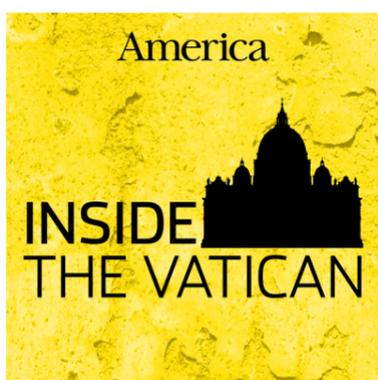


4 lessons from Rutilio Grande, priest, prophet and martyr

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Inside The Vatican
Deep Dive: The beatification of Rutilio Grande, E...

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Rutilio Grande, S.J., and his two traveling companions, 15-year-old Nelson Rutilio Lemus and 72-year-old Manuel Solórzano, had been driving to the small town of El Paisnal in El Salvador to celebrate the novena for the town's patronal feast of St. Joseph when they were gunned down on the road on [March 12, 1977, in Aguilares, El Salvador](#). Decades after the murders, the Vatican announced on Feb. 22, 2021, that it would recognize the three as martyrs.

The news of Father Grande's beatification was welcomed by many Salvadorans, who claim Father Grande as one of their own. Outside of El Salvador, Father Grande is primarily remembered as a close friend of Archbishop Oscar Romero. Often overlooked is the fact that at the outset of the civil war in El Salvador, Father Grande was the first priest killed. Indeed, he was the first-born of the martyrs of this new era. His prophetic stance and his solidarity with the poor of his native country led directly to his death. His influence on the church of El Salvador and those who followed him on the road to martyrdom merits profound consideration.

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What precisely can be learned from how he lived his life? What might it inspire us to do with our own lives? Father Grande's personal contributions to the poor of his beloved country, his commitment to the church and the Jesuit community, his love for the people that he generously served, his love for his many friends and family all resonate in the commitment that led to his martyrdom.

1) A life's value is not determined by one's net worth.

Rutilio Grande was born on July 5, 1928, in the impoverished hamlet of El Paisnal, El Salvador. His childhood was marked not only by poverty but by the trauma of his parents' separation and the death of his mother. Her death and his father's absence required his five older brothers to struggle to provide economic support for young Rutilio and his paternal grandmother. Despite the hardships, Rutilio never lost sight of his humble beginnings or forgot the religiosity taught to him by his grandmother: a people's faith. The simple joys of interacting with the people of the town and being part of the religious and cultural festivities remained with him throughout his life. He took pride in being Salvadoran. As an adult, Rutilio often described his mestizo identity as a "*cafe con leche*," a mixture of coffee with milk.

Although Father Grande's priestly formation occurred prior to Vatican II, its spirit captured his ministerial imagination.

As he always carried himself with dignity, he demonstrated that being born into poverty did not determine a person's worth. From personal experience, he understood not only the suffering of the poor, but also the hopes and aspirations they cherished for themselves and their families. This profoundly personal history became foundational for his priestly ministry. It shaped his teaching of the Gospel and resonated in his embrace of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. Although Father Grande's priestly formation occurred prior to Vatican II, its spirit captured his ministerial imagination.

2) Holiness can be found in the everyday.

During several periods early in his priestly life, Father Grande was assigned to minister in the seminary of San José de la Montaña in San Salvador. Encouraged by his studies at Lumen Vitae, a renowned catechetical and pastoral institute in Brussels, Father Grande transformed the traditional formation of the seminary by following the directives of Vatican II. He profoundly believed that future priests had to come into direct contact with the realities people were living. To increase the pastoral sensibilities of the seminarians, he organized trips for them to visit families in the surrounding towns. There the young men had the opportunity to experience firsthand how ordinary men and women were living.

Later, as pastor of the parish of Our Lord of Mercies in the town of Aguilares, Father Grande led a team of Jesuits in an innovative pastoral endeavor, one similar in spirit to the one he had created for the diocesan seminarians. His visionary pastoral innovations included a collaborative team approach and a preferential option to minister in rural areas among peasant workers. The goal of the pastoral activity was to evangelize men and women who in time would become agents of their own human destiny. In this, Father Grande's vision echoed the opening words of Vatican II's "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World": "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ."

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His own humble beginnings sustained and nourished his zeal for this new vision. Despite the many opportunities for higher education he had as a Jesuit, he never distanced himself from the town or people who shaped his life. Even long after his death, people remembered Father Grande's humanity and the ways he showed them a new example of priesthood. He would often say that God was not to be found in the clouds, but rather firmly present on earth in the lives of the people. In fact, Father Grande's pastoral approach was paving the way to the creation of a new model of church in El Salvador.

3) We all have a missionary call.

Just as Father Grande had earlier adopted an innovative approach to the formation of seminarians, when he was assigned to the parish in Aguilares he invested his energies and efforts into new approaches to the formation of lay men and women. He sometimes said: "Now we're not going to wait for missionaries from the outside. Rather, we must be our own missionaries." In this effort, the young pastor and his Jesuit teammates began to visit people in both the rural areas and the towns. In time, their personal approach drew people to the celebration of the Eucharist, the sacraments and Bible study, resulting in a vibrant community of Christians who were actively engaged in the life of the parish.

Father Grande's ministerial approach was so effective that within a year he had 362 "delegates of the Word" participating in the evangelization efforts of the parish. Some of the lay men and women actively joined the team of Jesuits to collaborate in actualizing the pastoral plan for the parish; others assumed pastoral tasks that matched their newly discovered talents and skills. The evangelizing method in Aguilares was bearing much fruit, and the Gospel was engendering the formation of committed Christians.

