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Creighton University

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Rutilio Grande

A Table for All

Rhina Guidos



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To Father Estefan, for keeping the work of Rutilio alive

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Introduction

In the popular 1989 North American film *Romero*, about the slain Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero, one of the most dramatic scenes near the beginning of the movie features a happy-go-lucky priest wearing what was then Hollywood's stereotypical version of peasant garb: all-white cotton shirt and pants, a straw hat and leather sandals known as huaraches. The priest stops his old car along a dusty road in what looks like a desert and picks up a trio of children. Soon after, a group of men on the side of the road, and another group in a car behind his Volkswagen Safari, simultaneously open fire. They kill the priest along with two parishioners riding with him in the front. The children he picked up manage to survive. They run out after the car crashes and tumbles and, inexplicably, are allowed to go free by the assassins.

While Father Rutilio Grande, the real-life Jesuit priest depicted in the film, wasn't always so cheerful and carefree, and likely didn't talk or dress in the way he does in the movie, the film accurately shows what happened to him and his two parishioners on March 12, 1977. That's the day the trio was traveling by car along a solitary road in El Paisnal, a hamlet in the Central American country of El Salvador,

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when they were ambushed. They were headed to pray a novena for St. Joseph, the patron of their hometown, in anticipation of the saint's upcoming March 19 feast day. After the shooting was over, more than a dozen bullets had fatally penetrated the body of Father Rutilio (pronounced roo-tee-lee-oh). He died slumped over the steering wheel of the car with Manuel Solórzano, a parishioner in his seventies, holding his back, as if at some point he had died trying to protect the priest from the shower of bullets. Nelson Rutilio Lemus, a teenager of fifteen or sixteen years accompanying the men, also died during the bloody attack.

If people have heard of Father Rutilio and the incident at all, it is likely in relation to the life of his more famous friend, the martyred Archbishop Romero, who would suffer a violent death of his own three years after the killing of the Jesuit. Some say Father Rutilio's brutal killing almost instantly changed Archbishop Oscar Romero that day. Before becoming archbishop of San Salvador, Romero had been reluctant to get involved in addressing El Salvador's growing social problems and how they disproportionately affected the poor in the areas of land reform, housing, hunger, education, health care, and so forth. He also had made it known in church circles that he didn't want other members of the clergy to do so either.

With the killing of Father Rutilio, however, Archbishop Romero had to confront the issues head-on because the Jesuit, who was a close friend, had died precisely because he was calling attention to them. The incident set off a wave of violence and large-scale religious persecution against certain members of the Catholic Church in El Salvador, and eventually would reach the archbishop himself. Most of the violence targeted the poor and those who advocated for them like Father Rutilio. Though abuses against those calling attention

to the problems of the poor had taken place before, the killing of the Jesuit was the first “notorious” assassination of a member of the clergy, as one of Rutilio’s colleagues would later call it.¹ But in the timeline of the country’s bloody history that would follow, the killings at El Paisnal would mark the beginning of a long list of barbaric incidences in which Catholics were tortured, persecuted, or martyred in El Salvador because they stood up for the Gospel values that honor God by helping the most disadvantaged members of society. The violence that touched Father Rutilio and his two parishioners that day would later be part of the beginning stages of a brutal twelve-year civil war.

Though many Catholics suffered during that conflict, they weren’t the only targets. Students, teachers, social workers, anyone joining the waves that produced popular movements that were trying to organize workers and the disadvantaged so they would demand better conditions in the country were seen as a threat that had to be put down fast, brutally, and dramatically. Church members such as Father Rutilio, and later Archbishop Romero, got caught up in that crisis because they simply had been inspired by the new life the Holy Spirit had breathed into church documents that came out of the Second Vatican Council in 1965, and out of a Latin American bishops’ meeting a few years later in Medellín, Colombia, which said Christians had a role to play in helping the poor.

Those who depended on the cheap labor of poor and uneducated workers to amass wealth, and which included many rich Catholics, thought some of the ideas the groups, and church members such as Father Rutilio, were espousing were dangerous. They saw them as destabilizing to the country and to a way of life they were quite happy with, and one that they believed God had provided for them. After all,

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they gave money to the church, they gave money to charities, they prayed. Some of them led strict lives of piety focused on the sacraments.

