

A Pilgrimage to Aguilares

Memories of the murdered Rutilio Grande keep his spirit alive in his former parish

SAN SALVADOR, July 18, 1978— We neared a few houses along the side of the road. "Here we are," said Pedro. He slowed the car, and I could see unpaved, badly rutted streets leading off between the houses. We turned into one, made our way among men, women and children for a little distance, turned again and continued for a block or two past the houses and shops that lined the streets.

"There's the church," said Pedro. I saw only the street full of people, a few pickup trucks, open-air vendors. Then I glimpsed the top of the square steeple that I had seen in a drawing, and suddenly we turned in at a gate and were in the yard between the church and the whitewashed parish house, a single-floor, L-shaped building with a portico within the L onto which all the rooms opened. People overflowed onto the portico. Pigeons, chickens and two dogs shared the courtyard where we parked the car. This was the church of Aguilares.

It was Saturday afternoon, and two young doctors had come with several volunteers for the weekly clinic. Campesinos and townspeople waited patiently. The doctors told me later that they had attended 80 patients that day between them. Pedro introduced me to José (not his real name), a young campesino waiting in line with his little daughter. José is a delegate of the Word, one of the leaders whom the people have chosen and whom the parish has trained. The delegate is the head of a small community, normally the families of a single small village.

I sat with José in the courtyard as

he waited to be called to see the doctor. Yes, he said, they had heard about the general conference that the Latin American bishops will hold in Puebla, Mexico, in October. What would he hope to see come out of it? Well, an affirmation of Medellín, the conference of 10 years ago, which committed the Latin American church to the struggle for social justice. Would he have any suggestions for Puebla? Yes, he would have some campesinos there, maybe two from each country, to let the voice of the people be heard among the bishops and priests. I said it was a good idea, but I didn't think it was very likely to happen.

He mentioned the persecution that the people of Aguilares have endured. Last year, gunmen killed the pastor, Rutilio Grande, and two months later the police came and desecrated the church, arrested all the priests and killed dozens of parishioners. The persecution continues. Campesinos are found dead or just disappear. Not long ago, fishermen pulled up two bodies in a lake behind a dam. One was handcuffed, the other bound with wire. The faces of both had been cut off to make them unrecognizable. No one doubts that more bodies lie in the lake. The local police commander warns people often that they, too, could wind up in the lake. And the members of ORDEN, the Government's paramilitary organization for the countryside, are everywhere. So are the "ears"—spies.

I asked José if he feels afraid sometimes. Yes, he said, he feels afraid. But he knows that Jesus in the

Gospel promised His followers persecution. Many have dropped away from the church of Aguilares out of fear. But many also continue.

I realized by now that he had passed up his turn to see the doctor and was waiting for the end of the line in order to keep speaking with me. I felt grateful. I wanted to ask him about Padre Rutilio. What did he remember about him?

Well, many things, he said. How Rutilio taught them to read and discuss the Gospel, how he taught them to share with one another. Many things. Someone brought each of us a glass of lemonade. I drank mine thirstily. José drank half of his and called to his daughter to take the other half.



As pastor of Aguilares, a diocesan priest has replaced the Jesuit Rutilio Grande. Four Sacred Heart sisters now live in a tiny house behind the church and replace, in a way, the team of Jesuits that was arrested and expelled from the country last year. Despite difficulties and persecution, the work goes on. Rutilio and his team of Jesuits planned when they began in Aguilares in 1972 that they would someday turn over the work to others. That is what has happened.

Aguilares is about 25 miles north of San Salvador and not much further from Honduras. All of El Salvador is only about 60 miles wide and 150 miles long. It contains about 4.5 million people, and 30,000 of them are in the parish of Aguilares: 10,000 in the town of Aguilares, 2,000 around the village of El Paisnal and the other 18,000 scattered about the 170 square kilometers of countryside. Thirty-five large haciendas take up most of the decent farmland, and the campesinos get the rocky spots that are left over. This means that, at times, campesinos must dig a separate hole among the rocks to plant each grain of corn, since plowing or spading is impossible. Some campesinos have not even a rocky spot to sow for themselves and work only during the sugar harvest on the haciendas. The oversupply of cheap labor keeps wages low, and the labor laws do not protect the workers from the caprices and exploitation of the land-

owners, who mostly live in the capital, anyway, and leave the administration to subordinates.

