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## **RUTILIO GRANDE: MAN, CHRISTIAN, AND PRIEST**

**First anniversary of the death of Father Rutilio Grande**

**El Paisnal**

**5 March 1978**

*1 Samuel 16:1b, 6-7, 10-13a*

*Ephesians 5:8-14*

*John 9:1-41*

Dear sisters and brothers.

Once again Christ is passing through El Paisnal. Each time the Eucharist is celebrated, the Lord passes by as in today's gospel. We have felt this special passing of the Lord this morning, and we want to interpret it in the sincerity of our conscience out of affection for Father Rutilio Grande and in our prayer for him and for the two *campesinos* who died with him one year ago.

I want to base my reflection on the word that has just been read by highlighting three thoughts. I want Father Grande to be seen in his full greatness, of which the church is proud. I do not want to see his Christian greatness mutilated or distorted. He proclaimed authentic liberation, and we gather here to embrace his message. I want to speak about Rutilio Grande as a man, Rutilio Grande as a Christian, and Rutilio Grande as a priest. That is the message I want to offer from his burial place this morning. My brother priests, along with the religious, pastoral workers, and all the people of God, desire to continue the wonderful mission that he undertook and that one year ago came to a glorious end as he walked with his people.

### **Rutilio Grande as a man**

The man! How wonderful it is to hear today's first reading here in El Paisnal. Let us change the name of the city: instead of Bethlehem, where Samuel was sent to visit the family of Jesse because God had chosen a boy there to be the future king of Israel, let us think of this small town of El Paisnal, much like Bethlehem of Judea, where Rutilio Grande was born with the sign of one chosen by God in the midst of his people. God came and anointed him as he did David. We can say that from that day the Spirit of Yahweh rested upon Rutilio as it did on the young David (1 Sam 16:13b). This man carried from this place the gift of love for his people. This man saw the same landscape that we see at this moment, and like the children who live in El Paisnal today, he passed through the dust of these streets, the sadness of the poverty, and the difficulties of living in a remote village. But he also experienced the moral richness of our people, the wealth of a home where he learned to pray, where he learned to see God and love his neighbor. It was here that Bishop Chávez y González during one of his pastoral visits found Rutilio among other youngsters in catechism class and asked him, «Do you want to be a priest?» And then he took him to the seminary. Just like the young David, son of Jesse, so too

Rutilio was called to undertake the great journey that was to make of him day by day a greater man.

To see true human greatness, sisters and brothers, you don't have to go to a big city; it's not a matter of having titles or wealth or money. Human greatness resides in becoming more human. That is why, when Rutilio reached the fullness of his humanity, we find him returning here to El Paisnal. Last year on the eve of the patronal feast of this little town, he returned here with all the affection of one whose heart grew steadily during the time of his university studies. This man had come to understand that true greatness did not consist in leaving El Paisnal and becoming rich in some other place. Rather, his intelligence and his vocation led him to return to this town out of love for his people in order to help them to grow in their humanity. Yes, this is true greatness! True development does not consist in having more but in being more. It was here that Rutilio began to be what he was; it was here that he grew to become the man whose teachings we now embrace. So human did he become that there is a danger of confusing him with merely human ideologies; he was so human that it might appear that there was no other dimension to his life but this humanness. Nevertheless, let us enter into his heart, and we will see another dimension of his life: Rutilio the Christian.

### **Rutilio Grande as a Christian**

Like the blind man in today's gospel, so too Rutilio one day was anointed here in the parish church. The gospel tells us that Christ anointed the blind man with clay made from dust mixed with his saliva (John 9:6-7) and then commanded him to wash in the Pool of Siloam. All this suggests baptism. Baptism makes the human person a Christian, and a Christian is one who hears the words of Saint Paul: «Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light» (Eph 5:14).

As a man Rutilio died one year ago, but as a Christian he can never die. The immortal light of Christ has shone on him. In the depths of his being he made a commitment to Christ, like the man born blind who was asked, «Do you believe in the Son of Man?» and who responded, «Who is he that I may believe?» (John 9:35-36). Rutilio came to know Christ in his catechism, in the seminary, and in his religious life. Like the man born blind, he prostrated himself every day before Christ and said, «Yes Lord, I believe in you. I will follow you. My doctrine is Christian, and my liberation is that of the Gospel. I do not want this liberation to be confused with other doctrines that are merely temporal. I want to be a Christian who inspires hope for the true progress of this society. While paradise will never be found here on earth, yet this earth should reflect the paradise toward which we journey. This is the kingdom of God that we human beings are working for, a kingdom that is necessary even if people do not accept it. Even if we must die as martyrs, this kingdom must be preached and announced».

