Rutilio Grande
Martyr of El Salvador (1928-1977)
“It is a dangerous thing to be a Christian in our world”
Excerpt taken from
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by Robert Ellsberg – Orbis Book

In the annals of the suffering church of Latin America, El Salvador has earned a special chapter. Beginning in the 1970’s, it fell to this tiny, impoverished country, named for the Savior, to represent most dramatically the ongoing crucifixion of Christ in his people. The poor had always suffered under the weight of an oppressive oligarchy. But in the 1970’s the struggle for justice was joined by an awakened church. Priests and Sisters, having immersed themselves in the world of the poor, had come to identify with their cause, as well. But to share the cause of the poor, as Archbishop Romero put it, meant risking “the same fate as the poor,…. to disappear, to be tortured, to be captive, and to be found dead.” This became the fate of dozens of priests, religious, and the archbishop himself, joining tens of thousands of the faithful poor of El Salvador. The first of them was Father Rutilio Grande.

He was born into a poor family from the small town of El Paisnal. He announced his desire to become a priest at he age of twelve, and five years later entered the Jesuits. Despite his earnest piety, there was nothing in Grande’s early years to anticipate his later role as a fearless prophet of justice. He was by all accounts a rather callow seminarian, given to debilitating scrupulosity and a sense of unworthiness that plagued him right up to his ordination in 1959. It was only in the mid-1960’s that Grande seemed to undergo a second conversion. In the new atmosphere following Vatican II, he acquired a different understanding of his vocation. Previously he had felt a priest was called to set an example of perfection. Now, as he came to believe, what was demanded was an example of self-sacrifice and loving service. From that time he seemed to exude a new confidence and joy in his priesthood.

In 1965, after studies abroad, Grande returned to the seminary in San Salvador as director of social action projects. In the nine years he spent in this position he had an enormous effect on the formation of all the clergy of El Salvador. Whereas in the past priests had carried an exalted status in society, patronized by the wealthy, Grande encouraged the seminarians to spend time living among the peasants in the countryside, learning to understand their struggles and their faith.

Increasingly Grande began to exemplify a new church in El Salvador, committed to awakening in the poor a sense of their dignity and rights as children of God. This was a time when the social contradictions in El Salvador were building to a violent crisis. In this atmosphere, Grande acquired a reputation as a “radical” priest, and enemy of the system. With the bishops facing pressure to “do something” about this troublesome influence, Grande resigned from his position in the seminary and took up an assignment as pastor of Aguilares, a small town near his birthplace. There he established a vigorous pastoral ministry training lay catechists to insert the gospel message throughout the community. In the base communities peasants studied the Word of God and in that light raised critical questions about the sources of their oppression. Grande’s sermons on social justice were infamous among the
town’s elite, and once again the pressure mounted to have him silenced.

On February 13, 1977, Grande preached the sermon of his life. The occasion was a Mass in honor of Father Mario Bernal, a Columbian-born priest who had recently been arrested and deported without charges. Denouncing the sham of democracy in El Salvador, the feudal enslavement of the masses, and the hypocrisy of those who called themselves Christians while tolerating such conditions, Grande stated:

*I’m quite aware that very soon the Bible and the gospel won’t be allowed to cross our borders. We’ll get only the bindings, because all the pages are subversive. And I think that if Jesus himself came across the border at Chalatengo, they wouldn’t let him in. They would accuse the Man-God, the prototype of man, of being a rabble-rouser; a foreign Jew, one who confused the people with exotic and foreign ideas, ideas against democracy—that is, against the wealthy minority, the clan of Cains! Brothers, without any doubt, they would crucify him again. And God forbid that I be one of the crucifiers!*

These were dangerous words, and they did not go unnoticed. On March 12, while driving on the road to El Paisnal, Grande’s van was sprayed with gunfire. He was killed instantly, along with an old campesino and a teenage boy who were accompanying him.

His death marked a stunning turning point for El Salvador, the first but not the last time that a priest would be exposed to violence. Among those touched by this event was the new archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero. Grande, a longtime friend, had pressed Romero to understand and speak out against the social crisis in El Salvador. It was Grande’s death that forced him to understand, and it proved the catalyst that prompted his own journey on the road to Calvary.