As for the life of the campesinos, a brief biography of Rutilio Grande, written by his fellow Jesuits and published by the Universidad Centroamericana, remarks: "Family life is unstable. The birth rate is high, as are infant mortality and broken homes.

think and speak for themselves, and they began to realize that much of their weakness and misery stemmed from their disunion. A sense of community grew.

But opposition also grew among the landowners and the Government. The priests were called agitators, Communists. So were the delegates. Agents of ORDEN appeared. The acronym

reaction to the murder of Rutilio, and he has not ceased to speak out against oppression and repression ever since.

I had met Archbishop Romero at dinner at one of the Jesuit communities on Friday. Six days before, the police had raided the same community, "looking for weapons," as the Jesuits finished dinner at the same table where we now sat. Had he come now to reaffirm his support for the Jesuits as a reaction to that harassment? I don't know. I didn't think of that at the time. I was rather studying the man himself, so unepiscopal in his gray shirt and the clerical collar that he quickly opened in the tropical heat. As he chatted about his visit to the Pope, he might have been a neighbor talking about his recent vacation trip. Large features, a big face and chin suggested to me at the time that he looked like a professional wrestler.

As he walked up the aisle of the cathedral on Sunday morning, however, vested and mitred, he had the aspect of a shepherd. The cathedral, admittedly not very large as cathedrals go, was filled, and latecomers were soon standing in the aisles. As he mounted the altar steps, I saw that the top of the crozier he carried was a crucifix—fitting symbol for the pastor of a suffering people.

His homily lasted 65 minutes. He spoke of the parable of the seed by the wayside, but he touched on many things: the injustice of the social order in El Salvador, the murder of a priest in Guatemala, the devotion of the people to Our Lady of Mount Carmel, whose feast was commemorated that day. The people's faces—faces of the poor, of campesinos, of workers and old folks—turned toward him as he spoke.

I arrived late at Aguilares. Four women and three men, including José from the day before, were awaiting me. We spoke for an hour and a half. Like José, the others, too, wanted Puebla to speak to their needs, their sufferings, their anxieties and their hopes. They, too, spoke of the persecution. One of the men told how he had been arrested, suspended by the neck until half dead, hung by the testicles until he thought he would die from the pain, beaten, thrown down a steep slope, kicked and starved. For

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Housing is scarce, unhygienic and miserable. The absence of electricity, running water and toilets gives the villages a primitive appearance."

It was in this environment that Rutilio Grande lived and worked for five years. I saw the room where he slept. It is now a dispensary, its rough table covered with packages of medicine. His bed is still there, a campesino's bed, with leather thongs instead of springs—not uncomfortable, but poor. The mattress and pillow are gone, but a cloth covers the thongs, and a wilted flower lay where he used to lay his head. On the wall hang one of the photographs of Rutilio that adorn thousands of walls in Central America, a color photo of Archbishop Oscar Romero giving Pope Paul VI a photo of Rutilio, a photograph of the superior general of the Jesuits with a handwritten note to the Central American Jesuits on Rutilio's death. The room is about 10 feet square.

When Rutilio and his team of Jesuits began to work in Aguilares in 1972, they began forming small communities around delegates of the Word elected by the people. Each community met weekly to read and discuss the Gospel, applying it to their own lives. They soon began to realize that the poverty and injustice in which they lived was not the will of God. They gained confidence in their ability to

stand for Organización Democrática Nacionalista, but "orden" is also the Spanish word for "order." ORDEN is a paramilitary force organized by the Government in the early 1970's to destroy any seeds of rebellion among the campesinos. Repression is a tradition. In a peasant revolt in 1932, thousands of campesinos were slaughtered, and El Salvador has had military governments ever since.



Some of the leaders of the parish were to talk with me the next day, Sunday, after Mass. But first I wanted to attend the Archbishop's 8:00 A. M. Mass in the cathedral. The Mass at Aguilares would not start, anyway, until after the Archbishop's homily, which is broadcast on the Catholic radio station and rebroadcast on the loudspeakers inside and outside the church at Aguilares.