This is the Christ that Rutilio the Christian encountered. Saint Paul in today's reading seems to be describing the soul of Father Grande when he writes, «Live as children of the light, for light produces every kind of goodness and righteousness and truth. Try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the fruitless works of darkness; rather expose them» (Eph 5:8-11). So much evil is done by the children of darkness! And how difficult it is to reveal and bring this evil into the light, to denounce it as injustice, to preach against disorder, cruelty, and abuse! Yet because Father Grande had the courage to unmask so many things, they marked him for death and killed him.

It is reported that someone joked on the day of his murder: «Now we have proved that even the skin of priests can be penetrated by bullets». Yes, they laughed because they thought that they had put an end to his Christian preaching. What they did not expect was that the death of a priest would cause storms and bring about the springtime that Christian El Salvador has experienced over the past year. They did not know that they had planted a seed that would burst into a great harvest, as Christ said, «The grain of wheat dies but it does not remain buried» (John 12:24). They have not triumphed over Father Grande, sisters and brothers. How abundant the harvest of persecution has been!

At this time I want to thank this Christian and the Christians who died with him, along with the Christians who worked with him to plant the seeds of spring that we are now harvesting. It is said that there has never been so much joy and hope in our archdiocese and the church as there is in these days. Blessed be God, for it is the death of Christians that is the seed of more Christians and more vocations, as the superior general of the Jesuits said. This is the life of this great Christian who by his baptism broadened the horizons so much that we can hardly encompass them from our earthly perspective.

I urge you, dear sisters and brothers reflecting with me this morning in light of the gospel, to realize that this is the example that must be followed by you and by us and by everyone who is concerned about the liberation of our people. Let us not mutilate this liberation with other liberations that are content with merely earthly horizons. No, let us open ourselves to the horizons of faith. Let us believe as Father Grande believed. Let us proclaim the church's doctrine of liberation with the confidence that one does not die when one is killed; rather, one rises above death and continues to be incarnated in the lives of those who follow. Great Christian ideals were what made this man great and enhanced his humanity; his was a human Christianity that expands toward God and motivates us to live in hope.

### **Rutilio Grande as priest**

Finally, sisters and brothers, Father Grande, the priest. Excuse me, but before he was a priest, he was also a religious, a Jesuit. At this time I want to extend my gratitude and the gratitude of the people to the Jesuit fathers. The Jesuit provincial of Central America is present with us. Also present are some of Father Grande's companions, men who knew the depths of his religious soul imbued with the spirit of Saint Ignatius Loyola. Rutilio knew how to ask these questions before the crucified Christ who died for us: «What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What should I do for Christ?»<sup>1</sup> It seems to me that the life of this Christian religious priest is the best answer to those questions.

«What should I do for Christ?» This explains how he was inspired to live a life consecrated to God and to travel tirelessly along these dusty roads, carrying a backpack like a needy pilgrim, visiting humble homes, and feeling himself to be a brother to the poor. Among the *campesinos* he felt totally at home because, like a good Jesuit, he carried Christ in his heart. As other Jesuits expelled from this region have said, Rutilio lived and felt like the Christ he had learned about. Here in El Paisnal the Jesuits also learned how to be true Christians because you people showed them the true image of Christ, the image that Saint Ignatius taught. That image is not discovered only during a spiritual retreat; it is discovered by living here where Christ is flesh that suffers, where Christ is carrying his cross. Christ is here, not as a meditation in the

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<sup>1</sup> IGNATIUS LOYOLA, *The Spiritual Exercises*, 53.

chapel on the Way of the Cross, but as living in the midst of the people. This is Christ with his cross on the way to Calvary. This is the Christ who became incarnated in this religious priest, in this Jesuit follower of Jesus.

Dear brother Jesuits, we have in El Paisnal a Jesuit martyr. His tomb gives glory to the Society of Jesus and the church. I want to thank you for all that you as a team brought here: you taught the people to love Jesus and helped them see in their poverty and suffering the source of salvation, liberation, and redemption. Father Grande's greatest suffering was being misunderstood and having his message of liberation mutilated. Let us honor him by embracing his true message in Christ Jesus. Otherwise, we can never understand the depths of hope that filled his heart—a hope that makes him rejoice in heaven because he knows that better times will come for these lands.

