

## Archbishop Romero Lecture 2016

### **Rutilio, Romero and Pope Francis** by Rodolfo Cardenal SJ

Allow me to start with a personal anecdote. One year ago, whilst I was in Rome pulling together the documentation on Rutilio Grande from the Central Archive of the Jesuits, the present archbishop of San Salvador invited me to join the Salvadoran delegation that had arrived there to thank Pope Francis for the beatification of Archbishop Romero. By chance of fate, during the audience with the Pope, I was seated in the front row. So, I had the opportunity to shake his hand. When I found myself standing in front of him, I introduced myself as the author of two biographies of Rutilio Grande, one short, and another longer one, and president of the advisory commission for the cause of his canonisation. He told me he knew of the first of these biographies. Then he looked at me and asked me if we had recorded a miracle linked to Rutilio. I told him no. Then he gave me a big smile and told me that there had been a miracle, and added, "Rutilio Grande's great miracle is Archbishop Romero".

One cannot understand Romero without Rutilio. Rutilio's ministry was brought to a violent end in March 1977, just as Archbishop Romero was beginning his ministry in San Salvador. As well as martyrdom, various biographical coincidences unite them in a surprising manner. They were both from poor rural families in El Salvador. They were both born in small villages. Romero was born in the east of the country in 1917, whilst Rutilio was born in a small village in the central area called El Paisnal in 1928, into a rather dysfunctional family. They both entered the seminary at a very young age. Rutilio in San Salvador and Romero in the diocese of San Miguel. In contrast to Romero, Rutilio did not follow the secular clergy route, instead joining the Jesuits in 1945, on graduating from the minor seminary.

Oscar Romero and Rutilio Grande had intense experiences of human weakness, albeit for different reasons. Rutilio suffered two serious crises of anxiety, probably associated with a traumatic experience in his infancy. From 1950 onwards, following the first and more severe crisis, his health was weak, limiting substantially his ability to study and to carry out apostolic work. The anxiety manifested itself in the desire to achieve perfection and to be liked by everyone, in an obsession for exactness, an excessive care for appearance and fear of ridicule. These tendencies caused him insecurity and anxiety. On these occasions, Rutilio withdrew from his surroundings, he kept silent, he appeared indifferent, serious and tired. Often Rutilio would walk in the dark, in a state of doubt. On various occasions he questioned his priestly vocation, which was what he most loved. In these difficult moments he always put himself in God's hands.

Romero and Rutilio both studied abroad, but in different locations - Romero in Rome, and Rutilio in Venezuela, Ecuador, Spain, France and Belgium. Despite the travel, the studies, and their clerical status, they were both constantly aware and proud of their humble roots. Rutilio always wanted to return to the village he had left to enter the seminary. When he did finally return to El Paisnal, as an ordained priest, he had to convince the older women, who regarded him with respect and veneration, that he was the same person as always. Romero too did not distance himself from his humble origins. When he was the parish priest in the cathedral of San Miguel he showed an unusual compassion for the poor, the alcoholics and the sick, who wandered around in the vicinity of the church. Later, he put his episcopal ministry at the service of this people pummelled by poverty and the repression of the military dictatorship.

From 1951, Rutilio worked in the formation of Salvadoran clergy in the national seminary. The majority of the seminarians were from humble origins, just like him. Until 1971, he was the "Father Prefect of the seminary", a responsibility he was less than keen to take on because he was responsible for discipline. But Rutilio knew how to combine high expectations with understanding. He did not want the seminarians to be submissive to authority, but responsible and mature in outlook. Later, many priests would seek him out to ask his advice. He was also the teacher of catechetics and pastoral work. But the course that he taught with greatest pleasure was citizenship because it allowed him to explain to the seminarians the rights of the Salvadoran people.

Rutilio wanted to train priests who were at the service of the people. This desire led him to open the seminary to the reality of El Salvador. The seminarians had to leave the building and likewise, the real world had now to permeate the seminary's classrooms and corridors. During the holidays he organised popular missions with several dozen seminarians. They weren't just about preaching, but a way for the seminarians to discover the people from whence they came and whom they were destined to serve. And Rutilio himself would provide pastoral support to El Paisnal on the weekends with the help of various seminarians.

In this same vein, he tried to introduce into the seminary the spirit of the Second Vatican Council and Medellin – the Latin American reading of the teaching of Vatican II. Indeed, Rutilio was one of the priests who worked hardest to make the Salvadoran Church accept the teaching of the Council and the Latin American application of it. However, his faithfulness to that teaching brought him into conflict with various bishops who did not accept it. They did not allow him to reform the life and studies of the seminary. Nor did they approve his candidature to become rector of the seminary, as proposed by the Jesuits in 1970. So, Rutilio decided to leave the seminary, because he had lost their trust. After a short spell in a traditional Jesuit school and an intense experience of Latin American pastoral outreach in Ecuador, in the autumn of 1972 he arrived in the parish of Aguilares – and within its jurisdiction was the village of his birth, El Paisnal. He spent the last four years of his life in Aguilares dedicated to proclaiming the gospel and the justice of the Kingdom of God to the *campesinos* (or peasant country-folk).

