

Rutilio Grande SJ

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On 12 March 1977 Fr Rutilio Grande SJ set out from Aquilares to celebrate Mass in nearby El Paisnal. He did not arrive alive. Today three small crosses mark the spot along the road where he and his companions, Manuel and Nelson, were assassinated. Scripture reminds us that no greater love is possible than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends (Jn 15:13). Rutilio died for love of God and some of the poorest people in the world. He did so in the company of two of those people. The three bodies were brought to the church in El Paisnal, and if you go there today you will see three slabs on the ground marking their graves. The Jesuits wanted all three to be buried side by side. Now they will be beatified together on 22 January. All three are martyrs having been killed out of hate for their Christian faith in a loving God who struggled with them to establish social justice in their society.

In the funeral homily, the new archbishop, Oscar Romero, now Blessed Oscar Romero, declared, ‘Fr Rutilio Grande died loving, and without a

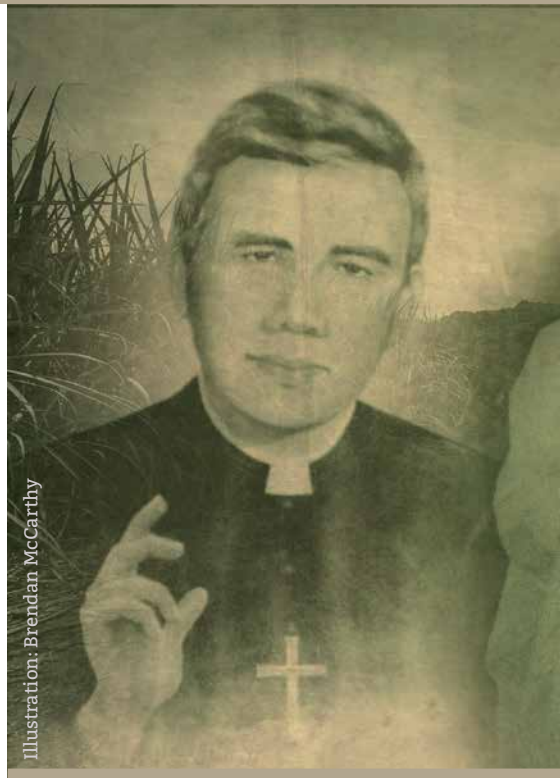


Illustration: Brendan McCarthy

doubt, when he felt the first impact of those bullets that killed him, he was able to say like Christ: ‘Forgive them Father, they don’t know, they have not understood my message of love’.’ Grande was a friend of Romero’s and his friend’s assassination turned Romero into the courageous archbishop he became. His subsequent courageous leadership on behalf of his people would result in his assassination three years later during the offertory of the Mass he was celebrating.

The life and death of Grande also had a profound effect on his fellow Jesuit from Latin America, Pope Fran-



cis. In his meeting with fellow Jesuits from El Salvador and the other countries of the Central American Province on 26 January 2019, the Pope told them:

‘Rutilio is very dear to me. At the entrance to my room there is a frame containing a piece of cloth with Romero’s blood and notes from a catechesis by Rutilio. I was a devotee of Rutilio even before coming to know Romero better. When I was in Argentina, his life influenced me, his death touched me. Rutilio, moreover, was the prophet. He “converted” Romero.

There is a vision here: the dimen-

sion of prophecy, that of one who is a prophet by the testimony of his life, and not only as those who are so because they teach and go around speaking. He is a prophet by witness. He said what he had to say, but it was his testimony, his martyrdom, that eventually moved Romero. This was the grace. So do turn to him with your prayers!’

We in Ireland need to turn to people like Grande at this time in our history when so many of us are rightly angry with and alienated from the Church because of revelations of sexual abuse and cover ups. Grande offers us a light in the darkness. He shows us that authentic Christian experience can inspire heroic loving for vulnerable people. He can inspire us all the more when we know that he, too, was a vulnerable human being who at one time had suffered terrible doubts about his own worth, doubts that had tortured him for years.

At a time when the first Latin American and Jesuit pope is leading the Catholic Church on a synodal path, a path of journeying with people in their lived experiences, questions, challenges, uncertainties, and hopes, Grande calls us to commit ourselves to that path and to do so with the great majority of the world’s people, the economically poor, most in mind. He calls us to draw close to Jesus on that journey, as he did so profoundly on his life’s journey, Jesus who came ‘to bring good news and to set the oppressed free’ (Lk 4:16–20), so that everyone ‘may have life and have it to the full’ (Jn 10:10). 