

# RUTILIO GRANDE THROUGH THE EYES OF OSCAR ROMERO

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## “I consider him a brother”

In the funeral mass for Fr. Rutilio Grande, SJ, Mons. Romero started the homily with these words:

“If this were an ordinary funeral, I would speak here, my dear sisters and brothers, about the human and personal relationship that I shared with Father Rutilio Grande whom I considered a brother. At important moments in my life, he was very close to me and I will never forget his gestures of friendship.”

(March 14, 1977)

“Here in a home in this town of El Paisnal, like in Bethlehem of Judea, Rutilio Grande was born with the signs of the one chosen by God in the midst of his people. God anointed Rutilio Grande just as David was anointed. We are also able to say that on the day of Rutilio’s anointing, the Spirit of God rested upon him. Then this man carried from here the gift of love for his people. This man saw the landscape that we are seeing at this moment and like the children of today who live in El Paisnal, felt the dust rise from the streets and experienced the sadness of poverty and the difficulties of living in a

distant village. Yet this man also experienced the moral wealth of the people, the wealth of a home where he learned how to pray, where he learned how to see God and love the neighbor. It was here where Bishop Chávez, during one of his pastoral visits, found Rutilio among the other young men and asked him: *Do you want to be a priest?* Then Bishop Chávez brought him to the seminary. (El Paisnal, March 5, 1978)

## “That good heart”

“Yes, we can see my sisters and brothers that the greatness of the human person does not reside in the fact that one

goes to the great city, or that one has titles of honor or wealth or money. The greatness of the human person resides in becoming more human. Thus when Rutilio achieved the fullness of his humanity, we find him returning here to El Paisnal. In the evening of the patron feast of this town, he returned here, filled with a love for humanity --- a love that was developed in his heart during the time of his university studies. This man had to understand that true greatness did not reside in leaving El Paisnal





and becoming rich in some other place. Rather, his knowledge and his vocation led him to realize that true greatness meant returning to his people, loving his people, and becoming more human. Yes, this is true greatness." (El Paisnal, March, 5, 1978)

And close to El Paisnal, in Aguilares, where Monseñor went to comfort the town after a month of being occupied by military forces that left behind numerous assassinations, he said these words to summarize who Rutilio was: "that good heart that we remember with fondness: Father Grande and his collaborators" (June 19, 1977).

### **"A torch on high"**

In the previous text, Monseñor Romero refers to a very important fact in the life of Rutilio Grande. On September 24, 1972, Rutilio took over the parish of Aguilares. There, together with a team of colleagues, he undertook an experience of rural pastoral work that made reality of what Medellín says in its documents: a Church committed to the poor, the farmworkers of Aguilares.

Monseñor Romero points out that the experience of evangelization in Aguilares is a "torch on high" (June 19, 1977), an example to follow. In fact, with his word and prophetic gestures, Oscar Romero made the whole archdiocese a torch that illuminated, inspired, and gave hope to many people. Monseñor Romero describes the novel pastoral experience of Rutilio Grande as "a daring movement of a more committed gospel:

"Sisters and brothers, I want to add a word of encouragement: a lot of encouragement, do not let your spirit become weakened. In the Archdiocese of San Salvador, Aguilares, has a very special meaning, since Father Grande was shot down by bullets, with his two beloved peasants ... Brothers, I believe that many have mutilated the gospel. We have tried to live a very comfortable gospel, one that no longer demands that we hand over our lives. A pious gospel that makes us comfortable. But here, in Aguilares, a bold movement of a more committed gospel begins" (June 19, 1977).