Rutilio and Archbishop Romero announced the Kingdom of God and tried to establish effective signs of its presence, in a reality dominated by economic exploitation, social oppression and state repression. This is why they denounced the injustice that oppressed the Salvadoran people and proclaimed the people's invitation to liberation. Rutilio did this from his rural parish, and Archbishop Romero from his cathedral. Both possessed the gift of prophetic preaching. Rutilio used a more colloquial Salvadoran language than Romero. He used the popular idioms used by the peasants, and had a marvellous mastery of metaphor. In contrast, Archbishop Romero's preaching was more elaborate, but no less popular. The two are notable examples of great communicators.

Both pleaded with those involved in injustice and violence to be converted. Neither incited violence. On the contrary, they both went to great lengths to avoid it. They fought against the repressive violence, which kills quickly in order to silence the calls for justice, and against the structural violence, which kills more slowly, through unemployment, hunger and sickness. They had different styles, but the word of both was sharp and timely. The poor received their words with interest and joy, because they gave them hope. But the powerful accused them of being communists and, in the end, resorted to murder to silence their voices. They were both assassinated at the instigation of the oligarchy. The physical authors of the killings were death squads under army command. Their murders could not silence the truth of their words, nor the force of their credibility.

Rutilio and Archbishop Romero, were inspired by Vatican II, Medellin and Paul VI's teaching document, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. They worked to build a Church that was truly a People of God, in line with the Vatican Council's definition. The first step was to bring the people together, because

without people there is no People of God. The Salvadoran population was not a people. The oppression had subdued them, and egoism kept them in a state of division and distance. This meant that neither of the two could overlook the historic struggles for justice and freedom. The Church had to be built up from the grassroots. So, they worked to bring the people together, calling them to conversion, to turn to God, and they showed the people the path to becoming a People of God.

In Aguilares, Rutilio and his team started to build a Church rooted in living communities. The starting point was the reality of parish life, where popular piety and religiosity was dominant. So the first task was to evangelise that form of religious practice, following the example of Jesus of Nazareth. And so the preaching included prophetic thinking. In the same vein as Jesus, Rutilio denounced the exploiter and made the exploited people aware of their dignity and rights. He called the exploiters to conversion and to those exploited he spoke the Word of God, that for so long had been denied them. So it was that the peasants discovered they had a voice and something important to do. Rutilio invited them to take on their Christian responsibility to transform society. The new and free man and woman would emerge from a process of personal and community transformation.

In this way, Rutilio founded dynamic, prophetic and autonomous Christian communities, which produced pastoral agents movers and shakers. They, and in particular the women, quickly began to set the direction of parish activity. The parish of Aguilares emphasised preaching of the gospel and conversion, and not simply the administration of the sacraments which had been the predominant activity of the traditional parish. Rutilio dreamt of a parish where the priest focused on exercising his ordained ministry, and the lay community took responsibility for the other parish activities.

The prophetic dimension of his preaching inevitably brought up the political question. Rutilio faced up to it in his rural parish in Aguilares and Archbishop Romero in the archdiocese, and by virtue of his influence, in the country as a whole. Rutilio came face to face with the relationship between faith and politics when the campesinos discovered the effectiveness of organising themselves to speak out and secure their labour, social, and political rights; and particularly when the best leaders of the communities, driven by their Christian commitment, didn't stop at just becoming involved in political organisation, but began to become its leaders. The transformation of the pastoral agents into leaders worried Rutilio. He had foreseen political commitment, but much further down the road. But the harsh reality of the parish led to its emergence almost simultaneously alongside the Christian community.

Rutilio tried to maintain a clear separation between the parish and the peasant organisation, without excluding their proper collaboration. But the organisation tried to use the parish pastoral programmes for its political ends. The difference in points of view led to confrontations between Rutilio and the leaders in the Christian communities and the peasant organisation - who were indeed the most courageous and admired people in the parish. Another source of discord was the prudence and moderation that Rutilio many times asked of the peasant organisation, which had become excited by its first successes; and that was because he feared a blood-bath. And not without reason, because this is precisely what happened a few weeks after his assassination, when the army invaded and occupied the parish. However, despite these internal differences and the complaints from the military regime, who considered him an agitator, Rutilio always defended the peasant people. As a result, from the outside, he was considered a leader of a social movement that threatened to undermine the decades-old oligarchic order.

