - who never existed - who blessed landowners and the military. Faced with this, Rutilio took Jesus seriously and denounced his manipulation: "Many prefer a Christ who is mute and voiceless, to be carried in processions through the streets. A Christ muzzled and fashioned to our liking and according to our petty interests."

When he spoke of Jesus to peasants, who had often been lulled to sleep in the name of a false Jesus, Rutilio became impassioned and, so to speak, defended Jesus' honour. It pained him to see a watered-down Jesus presented to people. "That is not the Christ of the Gospel, the young Jesus of thirty-three!" And in words that were very easily understood in those years, he said:

> *"I greatly fear, brothers and sisters, that if Jesus were to return today, coming down from Galilee to Judea - that is, from Chalatenango to San Salvador - I dare say that with his preaching and actions he would not get as far as Apopa. They would arrest him there, around Guazapa. And they would come down hard on him, until they silenced him or made him disappear."*

Perhaps today Jesus would no longer be arrested around Guazapa, nor on many of our streets, because his word is manipulated by neoliberal democracies and is often watered down within his Church. But that does not mean that things are going well in the country, or that the Church is doing everything it ought to do to prevent such things. It means that we are living in an age of a domesticated Christ, something that has happened many times in history. Hence the importance of returning to Jesus of Nazareth with the seriousness with which Rutilio Grande spoke of him.

But we must immediately add that this seriousness had nothing of masochism, sadness or anguish about it; it was filled with joy and hope. It is well known that Rutilio restored hope to afflicted peasant men and women who felt abandoned by God. And he did so above all by speaking to them of Jesus. Jesus was one of them, "a pilgrim who went through the cantons and hamlets." Jesus was not a speechless image before which novenas are prayed and which is carried in processions. He was much more than that. He was a living and present word, challenging and encouraging, a word "clean and clear like the water that comes down from the mountains." And for the peasants he was above all a word of hope. "The Kingdom of God is right there among you," Rutilio said, echoing Jesus of Nazareth's proclamation at the beginning of his mission. In words that have now become classics, almost a testament, one month before he was murdered, he explained what the Kingdom of God means today in El Salvador:

> *"God, the Lord, in his plan, gave us a material world, like this material Mass, with the material bread and the material cup that we shall raise in Christ's toast. A common table with long tablecloths for everyone, like this Eucharist. Each person with his or her stool, and enough table, tablecloth and food for everyone. Christ, thirty-three years old, celebrated a farewell supper with those closest to him and said that this was the great memorial of redemption. A table shared in brotherhood and sisterhood, where everyone has a place and a seat. It is the love of shared fraternity that breaks down and sweeps away every kind of barrier and prejudice, and must overcome hatred itself."*

Someone who speaks like this takes Jesus seriously and joyfully. And also takes his God seriously. "God is not up in the clouds lying in a hammock," Rutilio used to repeat. He complained bitterly when people presented a God "who does not care that things are going badly for the poor down here." Even then he complained about the inflation of words when speaking of God: so much saying, "God first, God first! In the name of God! Glory to God!" - but very little doing.

Rutilio would have greatly liked the words of his friend Romero: "The glory of God is the poor person who lives," so different from the repeated phrase "glory to God." Simple people, then and now, may not be given to subtle distinctions, but endlessly repeating "glory to God" can reflect an image of a God who is waiting for praise from his creatures - in the end, an egocentric God made in our own image and likeness, since we human beings certainly love to be paid homage. But John's theology explained that

misunderstanding very well. The first thing God does is love us. And what he expects from us in response to that love is that we love our brother and our sister (1 Jn 4:7-11).

If we are speaking of the "glory of God," Romero's words express it better: "that the poor may live." This is a good God, tender towards the poor, who is not waiting for people to sing his praises, but who goes ahead of them - as in the parable of the Prodigal Son - to embrace the poor. This is the God of Jesus, the God who loves and defends the poor. Hence the seriousness and tenderness with which Rutilio spoke of God. Hence too his preaching against a god without tenderness for the poor, turned into an idol that brings death to the poor. With humour and peasant wisdom he said:

> *"Some cross themselves: In the name of the Father - money - and of the Son - coffee - and of the Spirit - better if it is cane liquor. That is not God, the Father of our brother and Lord Jesus, who gives us his good Spirit so that we may be brothers and sisters as equals, and so that, as true followers of Jesus, we may work to make his Kingdom present here and now."*