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Gradually, as men and women who had little formal education reflected on the Gospel, they began to question the injustices they suffered. Campesinos were discovering the liberating spirit of the Word of God and learning how to incorporate it into their lives. Newly enlightened, the people sought out ways to organize themselves in order to demand what was justly theirs. Father Grande did not discourage them; rather, he continued to make them aware of the Gospel message, and of the truth that God had not destined people to live in poverty.

At the same time, he was clear in how he understood his priestly ministry. He would often tell the people: “I don’t belong to one political party or another. What I am doing is preaching the Gospel.” But as the people gained greater understanding of their rights as human beings, they began to look for ways to secure those rights. It was inevitable that they would become politically involved.

Parallel to the formation of the laity, Father Rutilio gave special attention to a liturgy transformed by the spirit and directives of Vatican II. His childhood engagement in the popular religiosity of his hometown of El Paisnal gave him great insight into and respect for how the faith was lived out by ordinary people. He felt that popular practices that the clergy had previously dismissed as misguided forms of religiosity should be recognized as authentic expressions of faith. In fact, Father Grande insisted that the popular religiosity of the ordinary people be honored and respected and kept as a central part of the pastoral plan of the parish.

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For him, prayer, popular expressions of faith and liturgy were integral to the real lives of the Salvadoran people. Consequently, he guided people in reclaiming the values inherent in their devotions and cultural celebrations. Having taught courses on the constitution of the Republic of El Salvador in the minor seminary, he often incorporated that material in his sermons and eucharistic celebrations, linking constitutional rights to the Gospel message. He understood that salvation history in the context of the modern world required that prayer and good works be integrated. All of these pastoral efforts inspired by Vatican II led the way in creating a new way of being church within the contemporary realities of El Salvador.

4) God transforms our wounds.

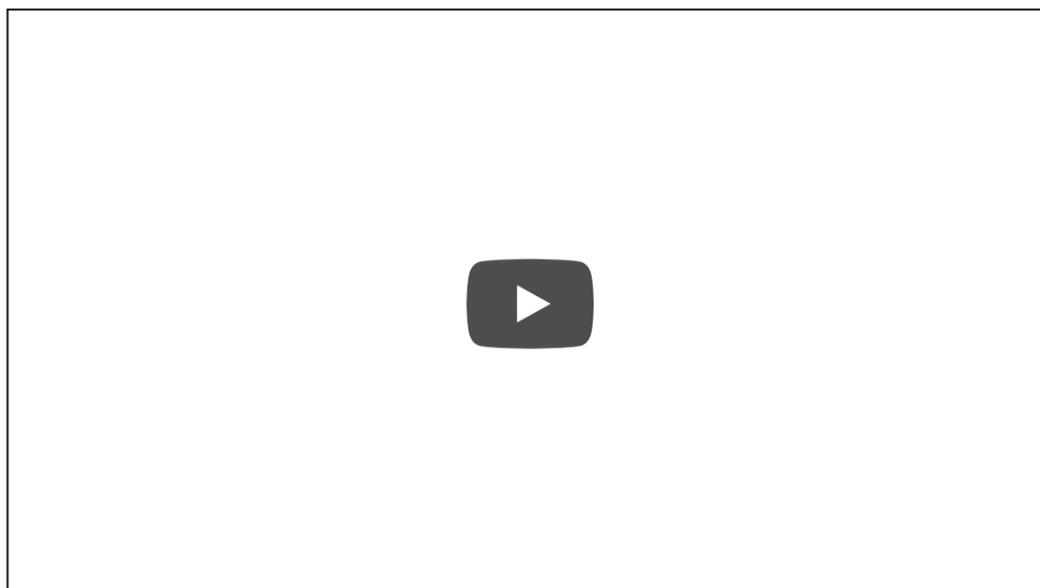
Amid celebrations of the beatification of Father Grande, those who knew him in life consider that, of Rutilio Grande’s many contributions to the church in El Salvador, the most notable was his work in aligning the church with the actual life of the people. But we are also led to reflect on another contribution he made: showing us what it means to be a saint, to be holy in the modern world. Early in life, Father Grande had suffered a catatonic episode from which he gradually recovered, but which had long-lasting effects on his health. Few people knew just how fragile his health was as an adult, when he dealt with ongoing bouts of depression and self-doubt.

His superiors in the Society of Jesus noted in his personal file: “At the beginning of his religious life, he manifested a clear nervous weakness.... He had psychological depressions and it was feared for his mental health.... He was aware of that limitation, suffered for it, but he did not let it control him. He accepted it. He worked to dominate it and he overcame it.” Father Grande learned to live with his condition by placing his trust completely in God, and by taking steps to help himself. Every day until his death, he placed himself with utter simplicity in the hands of God.

Even in his fragility—or perhaps through it—this beautiful son of El Salvador accomplished great things for the universal church, the church in Latin America and especially the church in El Salvador, by living and giving his life for the faith. His fragility may have been a difficult cross to bear, but it highlights the beauty of his holiness, his saintliness.

In the final moments of his life, Father Grande rendered his complete surrender as the faithful son of El Paisnal and the church as he said: "Let God's will be done." Just as the people of El Salvador will celebrate the beatification of one of their own on Jan. 22, their beloved "Father Tilo," let us join with them in crying out "*¡Presente!*"

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