Oscar A. Romero became Archbishop of San Salvador only a few weeks before Rutilio Grande was cut down on March 12, 1977. He had been considered cautious and conservative, and the Government and ruling class felt he was a safe man to succeed the aging Luis Chávez, who had often been a thorn in their side with his denunciations of injustice. Archbishop Romero surprised everyone with his vigorous

five days, he was denied food and water. He seldom sleeps in his house now; the police or ORDEN could come during the night. Yet he and the others knew that staying after Mass and talking with a strange foreigner would be noticed by the "ears." The barbershop across from the church is a notorious lookout spot for them, and the shop is open and busy on Sunday. Later, Pedro pointed out members of ORDEN in the street. Their city clothes and dark glasses set them apart from the local people. I thought of the Tontons Macoutes in Graham Greene's novel of Haiti, *The Comedians*.

Pedro and I visited the grave of Rutilio at El Paisnal, the village where he was born and where he lived until entering the seminary at 13. He was on his way to say Mass there when they killed him. We stopped at the spot. The road is wide and straight there, with cane fields on either side. The bullets, from a police-type weapon, entered his body from front, rear and side. An old man and a boy, campesinos, died with him. The people planted three rough crosses where the jeep with the three bodies once lay on its side. All three crosses have sprouted foliage and will soon turn into trees.

El Paisnal is perhaps five miles from Aguilares. The church is not used every week. Pedro went to get the key from the mother of the boy who died with Rutilio. The church is tiny, at the base of a hill. Only a few houses of the town are visible near the church, the road is rutted, the town hall above the church gutted by a recent fire—arson, Pedro said. The three graves are in front of the wooden altar, each alike, with the name only, and the date of death on Rutilio's, which is in the

center. I felt no emotion as I stood there, whereas I had been deeply moved when I spoke with the people at Aguilares and when I attended the Archbishop's Mass. Rutilio seemed much more real in the presence of the living.

Last Holy Thursday, Pedro told me, as the liturgy was about to start around the tombs, the celebrant looked out at the people and saw an armored car pull up to the door of the church and point its machine gun at him. He said the whole Mass with the gun aimed at him and the congregation.



My pilgrimage to Aguilares and El Paisnal was over, but my search for Rutilio Grande led me to one more place where I think I see his spirit living. On Monday morning I went to see Archbishop Romero. He met me in a bare, old-fashioned reception room, like the parlors in old convents, in the seminary where he has his offices. He wore a black cassock, with a plain pectoral cross and the ring without a stone that I had seen at dinner three days before. This time, I saw no wrestler but a simple priest, whom I knew by now that his people love. I asked him about his expectations of Puebla, and he said that he is hopeful. "Medellín is irreversible," and even if Puebla pronounces in favor of other values than what Medellín said, that would not be so bad. In his sermons, he said, he tries to strike a balance. Of course, the denunciations attract more attention.

I asked if the death of Rutilio had affected him. Yes, he answered softly,



it had very deeply. It was for him "a call from God" to continue the type of pastoral work that Rutilio had done. And did he feel close to the people, I asked, recalling that I had seen him stand greeting the people on the cathedral steps after Sunday's Mass, and knowing that, for him, as for most Latin Americans, "the people" means the poor. He smiled like one who has been reminded of something that makes him feel pleasure and affection. Yes, he said, he feels very close to the people—even to the misguided, manipulated ones like the members of ORDEN. All of them.

I knew others were waiting for him. His secretary had come to the door. I asked if he had any message for Catholics in the United States. Yes, he said. He was grateful for the support they had given the church in El Salvador last year. But he feared that after that excitement U. S. Catholics might be forgetting them in the persecution that is continuing, and he asked that they not forget. And finally, he asked for prayers and promised his own in the union of members of the same body.

One memory that I shall carry away from El Salvador is of the drive from Aguilares to San Salvador on Saturday evening. It was raining, and it grew dark as we traveled. A little girl of about 7 was in the car, and she passed part of the time singing, and the rest of us joined in as well as we could. I knew the words, more or less, to only one of the songs, a song that is sung in Latin America to the melody of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" from the Ninth Symphony. The Spanish words go something like this: "Listen, my brother, to the song of joy . . . that proclaims a new day. Come, dream while you sing, live with the dream of a new dawn—when men will once again be brothers." On the road from Aguilares, in the dark and the rain, Beethoven's melody and the child's voice together witnessed the hope that lives in the faith of the campesinos of Aguilares and of millions of others in Latin America.

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