Rutilio had a profound experience of God, an experience that opened his heart to compassion and his eyes to see the world as it is, neither concealing its sin nor hiding its hope. Above all, it enabled him to see human beings as we are, outwardly and in the depths of the heart. Among us there are Abel and Cain, hence the need for prophecy, as we have seen. But above all, beyond Abel and Cain, we all have God as Father, and hence utopia and hope:

> *"We have one common Father; therefore we are all children of the same Father, even though we were born from the wombs of different mothers. Therefore we are all brothers and sisters. The Cains too are our brothers, even though they are an aberration in God's plan."*

A Church of the Poor in Aguilares

That God and his Christ, Jesus of Nazareth, were the best things Rutilio had to offer his people in Aguilares. Then, as now, theirs was a people whose greatest task was simply to live, and whose nearest destiny was the rapid death of violence - especially in those years - or the slow death of poverty, the uprooting of family and culture suffered by millions of refugees, and the silence and even contempt of the powers of this world. Financial capital and the globalization of exclusion did not yet dominate. What dominated was simply the age-old injustice that produces poverty, "human scraps and waste," as Ellacuria used to say.

Rutilio put it in incomparable country language: "The orioles have a conacaste tree on which to hang their nests, to live and sing, but the poor peasant is not allowed even a conacaste tree, nor a fistful of earth in which to live or to be buried." Anticipating Romero, who would say, "This is the empire of hell," Rutilio said: "This is not the Kingdom of God, but the kingdom of wickedness, lies and the devil." And again, anticipating Romero, he denounced the fact that peasants did not have the right "to have their voice heard." In his last homilies Rutilio became their voice.

By turning to the historical Jesus, Jesus of Nazareth, and by turning to the peasants - standing before them and with them - Rutilio Grande worked the greater miracle of refounding the Church of Jesus in Aguilares, a Church of the poor. At that time others too - priests, religious women and peasants - were working the same miracle in other rural places and in the poor suburbs of the capital.

Rutilio's fundamental intuition - and that of that whole generation, an obsession if one wishes to call it that - was "to build community." Everyone, men and women alike, had to belong to the community. One important consequence was that peasant men and women should recover their dignity - the

equality and fraternity so often proclaimed by democracy and so rarely achieved - or perhaps possess it for the first time. "We want to build with you a community of brothers and sisters in which no one feels like a boss and no one like a peon." Simple though it may sound, without dignity there is no fraternity, and without fraternity there is no being sons and daughters of one Father. Then "Church" and "People of God" are no more than empty words.

Because of this primacy he gave to community, pastoral ministry did not consist in bringing people into the church building and filling churches, as is so often desired today, on the assumption that this is how the Church grows. Rather, the opposite had to be done: leave the church building, go out to people where they are, and enable the people themselves, men and women, to become God's living temple. "We are not trying to get you to come to church, or to bring the church from over there to here, but for you to be brothers and sisters and Church here in the hamlet or canton."

Rutilio was no iconoclast when it came to popular religiosity; quite the contrary. He knew well that religion gave direction, strength and consolation to peasants who had little else to cling to so that their lives would not be sheer misfortune. "The poor person has only religion and the machete. We cannot make them poorer still by leaving them only the machete!" he said. But neither did he hide behind phrases such as "we must not take away the faith of simple people" or "this is what people like" in order to avoid trying to change things. He did not see popular religion as untouchable, something which in the end keeps people submissive and gives power to religious authorities. He wanted to transform it, and in this he showed conviction, strength and creativity. "We want to prune away everything that is not of God and keeps us defeated. We want to give greater strength and life to this religion of ours so that the poor do not have to resign themselves to having only the machete."

Two elements of this renewed religiosity seem to us essential. The first is that the word of God should be in the hands of the peasants. It is not simply a matter of reading biblical passages at Mass, nor even merely of studying the Bible, but something much deeper: "gathering together to dialogue with the word of God," as Rutilio said. "Gathering together" means actively coming together in community. "Dialoguing" means that peasant men and women themselves express and share what that word says to them. "Of God" means what is ultimate, what comes from above and at the same time from the deepest part of the human heart, what challenges us ultimately, but also what enlightens, encourages, and produces joy and hope as nothing else can. The most innovative point, however, is that religion is not something directed by others, those above, but is born from the peasants' encounter with the word of God, in community and in the midst of a concrete history. This is the necessary triangle for the Bible to become the word of God, as Carlos Mesters describes it: the Bible, the community, history.

