

A Witness to Justice

As more becomes known about Father Grande, his stature grows.
His example will inspire others, and in the end
he may well prove more 'troublesome' as a martyr than as a pastor

A new name has been added to the growing Latin-American martyrology: Rutilio Grande, S. J., 49, of El Salvador.

On Saturday evening, March 12, he was driving to celebrate Mass in the town of El Paisnal. With him rode Manuel Solórzano, 72, and Nelson Rutilio Lemus, 16. As they passed through sugar cane fields, they were suddenly ambushed with machine-gun fire. All three were killed.

This assassination has provoked a church-state confrontation that is far from settled as I write.

Father Grande's death, like the execution of Jesus, is a convergence point, a crisis, a judgment. All signs indicate that it was not an "accident" or a misjudgment, but a calculated act. His work was evangelization, but it led to political consequences; his death was the logical outcome of his work. From the viewpoint of those who ordered him killed, he "deserved to die."

In a remarkable way, Father Grande's life and death bring together the tensions of El Salvador and the seemingly inevitable confrontations between conscious Christians and the "national-security state."

Initial news items simply recounted the circumstances of the murder. As more becomes known about Rutilio Grande, however, his true measure will be seen. I did not know him, but I have put together this account from people who knew him and worked with him.

Rutilio Grande was born and spent his first years in the rural town of El

Paisnal. He entered the archdiocesan seminary in high school and then the Jesuits. For a number of years, he served in the archdiocesan seminary as prefect. Thus he came to know well most of the clergy and was highly esteemed among the priests.

Looking back, Father Grande noted two significant conversion points in his life. The first was a period of study at Lumen Vitae in Belgium during the 1960's. As a result, he introduced group-dynamics techniques into the seminary and thus undermined the traditional top-down system. He also led seminarians in large "missions,"

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e.g., a group of 80 to a single town, the impact being felt both by seminarians and townspeople.

One of Rutilio Grande's charisms was preaching. He could be verbally aggressive; and, indeed, as things heated up toward the end, he began writing sermons beforehand. Asked why, he replied: "Otherwise I'll get too carried away." During 1970, he seems to have let loose some of this aggressiveness during a public sermon in the presence of high church and civil dignitaries and later during a week of

pastoral reflection for the clergy. Perhaps partly as a result of these incidents, he sensed some lack of confidence on the part of the hierarchy and resigned from the seminary. During the following year spent at a Jesuit high school that serves the upper class, he felt uncomfortable.

At this point came his second conversion point. Father Grande set out for South America to see what was happening. On the way, he stopped in Panama and went to Santa Fe, where Fr. Hector Gallego had been murdered the year before. He studied at the Latin American Pastoral Institute in Quito and spent some time observing pastoral work in various places.

Father Grande then came to Aguilares as pastor, along with a team of young Jesuits. In a way, it was a homecoming: this was the region of his childhood and early youth, and these were his people; and here his creative energies found their outlet.

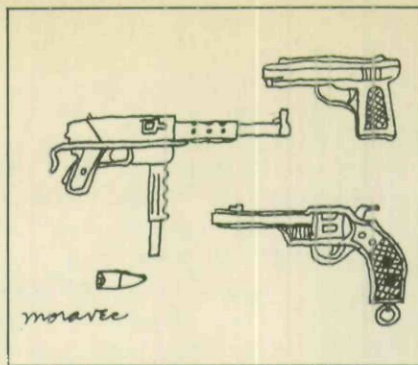
Aguilares may be unique in that the contradictions and injustices of El Salvador are present and palpable in one small valley. In all, there are about 30,000 inhabitants in the parish. The valley floor is filled with sugar cane, largely the property of three wealthy families. Some peasants live on the sugar plantations, where they are allowed to cultivate a bit of ground in return for their labor. Most of the people, however, live in the surrounding hills, where they cultivate subsistence plots of corn and beans. They supply seasonal labor for the cane fields and sugar mills. These people are particu-

larly combative, since the evidence of their exploitation is ever before their eyes, and yet their own lands give them a small measure of independence. The people of the town of Aguilares also have a record of political militancy. Thus, the area is a tinderbox.

