

Rutilio Grande SJ

Rutilio Grande SJ, a Jesuit murdered in El Salvador, helped shape the values of St Oscar Romero. **David Stewart SJ**, of the British Jesuits, recounts the story of their friendship and of the courage and vision of the life of Rutilio Grande SJ.

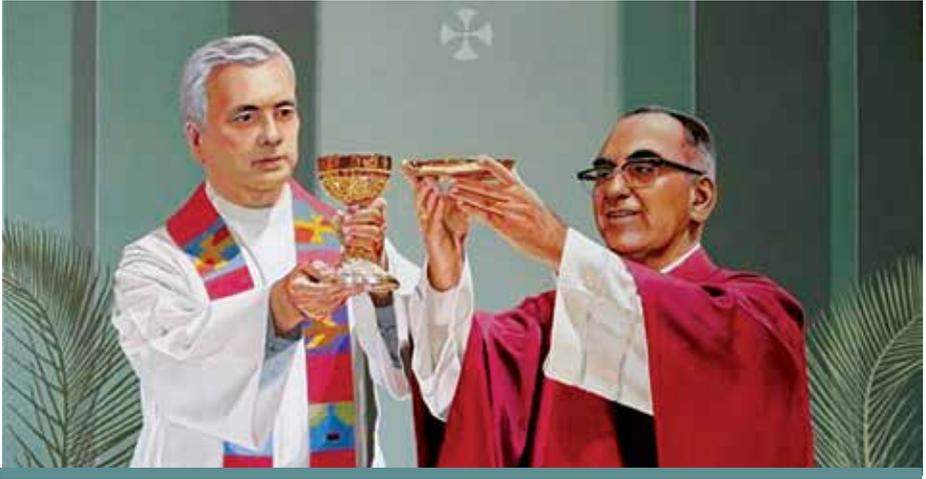


Photo: St. Ignatius Parish, Stamford Hill, London

We have few pictures of Rutilio Grande SJ, and we do not have many of his own words. We can imagine him standing to one side of St Oscar Romero, perhaps a pace or two behind, maybe in the great saint's shadow. One photograph that has survived shows St Oscar in his archbishop's vestments, accompanied by Rutilio, off-centre, in simple soutane and cotta, serving him at a great liturgy. Yet, this picture would be inaccurate because Rutilio inspired Oscar, showing him the way to the fullest possible engagement with the Gospel's invitation and striding ahead of

him, by three years, to his own violent martyrdom.

Fr Grande had come from poor roots and never forgot where he came from. His rural farming family lived in poverty, like all their neighbours, at El Paisnal, where he was born, where he celebrated his first Mass and, forty-seven years later, where he was murdered. He knew who he was and came to know who he was meant to become, for God's kingdom. Some of his own words that we do have express his distaste for any kind of special treatment, particularly when local people would make sacrifices beyond

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their means to offer him a fancy meal: he abhorred becoming one of the ‘fat priests who eat at the cost of the hunger of others. The little hen would be better for the malnourished children of the peasants than for him’.

It’s well enough known how, when St Oscar first became a bishop, the fourteen powerful families in that country were happy that they had a tame prelate, one who wouldn’t cause them any trouble or threaten their wealth, and who would encourage people just to say their prayers and keep quiet. The crops they farmed were chiefly for export, such as coffee and sugar; like many people of the developing world, they saw little of the proceeds and did not receive a fair wage for their labour.

Oscar changed as he got to know more about how people were suffering, and he got to know about what his friend Rutilio was doing in the poorest areas, supporting the people to form small communities, letting the light of the Gospel shine into their situations and the injustices they faced. The point was (and is) to read the Gospel from their own perspective and that of their community and class, rather than from a perspective dictated to them by those who had power over them. Only they could enforce the change they desired, but only once they had learned, reading the

Gospel this way, that it wasn’t God’s will that they always remain poor.

Oscar was, at first, suspicious of Rutilio’s work. He was gradually converted. When Rutilio and two people from his parish, his elderly sacristan and fourteen-year-old altar server, were murdered by government death-squads, Oscar knew that he must follow the same path. Three years later, he met the same fate.

It was said of Oscar that he ‘did everything with apostolic courage, even though he was actually a somewhat shy and self-effacing man. When he got into the pulpit, he was a man transformed’. Rutilio was also a shy man who, at times, experienced crippling doubt and sometimes suffered from depression. Each of them became transformed, enlivened by God’s grace.

A picture, made by a London Catholic artist, of the two martyr-friends celebrating Mass together now hangs in St Ignatius Jesuit church in Stamford Hill, north London. Fittingly, it’s entitled ‘The Great Amen’. We Jesuits hope that Rutilio, too, may soon be declared a blessed and, in God’s good time, a saint. Pope Francis has been heard to observe that Oscar was Rutilio’s first miracle. Let’s pray for Rutilio’s beatification, knowing that, in his friend Oscar, we have a new saint to support our prayers. 