What is essential about that word is that it produces life, salvation here and hereafter. The communities, and also many people in the popular organizations - despite all the headaches they caused Rutilio - took hold of that word of life. In any event, the Church ceased to be routine, a collection of traditions from the past. "The Church is not a museum of dead traditions, of undertakers whose only concern is to carry the bier on Good Friday to bury Jesus. It must be a strong cluster of living communities, bearers of life and hope for our humblest people."

The second element, to which we have already referred, is community. Today meetings proliferate in the Church almost to excess, but being community is something else. For Rutilio it was essential that everyone, men and women, should take part in the community with enthusiasm, actively and creatively, even if only by cleaning the church. Individualism, whether personal or that of groups and

movements, is the denial of community. "It is no good saying, 'Everyone save himself, as long as things go well for me.' We have to be saved in a bunch, on the cob, in the same sack - that is, in community!"

And the quality of community was measured by service. As in Paul's time, everyone in the community was recognized as having charisms, gifts, abilities and talents with which to build it up. No one was greater or more important than another, a temptation and danger that Rutilio confronted with determination and great clarity. "Remember that you are delegates of the community," he told those entrusted with more prominent tasks. And he repeated it in his own language: "It is not so that you can become little bosses, but servants."

The synthesis of this Church taking shape in Aguilares, in other rural areas and in the poor suburbs of the capital, lay in the power of the word because it was God's word; in listening to it in community rather than individually and to the exclusion of others; and in doing so in the midst of the real history of poverty and injustice, struggle and hope, rather than in an interior spirituality that abandons reality to its fate. This is what others later theorized as the Church of the poor. And let me recall that in his ecclesiological writings Ellacuria kept very much in mind - alongside Archbishop Romero - the memory of Rutilio and the experience of Aguilares.

Strength in Weakness

This Rutilio of vigorous speech, always searching, immensely creative, strong to the end - his most prophetic words were spoken in the final months of his life - was a human being with limitations and, in particular, with a psychological make-up that caused him to pass through periods of weakness, at times acute, as Rodolfo Cardenal explains in depth in his book The History of a Hope, written in 1985 and recently reissued. We therefore ask, in conclusion, where he found the strength to speak the words we have mentioned, especially the prophetic ones.

Rutilio was not naive. In his time, alongside age-old poverty, repression of the people erupted. And, as something very new and astonishing - and also as a great blessing - persecution of the Church and of priests erupted, something inconceivable only a few years earlier. Yet none of this seemed to surprise him, still less to discourage him. Rather, it confirmed him in the conviction that he, the Aguilares team and the community were on the right path. And this, as the deepest Christian paradox proclaims, gave him strength to continue along it. Here too he resembled Romero, who even psychologically grew stronger as persecution of the Church and attacks on his own person intensified.

Amid external difficulties and personal weakness, Rutilio retained his clarity. He told the peasants: "Do not become discouraged or lose heart if the big bosses and those with twisted fangs call you agitators and subversives and other things they do not even understand. Keep going - it is a good sign!" The reason he could say such astonishing words at that time lies in the "return to Jesus" already mentioned: "The Pharisees, the authorities and even the priests of those days also called Jesus - notice this well - a troublemaker, a blasphemer and an agitator of the people!"

And the fiercer the persecution became, the more eloquent Rutilio became. His activity and his words recalled Jesus' final week in Jerusalem, denouncing scribes and Pharisees, Sadducees and chief priests. The nearness of death did not calm him; it fired him up. "Woe to you who call yourselves Catholics with your lips while inside you are filth and wickedness! You are Cains who crucify the Lord when he walks under the name of Tono, Licha or the humble farm worker."

Anticipating the years of terror and repression that the country and the Church were soon to endure, though they were already beginning to appear, Rutilio uttered these stark words: "It is dangerous to be a Christian in our country! In practice it is illegal to be a true Christian in our society!" Rutilio, then, was not naive, and he knew his own frail condition. What happened was that, like Paul, he could say in tribute to the grace of God working in him: "In my weakness lies my strength."

