

# MAN OF GOD, MINISTER OF THE POOR

Ana María Pineda, RSM

Forty years ago, on March 12, 1977, Jesuit Rutilio Grande was murdered on the road to El Paisnal. He was driving there to celebrate the novena to St. Joseph, the town's patron. Two campesinos, 72 year-old Manuel Solórzano, a delegate of the word, and 16 year old Nelson Rutilio Lemus died with him. Father Grande was the first priest to be killed on the threshold of the civil war in El Salvador. Grande, a tireless worker in preaching the Gospel to the rural poor of his native country, and an innovative promoter of a ministry directed to the campesinos, was only 49 years old. Evolving from the Grande family history of poverty and his own life-long struggle with his human fragility, he had dedicated his life to answering the call to minister to the poor.

The youngest of the six sons of Salvador Grande and Cristina Garcia, Rutilio was born on July 5, 1928 in El Paisnal—one of the poorest little towns in San Salvador. The poverty of his childhood coupled with the disintegration of his parents' marriage, shaped Rutilio's personality and by some accounts, predisposed him to future bouts with depression and scrupulosity. After a pastoral encounter in El Paisnal with Archbishop Luis Chávez y González, 13 year old Grande entered the minor seminary of San Salvador. His road to the priesthood led him to later join the Society of Jesus and he was ordained on July 30, 1959 in Oña, Spain.

Throughout Grande's years of ministry, he worked in the formation and education of seminarians, liturgical and catechetical ministers, and parish workers and in the consciousness raising of the rural poor of El Salvador. Enriched by his studies in Spain, Belgium and Ecuador, Grande creatively used the directions from the Second Vatican Council and Medellín to inform his ministerial methodology. Even in his early work with the seminarians, he employed the See-Judge-Act method. A gifted communicator, adapting a message to his audience, Grande was known for his ability to use language rooted in rural realities to communicate with the people of the countryside. A man of many gifts, he was involved at many levels of the Church's life within and outside of El Salvador. He was often asked to give retreats, sermons, workshops, courses, and to serve on numerous archdiocesan commissions.

In 1972, at the request of Archbishop Chávez y González, Grande accepted the pastorship of the parish of Our Lord of Mercies in the city of Aguilares. With a team of four Jesuits, Grande began a pastoral ministry that responded to the needs of the area's rural poor. This period of time was marked by growing tension between the rural campesinos and the landowners. As the evangelization process in Aguilares and its satellite parishes advanced, the people acquired a sense of dignity and personal worth. They began to join the political organizations that were fighting for the rights of those who worked the land. By 1976, the economic and social disintegration in the country created a dire situation of overall agitation. Every day brought news of kidnappings, extortion murders and expulsions from the country. At the same time, ministerial work such as that in Aguilares under Rutilio Grande was monitored with growing suspicion. Catechists, delegates of the Word and active Christians became the targets of repression.

The following year, the expulsion of foreign religious and priests escalated. At the end of January 1977, Father Mario Bernal, originally from Colombia, and then pastor in the town of Apopa, was kidnapped, tortured, and expelled from El Salvador. In response, a massive convocation of people gathered in Apopa, for a “manifestation of faith” protesting the injustice suffered by Bernal and others. Father Rutilio was asked to deliver the homily for the massive assembly in which he decried the numerous abuses being unleashed upon innocent people. He was aware of the presence of hostile elements and of the potential danger the protest represented for him and the participants. To the adherents of the status quo, the Apopa “manifestation of faith” represented a subversive and dangerous threat.

A few weeks after his challenging homily, gunmen lying await on the road to El Paisnal assassinated Grande and his two companions. A grief-stricken Monseñor Oscar Romero, the newly installed Archbishop of San Salvador and friend of Grande's from the time Rutilio worked with the seminarians in San Salvador, presided over the Mass of Christian Burial. One of the three youngsters whom the gunmen allowed to flee from the jeep, recalled that in the final moments of life, Grande said: “God's will be done.”

The death of Grande signaled an intensification of suffering in El Salvador, throughout it all, the memory of Grande remained seared in the hearts of the people of El Salvador. Many in El Salvador, aware of Rutilio Grande's life and legacy, recognized him as a “martyr”. They await an official confirmation by the Church that Rutilio Grande is indeed “blessed” and a martyr who died in defense of the poor. In 2015, Vatican Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, postulator of Archbishop Romero's sainthood cause, visited the small parish Church in El Paisnal to visit the burial place of Grande and his traveling companions. At the tomb, Paglia communicated Pope Francis' desire to name Rutilio Grande “blessed” in the near future. Without a doubt, a proclamation that their beloved pastor is a true “saint” resonates in the hearts of many of the people in El Salvador. The people of God await the good news.



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