When Father Grande and the team of Jesuits began their work in 1972, the whole nation of El Salvador was entering a more difficult phase. This country of four million people has the greatest population density in Latin America. Some diagnose the problem simply as "overpopulation," and prescribe rigorous family planning. A closer look, however, reveals extreme land concentration: the top 0.5 percent of farm owners have 37.7 percent of the cultivated land, while the bottom 91.4 percent have only 21.9 percent. Historically, such large holdings were often acquired by despoiling the peasants who had worked them for generations. The large farms are mainly agroexport operations producing coffee, sugar, cotton and beef. This kind of agriculture cannot absorb the labor supply, and thus it is estimated that the average peasant can expect only 141 days of work per year. The situation has been deteriorating: from 1960 to 1973, per capita caloric intake declined from 1,797 to 1,683, vs. the 2,200 considered a daily minimum. El Salvador exports agricultural products while Salvadorans go hungry.

During the 1960's, an expansion of light manufacturing and the development of the Central American Common Market brought some economic growth. But in 1969, El Salvador went to war with neighboring Honduras. One of the issues was Honduras's attempt to expel perhaps 100,000 Salvadoran peasants who had come seeking land and work. As a consequence of the war, El Salvador lost Honduras and some other areas of Central America as markets for its manufactures. The tens of thousands of peasants who returned from Honduras increased unemployment and the general pressure on the whole system.

A new government under Col. Armando Molina came to power in 1972 through what is generally admitted to have been an electoral fraud. Observers have described its program as "reform with repression." Reform meant essen-



tially an aggressive state policy to stimulate development: Government control of coffee marketing, encouragement of tourism (e.g., hosting the Miss Universe extravaganza in 1975), new infrastructural projects and, in intention, a gradual land reform to be called an "agrarian transformation." Repression included the persecution of union and peasant organizers and members of the political opposition, particularly at the local level. The aim was to eliminate any independent organization. A paramilitary apparatus called ORDEN was set up to be employed particularly in the countryside.

Until the present, El Salvador's level of violence has not equaled that of neighboring Guatemala. Part of the reason is the memory of a peasant uprising in 1932 that was put down with perhaps 30,000 deaths. There is a lingering fear of "another '32" on the part of both the oligarchy and the peasantry, each for its own reasons. Unionization of rural workers is illegal.

Thus, Rutilio Grande and his fellow team members were entering an explosive area just when the contradictions of Salvadoran society were becoming more acute. The national situation formed part of the context of their work, and what happened in Aguilares could easily have national impact because of El Salvador's size: Aguilares is no more than two or three hours by car from any point in the country.

Work in Aguilares unleashed Father Grande's pastoral creativity, and he made original applications of what he had picked up through study and travel. The basic pastoral option was to start with the people's traditional-style Catholicism and to lead them toward an awareness of the Gospel. As

a method, the team chose a variation on the customary "mission": they would go to a community and live there for two weeks, sharing the life, homes and food of the people. Each evening, all were invited to a meeting. After a Scripture reading, people would break up into discussion groups and try to get at the meaning of the passage in terms of their situation. Then the groups would meet to share their findings. Toward the end of the mission, the people would elect a number of men and women as leaders to continue and deepen the process.

This method seems to break with certain features of "base-community" work as it exists in Latin America. The latter approach seeks to establish a small Christian community over against the larger, human community, in part to question and challenge cultural Catholicism. Leaders often have a title like "delegates of the word," and their functions are church-related. Continuing education is often centralized in a priest/sister/lay team which, e.g., prepares worship services for weekly use. In contrast, the work in Aguilares seems to be in a more "mass" line. There is no sharp definition of the "Christian community," and leadership is more collective and varied. People are prepared to use the Scripture more spontaneously in connection with current events.

If the focus was evangelization, the consequences tended to become "political." The peasants did not need to be told they were oppressed or who their oppressors were. What they came to see was that such situations are anti-Christian and that far from exhorting to resignation, the Gospel calls them to struggle. Within half a year of the team's arrival, there was a spontaneous strike in one of the sugar mills. While it was not at all organized by the parish, its impulse came from evangelization.

From this point on, Father Grande experienced a tension: he saw clearly that his mission was evangelization and not political organizing. But the awakening of consciousness in a situation of oppression must lead to organization, and the peasants began to organize. Eventually, different groups moved into Aguilares to help the organization process and to link the peasants to

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national movements. In a way, these groups were reaping from what the evangelization had sown. Father Grande is said to have felt at times that things were moving too fast. Moreover, he would insist that the kingdom of God transcends any specific political project. And he adamantly refused to be used by any political group. Yet, when conflicts broke out, he defended people's right to organize and often enough took his stand bodily with them.