Yet, their coffers benefited from a system of inequality that had been built over time by taking advantage of the poor. They didn't see that as a sin. They had built lifestyles on massive fortunes based on the workers' ignorance and, to some degree, on the fatalism the poor themselves had adopted. That fatalism had led many among the poor to believe that their lot in life was merely the will of God. It was not to be questioned and there was nothing they could do about it except to hope for a better existence in another life.

But Father Rutilio, who was born among the poor, saw it differently. He set out on a mission to change that pattern of thinking among them. He desperately wanted the poor to know that God had given them gifts and talents as well as dignity, that they were worthy of a better life than the one they were living, and that Christians had a responsibility to build the kingdom of God on earth.

Along with a group of missionaries, he spent what were probably the most spiritually rich years of his life, from 1972 until his 1977 assassination, teaching the poor to read, helping them to study the Gospel, helping them to understand what God—not the oligarchy or El Salvador's powerful—wanted for them and how much God loved them. Father Rutilio, a man of poor physical health and sometimes nervous nature, whose older brother had to sell his oxen so he could fulfill his little brother's dream of becoming a priest, knew misery is not what God wanted for the poor, or anyone else. He did everything in his power while he was alive to let those who could change things know what was happening among poor and rural communities and what could be done to bring about change. He wasn't against the rich. He wasn't against the government, or even the church, as some had

maliciously argued. He was with the poor and, because of it, he was labeled a subversive, a communist, a rebel, an instigator. Accusations against Father Rutilio were abundant in his lifetime and even after his death, as the archbishop of San Salvador José Luis Escobar Alas would say four decades after the Jesuit's killing.²

The intention behind the falsehoods was to justify a premeditated plan to murder him by saying Father Rutilio's work among the poor and his outspokenness were part of a dangerous political ideology that had to be stopped, said Archbishop Escobar, and it became a method that would later be used again and again to justify the murders of many other members of the church.

But the only ideology the Jesuit supported, followed, and promoted was that of the Catholic Church based on Jesus Christ's message of serving "the least" in society, particularly the poor rural masses he knew intimately from his childhood. In a country where arable land was scarce, and where the rich owned almost all of it—a tale familiar in many parts of Latin America—Father Rutilio was simply asking that something be done to stop the poor's misery. He felt he had to speak of the struggle of the men and women whose scant bodies, calloused hands, and sunburned faces he saw and touched, of the social sin being committed against them and one he desperately wanted to heal. He publicly lamented that even birds had a place to call home and something to eat but the poor peasants of El Salvador, who picked coffee or cut sugarcane, weren't afforded that necessity and weren't owners of the land nor masters of their lives.³

Although the Vatican and the bishops of the church in Latin America had addressed social sin much in the same manner, his views raised eyebrows inside El Salvador, where clergy and wealthy members of the church weren't so readily adopting the church's new ways of thinking. But that

didn't deter Father Rutilio from forging ahead. He was inspired, not afraid, of a new approach, a new journey for the church in the modern world that Vatican II was offering. He was committed to bringing that vision to fruition in the place and among the people he loved the most.

Father Rutilio began by encouraging his fellow Jesuits in El Salvador, who were predominantly Spaniards and had worked almost exclusively in the world of academia, to have contact with the country's poorest masses so they could understand the realities the poor were facing. While he wanted his spiritual brothers to see the social challenges the poor were experiencing, he also wanted them to see the beauty, richness, and joy found in the lives of faith among El Salvador's masses. It was a world that was largely unfamiliar to them since they operated and worked in private schools and in a nascent university system patronized by El Salvador's rich. Conversely, he wanted the poor to form a closeness to their pastors and to other church members, to see them as peers, partners, facilitators, and servant leaders, an idea that was, back then, alien to the men and women who were not used to being seen and heard in society and in the church.