Archbishop Romero also was very careful to distinguish between faith and politics. But like Rutilio, he was also accused of improperly involving himself in politics and was considered highly dangerous by the powerful. And all because he defended the poor, denounced the violations of human rights and called insistently for the avoidance of a civil war.

Despite the criticisms and the complaints, Archbishop Romero explicitly approved the preaching and pastoral action of Rutilio. According to the archbishop, his preaching was characterised by, "looking to God, and looking at his neighbour as his brother, from God's perspective" and by inviting us "to organise our lives according to the wishes of God", which should be evident "through concrete commitment and above all, motivated by love, fraternal love," because the Christian must not forget the poverty that surrounds them.<sup>1</sup> The Christian cannot forget it because the Word of God has to be made flesh in the situation we live so as to save it from within. This is the mystery of the incarnation. But by becoming incarnate in human history, the Word of God inevitably acquires a social dimension. So it is that salvation includes political liberation, but goes far beyond it, because it prepares the way for the Kingdom of God, already present in this transforming action.

The option that Rutilio and Archbishop Romero made for the poor and for the liberation of the poor from all kinds of oppression provoked the fury of the oligarchy. The oligarchy expected their pastors to keep the people silent, passive and resigned to their fate. The sufferings of this life would be greatly rewarded in the next life. But neither Rutilio nor Romero accepted this traditional role, because the gospel does not tolerate oppression. Neither of them confused faith and politics, but they were both conscious that preaching about the Kingdom of God would inevitably have political implications in a situation so unjust as that of El Salvador. Neither of them was frightened by the implications. On the contrary, they stayed faithful to the Salvadoran people and to Jesus of Nazareth, to the point that they gave their lives for them.

If Rutilio and Archbishop Romero are guilty of anything, it is of proclaiming that, according to God's will, the gifts of creation are for everyone. Therefore, no-one has the right to take possession for themselves of that which belongs to all in common. Self-enrichment in this way is contrary to God's will and therefore sinful. It is not only sinful at a personal level, but also at a social level, because individual egoism has negative, and truly mortal consequences for all those who are excluded from the goods of creation. So Rutilio and Romero invited the people to speak out to reclaim their rights to enjoy these same goods of creation; they held out their hand to them, to help them to stand up; and they showed them the way of true justice and liberation.

Unquestioning conformity, as preached by the traditional Church, was unacceptable, because the Christian is called to take away the sins of the world and to work to build a humanity that is respectful of creation, that is fraternal, and expresses solidarity; and where the idea of "this is mine and that is yours" does not exist. Everything belongs to all of us, we are Christ and Christ is God. Rutilio expressed it beautifully when he spoke of the utopia of the Kingdom of God as an immense table, covered with long tablecloths, where there is a place reserved for everyone - and bread for all.

Rutilio and Romero had a deep friendship, although it was not free from painful disagreements. Apparently, their friendship was born when they each were going through difficult times. Oscar Romero arrived at the seminary in San Salvador rejected by the clergy of his diocese. In the seminary he met Rutilio, who was also going through a difficult period. At times the responsibilities he carried were very heavy and his health did not help him. Somehow, the two met and became friends. Rutilio was Master of Ceremonies for Romero's episcopal ordination, an event that both recalled with affection. But at the time, Bishop Romero did not share the approach that Rutilio was following in the formation of the seminarians, nor his vision of Church. For that reason, he did not back Rutilio's nomination to become rector of the seminary. This veto caused a distance between them; but not for long, because Rutilio sought out Romero to re-establish their contact. They met again when Romero returned to San Salvador as archbishop.

Shortly after Rutilio's assassination, it was said insistently by and amongst the people and in the Salvadoran Church, to the point that it became a local tradition, that Archbishop Romero was

---

<sup>1</sup> Homily, 14 March 1977

converted by the death of Rutilio. We talk of conversion not in the sense of giving up a life of sin to return to God, but to return to an oppressed people, whose cause he began to defend with extraordinary force and clarity. Other voices, though few, said that Archbishop Romero was the miracle of Rutilio, but this interpretation was not accepted. More recently, Pope Francis has picked up on it, affirming that Romero is Rutilio's "great miracle".

The "miracle" of Rutilio can be seen clearly after his martyrdom. Archbishop Romero took possession of the archdiocese of San Salvador on 22 February 1977, just three weeks before Rutilio's assassination, in an atmosphere of frustration and disagreement amongst the clergy who viewed his appointment as an attempt to turn the clock back to the old styles of pastoral work. Some reacted with scarcely-veiled hostility. So Rutilio used all his influence among the clergy to ask them to give the new archbishop a chance.