### **"A peasant pilgrim, brother among the poor"**

In the homily of the first anniversary of his assassination, Monseñor Romero presents Rutilio as a peasant who walks among peasants, a brother of the poor. What better a title and honor is there than this: brother of the poor! Monseñor thoroughly understood the life of Rutilio, which is why this beautiful title came out of his lips. The text that follows is extensive, but he is talking about the deeper option Rutilio Grande made: the option for the poor. Rutilio Grande was not just a follower of Jesus, Monseñor Romero tells us, but of a Jesus who "lived in the village":

Here are Fr. Grande's companions who knew in depth that religious soul who, drenched in the spirit of St. Ignatius of Loyola, knows how to ask himself before the crucified Christ who died for me: what have I done for Christ? What do I do for Christ? What should I do for Christ? And it seems to me that the life of this religious Christian is precisely the answer to these questions: what should I do for Christ? This explains an inspiration of a life consecrated to God that has made him restless on those dusty roads, with his saddlebag, like a peasant pilgrim, reach the humble houses and feel brother among the poor. Among the peasants, he felt the most incarnate man because he carried Christ in his heart as a good Jesuit, to live and to feel Christ ... that is not learned only in the spiritual retreat but living here where Christ is flesh that suffers, here where Christ is something, where Christ is persecuted, where Christ is men who sleep in the fields because they cannot sleep in their houses, where Christ is illness that comes from so many hardships and sufferings, here is Christ bearing his cross, not meditated on in a chapel with stations, but lived in the people. It is Christ with his cross on the

way to Calvary. This is the Christ who was incarnated in this religious, in this Jesuit follower of Jesus" (March 5, 1978).

### **"Our first martyr"**

Finally, Monseñor Romero presents Rutilio Grande as "our first martyr" (March 9, 1980). "His tomb is the glory of the Church" (March 5, 1978). It is not easy for the hierarchy of the Church to recognize a priest killed as a martyr. Prudence and canons can be more than evidence of fact. Monseñor Romero surprised us all when in a clear and natural way he told us that Rutilio Grande is a martyr because he died as Jesus died for defending the life of the poor. Monseñor Romero allowed himself to be questioned and struck by Rutilio Grande when he saw him "anointed with the oil of martyrdom, with his own blood as I found it that night when I saw him in the church of Aguilares lying dead" (March 5, 1978).

Romero did not overlook that along with Rutilio Grande two peasants accompanying him were also killed: Manuel Solorzano and Nelson Rutilio Lemus. Monseñor presents this fact as a symbol with much meaning. Rutilio Grande does not die alone, he dies next to two peasants. In this way, the death of Rutilio Grande is the symbol of a Church that opts for the poor.

True love is the gift that Rutilio Grande brings us in his death with two peasants of the land. The Church loves in this same way, and through these deceased, presents us with the transcendence of the Reign of God. The Church loves them, and it is significant that it was there, while Father Grande walked among his people carrying the message of salvation and of the mass, where he fell riddled with bullets. He was a priest with his peasants, on his way to his people to identify with them, to live with them, not through a revolutionary inspiration, but an inspiration of love (March 14, 1977).

In the days leading up to the first anniversary of the assassination of Rutilio Grande, Monseñor Romero tells us that we have "an obligation" to remember the martyrs:

We have, brothers and sisters, the obligation to recall the courage and commitment of Father Grande so that this voice that some people wanted to silence through violence might continue to cry out like Jesus: "do not fear those who can kill only the body but leave the eternal Gospel and the Word alive in our midst." (February 26, 1978).

He remembered Rutilio every year as the date of the anniversary approached, as we can see in the homilies of March 5, 1978, March 11, 1979, March 16, 1980 and in the last homily of Monseñor Romero in the cathedral on March 23, 1980. On that occasion Monseñor Romero refers to the third anniversary and tells us that if we want to be faithful to Jesus we find "what the great priest found," persecution and martyrdom. A day later he himself was to be shot down by the bullets precisely because of the same reason for which Rutilio Grande was killed—for fidelity to Jesus and the poor people.

"His memory is hope for our people" (March 5, 1978), says Monseñor Romero at the conclusion of the homily for the first anniversary of Grande's death. It certainly was hope for him. The life and testimony of Rutilio Grande inspired and encouraged Monseñor Romero. On several occasions in the homilies he expresses gratitude for his testimony and encourages the people to follow Grande.