Nevertheless, we ask again how his weakness could become strength, where Rutilio found the strength to speak in this way and act accordingly. This is the mystery of every human being, which in the end we cannot penetrate. But perhaps we can glimpse something. We have already said that Archbishop Romero grew stronger, even psychologically, during the final three years of his life; persecution, the cross, can generate strength and vigour in a Christian. But in addition to this, Romero, beset on all sides, once let slip the source of his strength and vigour: "With this people it is not difficult to be a good shepherd." Perhaps this is also a sure clue for understanding Rutilio, which we can briefly trace in key moments of his homilies.

At the 1976 Festival of the Corn, he said to the community of Aguilares and to the many people who had come from cantons and hamlets: "Forgive me for congratulating you during the Eucharist for so many good things. Congratulations to all the brothers and sisters, because news reaches us from everywhere that the faith of many among you, in your communities, in the parish and in the country, is not empty."

Rutilio congratulated them because the Gospel was now closely joined to their lives and because they had not been content merely to understand the Word, but had put it to work and made it bear fruit. With great tenderness he especially congratulated the adorers of the Blessed Sacrament, elderly people who, amid the changes taking place in the Church in those years, remained faithful to Eucharistic adoration while remaining open to what was new.

Someone who congratulates others sincerely, as Rutilio did, is himself happy. His congratulations to his people are like the reflection of his own happiness, which cannot be hidden in the following beautiful words:

> *"I congratulate you, brothers and sisters! You have taught us a great lesson. We are told that instead of starting an argument with Brother Pedro about whether the Virgin had many children or not, or whether one may eat a strangled chicken or not, you offered him your help when he was evicted. In your poverty you rebuilt his hut and helped him move his few belongings. Well done, and I rejoice. You yourselves say that he has joined your community and you no longer want him to be called a 'separated brother'."*

Rutilio rejoiced to see the poor living with one another and being there for one another. He learned from them. If from above he was sustained by the love of God, from below it was the poor who gave him happiness and joy. The same happened to Jesus. From above he was sustained by the Father, Abba, and from below - although little is said about it - he was sustained by the poor and, in the examples given in the Gospels, by the marginalized, especially women who had been brought low.

It is said of Jesus that he was moved when he saw the widow putting a few coins into the Temple treasury, when he saw the sinful woman weeping at his feet with great faith, and when he saw the Canaanite woman correct him - when he was refusing to perform a miracle because "it is not right to throw the children's bread to the dogs" - by replying that "even the little dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the table." The poor communicated something good to Jesus; they communicated good news to him; they evangelized him. That, I think, is what happened to Rutilio. The goodness he saw in peasant

men and women was the strength that sustained him and enabled him to feel joy amid weakness and suffering.

Rutilio Today

Throughout history there have been many ways of being Christian, and there have even been periods in which Christianity has degenerated. But whenever people seek what is truly Christian, we believe two things happen: a return to Jesus - not just any Jesus, but Jesus of Nazareth - and an incarnation in reality, in its joys and hopes, its anguish and suffering, especially those of the people who suffer most. This is what the Second Vatican Council and Medellin said more than thirty years ago. And this too was Rutilio's secret.

By this we mean that it is not enough simply to repeat, as is often done - sometimes in order to avoid doing what must be done - that "things have changed," thereby feeling justified in not having to remember Rutilio or Romero, or remembering them in such a way that what we are and what we do bears little resemblance to what they were and did. Things do change, certainly. The PCN may not be the same as ARENA. Repression and war are not the same as the constant exile of refugees. The political kidnappings of the past are not the same as today's kidnapping business. And there are a thousand other differences. But not everything necessarily changes. The waves may change, and sometimes they express a different sea. At other times, though the crest of the wave is different, the underlying currents remain the same. Can we honestly say that today, unlike in Rutilio's time, the forces of evil, falsehood and death have been defeated by the forces of goodness, truth and life? I very much fear not.