In 1976, events moved closer to the climax. The Government sought to put into effect its "agrarian transformation," essentially an attempt at land reform in the long-term interests of the oligarchy. The plan called for the expropriation of lands in a given region and their resale to 12,000 peasant families. Owners would be reimbursed and given incentives to invest in industry. The whole scheme was far from radical; the U. S. Agency for International Development had done preparatory studies and was going to finance it in part. Decades would be required to cover the country at the initial planned rhythm. It would be "an insurance policy for your grandchildren," the Government told the oligarchy.

The latter, however, unleashed a furious campaign through full-page newspaper ads. After months of controversy, the Molina Government backed down. The "agrarian transformation" remains in name, but it simply means that landowners may sell whatever lands they wish at market prices. The new Presidential candidate for the official party, Gen. Humberto Romero, sided with the oligarchy and private business sectors in a clear rejection of even President Molina's weak attempt at reform. After their triumph, these sectors began to

speak of the need to control things more and particularly of priests who were "causing trouble."

They did not have to wait long for their pretext. A new hydroelectric project was flooding lands in a part of the Aguilares parish. On one hacienda, peasant families, some of whom had been there for 50 years, were being forced to move, and the owners felt no obligation to help them relocate. In early December, a group of 250 peasants came to see Francisco Orellana, one of these owners. Shots were fired, and his brother Eduardo was killed. According to the peasants, Francisco panicked and began shooting, inadvertently hitting his brother. This version would seem to be confirmed by the fact that the rural policemen present did not arrest any peasants.

Landowners' and businessmen's organizations began a new campaign in the papers: they spoke of the "killer hordes" of peasants and attacked the priests of Aguilares for inciting the peasants. They linked the Jesuits to a whole series of priests mentioned by name or parish, who were "Communists" and "preachers of hate." Archbishop Luis Chávez defended the priests and the church's mission. Throughout December, the controversy raged. Oligarchical groups dredged up 19th-century anticlerical accusations and threatened that the blood that flowed would be the clergy's fault.

National elections were coming up on February 20. It was basically a confrontation between the official National Conciliation party (P.C.N.), which has been in power since 1961 with military rulers, and the National Opposition Union (U.N.O.), a reformist coalition of three parties. In 1972, the P.C.N. had underestimated the degree of intimidation and ballot-box stuffing needed to overcome the opposition. When the numbers began to go wrong, the P.C.N. had to impose a recount to make them come out right. This time they would take no chances. They now controlled all the local offices in the country and had changed voting laws in their favor. There is also strong evidence that they had prepared many false ballots: the number of eligible voters is said to be 400,000 more than what demographic growth

would indicate. Other means included keeping the legal U.N.O. observers away from polling places and the vote counts, intimidating voters in the countryside and making voting public in some places. Finally, the U.N.O. intercepted and recorded what seemed to be a radio system set up on election day by the Government. In code language, headquarters gave instructions on how to change the voting figures. The result in figures was a 2-to-1 victory for General Romero and the P.C.N. The opposition understandably cried fraud and organized large demonstrations in the central plaza in San Salvador. A little over a week after the elections, troops broke up the demonstration, killing an undetermined number of people (the opposition puts the number at 100, but there is no way of knowing). Through the mediation of Archbishop Chávez, the defeated candidate, Col. Ernesto Claramount, and other U.N.O. leaders, were allowed to seek asylum in foreign embassies and to leave the country. A state of siege was declared.

Throughout this period, the Government stepped up its campaign against priests. In December, two young ex-Jesuits were expelled. One had worked in the Aguilares area. Three priests were expelled: Mario Bernal, a Colombian and pastor of a parish near Aguilares, Guillermo De-naux, a Belgian, and Bernard Survil, an American. Juan José Ramírez, a Spanish ex-Jesuit, was held and submitted to torture, including electric shocks, for 10 days. Apparently, authorities were unaware that he was leaving the Jesuits. Six priests who had been working in El Salvador and left for short periods have been denied permission to return. One was a member of the Aguilares team; another is the president of the Justice and Peace Commission of El Salvador and regional secretary for Central America. Another has not returned because Government officials have stated that they cannot guarantee his security. Forty soldiers surrounded the house of Fr. Rutilio Sánchez; he rang the church bells, and a crowd gathered and frustrated the attempt to take him. It is

said that Fr. David Rodríguez is in hiding and that the Government is preparing criminal charges against him, accusing him of being the author of the murder of a local boss. Another priest took refuge in the seminary because of death threats.