Finally, sisters and brothers, Rutilio was the priest who embraced his vocation here. Not only was he anointed with the holy oil with which all ministers of the altar are anointed, but we venerate him now because he was anointed with the oil of martyrdom, with his own blood. That is how he appeared to me that night when I saw him in the church of Aguilares: prostrate, dead, as when the priests prostrate themselves to be anointed. He was prostrate there, immortally a priest, and as a martyr his Mass was already being celebrated in heaven. But he had lived here, and we feel that he is very much ours. Now, with his brother priests around the altar, we say that we miss him. We feel that he should still be walking with us, that something killed him that should not have done so. It was a crime. He should still be walking with us and doing so much good. He was strong; he was young; he could do so much!

Crime is horrendous when it snatches away a life that is still full of hope. Yet as the Jesuit provincial said, we are the ones who now receive his inheritance. The empty space he left we are going to try to fill worthily. The new pastor, Father Octavio Cruz, is already here. He has a great responsibility, as Paul VI said before the tomb of John XXIII, «His inheritance is great. It cannot remain encased in this tomb». So Father Cruz takes up this inheritance in order to move forward the work of the church.

That is what a priest does, and so I see the image of the priest in the figure of Christ who in today's gospel cures the man born blind and tells him, «I am the light of the world, and I must do the works of him who sent me» (John 8:12). A priest, like Christ, is judged in his Christian followers. All the hatred of the Pharisees against the poor blind man who recovered his sight was not directed just against him but against Jesus. So too, the ferocity of persecution is not directed against human ministers but against Jesus. The fierce persecution in Aguilares and El Paisnal was aimed at the character and the person of Father Grande. Now they can no longer kill Father Grande, but they persecute him in those who follow his teaching. This is the commitment that we have taken on, not with him, but with the one whom the priest preached: the immortal Jesus Christ.

Rutilio is the priest who discomfits the parents of the blind man: «He is of age, ask him» (John 9:23). The parents were afraid because the authorities had decreed that anyone who proclaimed Jesus Christ to be the Messiah would be expelled from the synagogue. Woe, then, to anyone who preaches what Father Grande preached! Because of fear many have walked away. Hopefully, my sisters and brothers, this anniversary will remind us of the great commitment that all of us who are baptized—not just Father Grande—have with Christ. May his absence

motivate us to continue to be faithful to the teachings of Christ, in whom we believe and whom we carry within us through baptism.

The blind man was expelled from the synagogue because of Jesus (John 9:34b). The priest must realize that his preaching is dangerous and that many people will keep away from him because they do not want to commit themselves. How many friends of Father Grande are now embarrassed to admit that they knew him? Hopefully that is not the case because I know that there are many courageous people who follow Father Grande's teaching. It is the priest, it is Christ who goes to those being persecuted and tells them, «Do you want to believe in the Son of Man? Do not be afraid!» When they ask, «Who is he that we may believe?» he responds, «It is I, the one who is talking with you» (John 9:35-37). The priest bears the presence of Jesus and encourages people with the presence of Jesus. He is Jesus who by sacramental actions converts people's hearts to grace and truth.

Finally, Rutilio as priest becomes a judge alongside the accused Christ who said, «I have come into this world for judgment» (John 9:39). The judgment is to make blind those who see and to give sight to the blind. There is a cutting irony in Saint John's gospel. The Pharisees ask Jesus, «Surely we are not also blind, are we?» (John 9:40-41). Jesus responds, «No, if you were blind you would have no sin; but now you boastfully say, "We see". You see too much, you think you see like God, and that is why you are blind». They were blind of heart because they could not understand the true message of liberation; they were blind because they were self-sufficient; they were blind because they despised others but understood little of the true light in the Lord's message.

The true priest is the one who identifies with Christ in order to suffer, like Father Grande, to the point of dying for his teaching, as Christ died for his. I thank you, dear sisters and brothers, because the memory of Father Grande is so energetically alive in your love for him. That is why we have come together here in his birthplace. As Samuel went to the house of Jesse, so we have come to the tomb of Father Grande, which is also his birthplace. We know that the Spirit of the Lord is throbbing in him. The memory of him brings hope for our people if we know how to understand the Christian and priestly dimensions of his life. That is why we commemorate him today in the Eucharist, for it is in the Eucharist that the priest finds the center of his life. It was in the Eucharist that Father Grande felt fully the joy, the hope, the anguish, the labor of his pastoral ministry. The Mass is the center. Let us experience intensely, sisters and brothers, the Eucharist which is Christ. This is a solemn moment in our history, when we find ourselves not only with Father Grande and his message, but also with the source of that priesthood, Jesus Christ the Lord. Let it be so.