We say this not in order to analyse the country's situation here, but the reality of the Church. The Church cannot appeal to changed circumstances - that we now live in a democracy, that there is freedom of expression, that postmodernity in religion cannot be ignored, though there is some truth in all of this - in order to avoid confronting what is fundamental: in our country there exists a very grave sin that brings death; structures are ultimately governed by selfishness and for the benefit of a few; the majority continue to be ignored, despised and, when necessary, deceived.

In this situation Rutilio Grande challenges the Church. We do not have to repeat what he did, but we do have to carry out pastoral ministry with the creativity, honesty, love for the poor people, prophetic spirit, strength and joy with which he carried out his. In the end, we must be Christian as he was Christian: with our eyes fixed on Jesus and on the people. And we must build Church as he built it: in community, with the word of God in the hands of the poor.

It is true that there are good things in today's Church, some of them even new in comparison with Rutilio's time. It is true that every year we remember our martyrs. It is true that efforts are made to keep alive many evangelical and Salvadoran traditions. Finally, and most importantly, it is true that communities are re-emerging here and there. Amid the destruction caused by the earthquake, perhaps the most positive thing has been that many Salvadorans have shared with one another what they have, and have sometimes even rejected aid and privileges coming from outside if they were not for everyone, if they did not foster community. But much remains to be done, and the Church as a whole does not keep it sufficiently in mind; it is neglected in its mission.

Rutilio today? In the marches and forums for peace during the last three years, urgent challenges for humanity have been formulated, and the Church would do well to take them centrally into account: democracy, participation and repression; social and labour rights; migration; ecological and

environmental rights; the agri-food model; globalization and militarism; women and globalization; globalization and development. In addition to these challenges for all humanity, Don Pedro Casaldaliga lists three others which the Church of Jesus must take up with prophetic boldness and evangelical freedom if it is to be credible and evangelizing today: worldwide decentralization, which should be demanded both of the United Nations and other world bodies and of the Holy See and ecclesiastical curias; shared responsibility and participation, especially by those at the bottom of society and the Church, and most particularly women; and solidarity-based dialogue among cultures and religions, without arrogance.

More concretely in our own country, the challenge of poverty remains scandalous and urgent and, incredible though it may seem, may be greater than in Rutilio's time; unemployment and degrading employment in the maquilas; violence in its various forms and the responsibility of the National Civil Police (PNC) in relation to it; the forced exodus of thousands of Salvadorans, which continues; the selfishness and indifference of rulers and politicians towards the people; the disillusionment of the majority... At the ecclesial level let us mention only the absence of a guiding and encouraging word in messages and pastoral letters; the blurring of the ecclesial body, dispersed into innumerable groups and movements in a kind of "every person for himself"; and the tendency to spiritualize and infantilize religion...

Can Rutilio help us respond to these challenges? Undoubtedly neither Rutilio, nor Romero, nor Ellacuria offers us a recipe, but they do offer us the spirit in which all this should be undertaken in the Church. That spirit, again in the words of Don Pedro Casaldaliga, can be described as follows: a coherent witness, in a civilization of images in which the world wants to "see"; fraternal and sisterly coexistence, the greatest and most everyday challenge for persons, communities and peoples - the chief commandment, the commandment of love; free and generous welcome and service, making every ministry and every profession an unselfish and generous service; prophetic commitment, more necessary than ever against the neoliberal god of death and exclusion, and in favour of the God of the Kingdom of life and liberation; trusting contemplation, open to the graciousness of God, so necessary in a time of immediate efficiency and pragmatism; and Easter hope, in a time of disillusionment, in which against all hope we affirm that life has the last word over death, that the poor will live.

I believe Rutilio would understand very well the challenges we have mentioned and the spirit in which we must address them. And he would encourage us to do so. That is why it seems necessary to us that the Salvadoran Church - hierarchy, parishes, movements and communities, everyone in the Church - should return to Rutilio Grande.

His word, like the word of God, is like a two-edged sword that penetrates to the depths of the heart and leaves nothing hidden. That is why we have spoken of a challenge, an interpellation. But that itself is already good news. We are not orphans; we have valuable points of reference. Rutilio is someone who challenges us and also encourages us. He can set the Church in the right direction and unleash the strength needed to travel the road. In the end, we can become soaked in the hope that flows from his words. And that is good news. But let us not forget it: "Let us return to the Gospel; let us return to the poor people."