It was perhaps clumsy and inappropriate for the hierarchy (or Nuncio) to choose this period for the retirement of Archbishop Chávez, who had been vigorous in defending priests and others over the years. It would also seem that the uncertainty of the transition phase made it difficult for the hierarchy to react to the series of expulsions and harassments. The bishops finally protested when Fr. Rafael Barahona was kidnapped. They demanded his release. He was released, apparently with no permanent physical harm, but he is only slowly recovering from the brutal treatment he received. (Father Barahona's brother was also killed while driving the priest's car—probably a case of mistaken identity, since this happened the same day Father Grande was killed.) It would seem that this whole series of events, plus the Government's brutal assault on the U.N.O. supporters, finally moved the bishops to begin preparing a pastoral letter.

In the meantime, Rutilio Grande had been confronting things in his own way. When the army occupied El Paisnal on December 11 at the behest of the landowners' associations, Father Grande went there and began to needle the soldiers. For public relations, they had brought medical personnel. "So you've come to help the people! Wouldn't it be nice if you kept coming?" he shouted.

On February 13, Father Grande preached the sermon at an open-air concelebration to protest the expulsion of Fr. Mario Bernal. At the outset, he pointed out that any leaflets being distributed by peasant organizations were independent of the concelebration—a sign of the tension between evangelization and political organization referred to earlier.

Observers see this sermon as provoking Rutilio Grande's death. "We all have one Father, so we are all sons . . . all brothers . . . all equal. But Cain is a miscarriage of God's plan; and there are groups of Cains in this country. What's worse, they invoke God's

name." The material world, he said, has no borders, and it should be shared. Even if someone could buy half of El Salvador, he would have no right to it. "There is no right that is valid against the majority." The world should be shared like the Eucharist.

"We are not here out of hate. We do not even hate these Cains. The Christian does not have enemies. The Cains are not our enemies. They are our brother Cains. . . . Love is conflictive and demands moral violence in believers and in the church as a body. . . . Violence is in the word of God, which does violence to us, to society—and which unites us and

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brings us together even when we're being beaten."

Speaking of Mario Bernal and the risk of being Christian, he said: "My dear brothers and friends, I'm quite aware that very soon the Bible and the Gospel won't be allowed to cross our borders. We'll only get the bindings, since all the pages are subversive—against sin, of course. . . . So I think that if Jesus came across the border near Chalatenango, they wouldn't let Him in. They would accuse the Man-God, the prototype of man, of being a rabble-rouser, a Jewish foreigner, one who confuses the people with exotic and foreign ideas, ideas against democracy, that is, against the minorities. Ideas against God, because it is a clan of Cains. Brothers, they would undoubtedly crucify Him again. And God forbid I should be among the crucifiers. . . ." He spoke of those who prefer a mute and muzzled Christ they can carry through the streets in a procession. The sermon ended by uniting Mario Bernal with what the

church, the Archbishop and the Pope have proclaimed.

A month later, on Saturday, March 12, Father Grande was driving through the cane fields to celebrate Mass in El Paisnal, where he had spent his childhood. His ambushers put more than 10 bullets into his body, all but one sufficient to kill him. According to one version, the car turned over. The old man and the boy were killed, presumably to eliminate witnesses. It is said that two or three small children in the car were let go. Local authorities did not want to get involved by ordering an autopsy, so the Jesuits secured the service of a doctor who had experience as a coroner. He estimated that shots had been fired from at least five points and that the weapon was a type of small machine gun used by police.

Several signs point to Government complicity. Within an hour, telephone service to Aguilares was cut off, although it continued in neighboring towns. When very few people in San Salvador were aware of the killing, President Molina called Archbishop Oscar Romero to offer his condolences (although the papers reported that it was the Archbishop who made the call). The subservient press stated that the killing had been done with small arms.

On Sunday morning, the bishops' pastoral letter, signed a week before, was read in the churches. In terse, straightforward language, they cite facts: repression, killings, torture, the post-election disappearances and killings, the campaign of landowners' and businessmen's associations against Christians and Archbishop Chávez and the expulsion of priests without consulting the hierarchy.