By the end of March, the clergy had overcome their reservations and gathered together around Archbishop Romero. The ecclesial unity of the archdiocese, something that was unthinkable three weeks before, had become reality. At Rutilio's funeral in the cathedral, again at the *misa única* or single mass on 20 March which was also held in the cathedral, and in the mass in Aguilares on 19 June, Archbishop Romero gave thanks "to all these dear priests, here, in public, before the face of the archdiocese, for the unity that is expressed today in our gathering for the only Gospel."<sup>2</sup>

Even more noteworthy is that the martyrdom of Rutilio was at the heart of the commitment by the Church in San Salvador and its pastor to continuing Rutilio's work and to keeping his memory alive, "because he is the hope of our people"<sup>3</sup>. Aguilares, Archbishop Romero said, "has a very special significance, since those bullets brought down Father Grande and his two dear companions", "beyond doubt, it is a sign of the choice of our Lord."<sup>4</sup> From that point on, the archdiocese of San Salvador followed its pastor, Monseñor Romero. So, what was unthinkable a few weeks beforehand, unexpectedly became reality, to great surprise.

This is how Rutilio contributed to preparing the path that shortly after would be walked by Oscar Romero during his three years as archbishop. In effect, Rutilio had trained several generations of priests, he had spread the word of the teaching of Vatican II, Medellín, and *Evangelii Nuntiandi*; and he had put those teachings into practice. A week after his martyrdom, Archbishop Romero confirmed that ministry of Rutilio. "Be assured, brethren, that the evangelical line that the archdiocese is taking is authentic and to all those dear priests, religious, and lay people who collaborate with it I say, stay firm in your stance and you will be in communion with your bishop."<sup>5</sup> On the first anniversary, the archbishop described Rutilio as "the example we must follow."<sup>6</sup>

Rutilio was faithful to Jesus and to the People of God, with admirable consistency. "So, we find Rutilio attaining his full humanity when he returns to El Paisnal", said Archbishop Romero, "arriving here because of the love in the man whose heart had grown after passing through universities, books and studies. This man had understood that true greatness, to which he directed all his intelligence, vocation, his everything, was not to be found in leaving here and in becoming richer amongst another people, but in returning to his own people, loving them, in all their humanity. This is true greatness."<sup>7</sup>

He returned to his village, El Paisnal, continues Archbishop Romero, to live "here where Christ is suffering... where Christ is carrying his cross on his shoulders, not in a chapel...but alive in the people; he is Christ with his cross on the way to Calvary. This is Christ made man in this religious

---

<sup>2</sup> Homily, 20 March 1977

<sup>3</sup> Homily, El Paisnal, 5 March 1978

<sup>4</sup> Homily, Aguilares, 19 June 1977

<sup>5</sup> Homily, 20 March 1977

<sup>6</sup> Homily, El Paisnal, 5 March 1978

<sup>7</sup> Homily, El Paisnal, 5 March 1978

brother, this Jesuit follower of Jesus".<sup>8</sup> His assassins found him there. They took his life, along with the lives of an elderly man, Manuel Solarzano, who was his constant companion, and an adolescent, Nelson Lemus - both symbols of the Salvadoran people. Despite the dangers he lived, Rutilio refused to leave the parish, he did not want to abandon his people. His last words: "We must do God's will."

Rutilio Grande was a priest and a Jesuit of unsuspected human and religious dimensions. It was in his weakness that he discovered his greatness. Most of his life he lived quietly. He was not a brilliant student, nor did he stand out as a leader amongst the Jesuits. On occasion he was even the victim of disdain amongst his superiors and companions. But those who really knew him found him to be a warm, generous person who was at their service. The seminarians and the clergy discovered in him a teacher, counsellor, and a compassionate and friendly companion, who was also firm and serious. The peasant folk found in him a priest who was close to them, humble and affectionate." In short, Rutilio lived out his Jesuit and priestly vocation as a "service of faith, in which it is an absolute imperative to promote justice and bring about reconciliation in mankind, as demanded by the reconciliation of Man with God."<sup>9</sup> This is what made Archbishop Romero state, "we know that the Spirit of the Lord lives in him."<sup>10</sup>

His martyrdom, according to Archbishop Romero, was a reflection of his life. "A priest among his *campesinos*, walking towards his people, to identify with them, and to live with them, inspired not by revolution, but by love."<sup>11</sup>

San Salvador, August, 2016

[www.romerotrust.org.uk](http://www.romerotrust.org.uk)

Twitter: @RomeroTrust

Facebook: search for Archbishop Romero Trust

---

<sup>8</sup> Homily, El Paisnal, 5 March 1978

<sup>9</sup> General Congregation 32, Decree 4.2

<sup>10</sup> Homily, El Paisnal, 5 March 1978

<sup>11</sup> Homily, 14 March 1977