They speak of a "fundamental sin," the existing inequality, and they specify the problems of the unequal distribution of wealth and land, of political participation and of organizing the people. Whenever the church has worked for a more just society, "the reaction has been quite similar: those in power turn against these Christians, and people have been killed, have disappeared, have been expelled and threatened."

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also." At the risk of being misunderstood, the church has to raise its voice and expose sin wherever it is, "in the Pharisees, priests, the wealthy, in Herod or Pilate. All are called by God, rich and poor, but in a different way. The church should be with the dispossessed." The bishops concluded by calling for an end to violence, torture and the expulsion of priests without consultation and, in general, for the protection of human rights.

This confrontation has continued, and the firmness of hierarchy and clergy, and particularly of the new Archbishop, has occasioned some surprise. Thousands of people attended different Masses and processions related to the funeral of Rutilio Grande, in defiance of the state of siege. On Sunday, March 20, all Masses in San Salvador were canceled except for a single concelebration in the cathedral. The Catholic radio station has continued to broadcast excerpts from Father Grande's February 13 sermon and its own news items to counteract the omissions and distortions of other media.

Who killed Rutilio Grande? The evidence points to security forces operating with orders from landowners and/or high military or Government officials.

There may be an element of miscalculation on the part of the power structure. Since the hierarchy had not reacted to the series of expulsions in January and February, it may have assumed that the church would not react so cohesively. Yet, even so, Father Grande's assassination carries a message: not even a highly respected priest is untouchable. They may be thinking that by eliminating him they will end his leadership and instill terror into the people. The outcome remains to be seen.

As more becomes known about Rutilio Grande, his figure grows. His example will inspire others, and he may in the end prove more troublesome in martyrdom than as pastor of Aguilares.

[Edmundo Moran is an experienced observer of Central America who has lived and worked there in the past.]

FRANCIS J. BUTLER

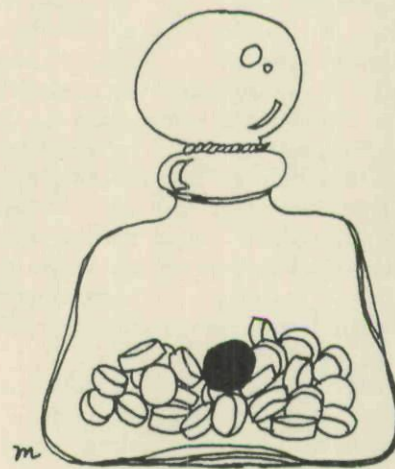
Medicaid Fraud: A Bitter Pill for the Nation's Poor

Like most Americans who have ever filed a tax return, you have probably marveled at the Internal Revenue Service and its capacity to ferret out the mistakes and disallowable deductions of the nation's taxpayers. Each year, succinct replies come back to scores of citizens indicating their errors. Many are asked to gather their canceled checks and to stop by for an informative chat with an I.R.S. representative. Such adept tax collection processes are the envy of other governments, and they tend to reassure us, in these times of indifference and isolation, that our Government is very much interested in us and in every nickel we spend.

One would hope that such solicitude were operative in the matter of redistributing taxpayers' contributions to the commonweal in the myriad forms of revenue sharing, categorical grants, foreign assistance and their subsidies and procurements that comprise our Government's annual \$400-billion outlay. Cost overruns for defense projects, multi-million-dollar pork-barrel water projects and self-imposed pay raises for elected officials create an impression at times that no one is minding the horses at the public trough.

Perhaps there is no more startling example today of careless and unexact disbursement by Uncle Sam of public funds than the Medicaid program. Each year, \$1.2 billion is distributed to an assortment of fraudulent doctors, hospitals and clinical laboratories. The medical industry, like the medicine shows of the old West, is once again becoming a haven for flim-flam artists and assorted crooks.

While relatively little is known about the extent of the fraud and profiteering, the disclosures to date suggest that probity among medical practitioners is indeed rare. Recently the U. S. Attorney's office in Chicago noted some examples of the rampant fraud and abuse in the Illinois Medicaid program. Seven nursing home owners and four pharmacists, for example, were caught in an elaborate scheme in which the pharmacists



kicked back \$50,000 in payments to the nursing home owners for spurious drug orders. A physician, three registered pharmacists and employees of 28 medical clinics and pharmacies, to cite another example, were placed under a 66-count indictment for Medicaid fraud involving elaborate procedures to generate unnecessary medical services in order to collect fees. In the same case, thousands of patients were given electrocardiograms and X-rays, pre-