He had tried something similar in his role as a teacher with the seminarians under his tutelage, encouraging the future priests to visit the poor in the countryside during breaks from their studies and asking them to spend time listening to the tales of hardship and joy found in rural communities. It was a way to evangelize, not just the rural populations but also the future priests themselves. His fervor for the work among the rural poor earned him the moniker "martyr of rural evangelization," part of the title of the first book written about him.⁴

Today, his legacy continues in El Salvador and beyond, in places where new generations of priests, religious men and

women, and Catholic laity still practice the devotion to the poor he preached and one inspired by Jesus. It also lives on in parts of Latin America, where many have chosen to continue his work educating rural communities, advocating for better wages and working conditions among them, and continuing the path toward justice and equality set out by Father Rutilio as well as by those who shared and worked to fulfill his vision. Those who have heard of him are still inspired by the priest's special devotion for those who toiled in rural areas, among the cotton, sugarcane, and corn fields—the landscapes of his birth and youth.

Nowhere is his legacy stronger than among the humble men and women of El Paisnal and the nearby city of Aguilares, where those who knew him and survived that period of darkness that took him still speak of Father “Tilo” with great affection. Father Rutilio was a priest, but more importantly a friend and partner, and a spiritual guide who visited them, ate with them, taught them to read, made the Gospel accessible to them, baptized their children, encouraged them when they needed it, listened to their many sorrows and challenges about their work, life, and faith.

They talk about how he taught them to care about one another, their families, friends, neighbors, Christian brothers and sisters, those who didn't love them, and anybody in their community, in a way that Jesus would have wanted. He asked them to look around in the community and ask, Did everyone have enough to eat? Did they have enough medicine? Did they have enough work? If they didn't, could others help?

He wanted their prayer to be not just a rote prayer elevated toward the heavens, but tied to taking action to help those around them. Jesus wasn't in the sky sleeping in a hammock, he would often say, but was in their midst, living

among their brothers and sisters who needed their help in whatever form they could give: a shoulder to cry on, food, friendship. All of it was a form of prayer and as important as praying the rosary or saying a Hail Mary. For Father Rutilio, it was all a work of salvation, not just for the individual, but also for humanity. He believed that said salvation didn't take place individually but as a community and it began by seeing everyone, no matter how poor or wretched, as a child of God.

Among the hardest to convince of that vision were the poor themselves. But along with a team of missionaries, he set out to teach them that they and their work had dignity and that they deserved better. With time, they learned to organize not just as determined workers, but as men and women worthy of being true disciples of a God who wanted them to have a say in their destiny and that of others.

But not everyone liked that vision or what it had inspired in the peasants. To them, priests like Father Rutilio were not men of the church. In part that was because the church itself had, perhaps unintentionally, helped the oligarchy maintain the imbalance of power and disparate social conditions so rampant in Latin America. They had allowed them too much influence in church matters. In El Salvador, as in other parts of Central and South America, the rich were powerful enough in those days to influence who rose and who didn't on the ecclesiastical ladder. They favored church leaders who helped preserve the place of the wealthy among the rungs of power in Salvadoran society, and they did so in 1977 when they influenced the Holy See's decision to appoint Oscar Romero as archbishop of the largest diocese of El Salvador. They were looking for someone who wouldn't ruffle any feathers especially because there was plenty to worry about with the rising social unrest that began brew-

ing in the country in the 1970s. Back then, Bishop Oscar Romero, who tended to a poor rural area named Santiago de María in an eastern and remote part of the country, was a quiet priest who had long been focused on the sacramental life of the church and he had seemed like a safe choice.

Those in power didn't know of the stirrings that were taking place inside him while he was stationed in the rural diocese, or of the friendship and bond Romero shared with Father Rutilio despite their great philosophical differences in how each approached and carried out his life as a pastor. But they quickly found out three weeks after Romero's installation as archbishop when the highest-ranking member of the Salvadoran church received word that the man whom he later said was like a brother to him lay lifeless on a table at his parish, along with two peasants from his church, being mourned by his large rural flock.

If the goal of killing Father Rutilio was to silence him, the operation was a failure, said Father Salvador Carranza, who worked closely with him at the time of his death. Father Carranza said in a 2007 interview that when Archbishop Romero hurried to Father Rutilio's side immediately after he heard about the killings, the fallen Rutilio was well on his way to a resurrection of sorts, not just in the quiet and meek Romero, who would take up and elevate his work, but also in "his Jesuit brothers, his church and his people" who would continue the mission he had started, despite the dangers it entailed.⁵

It didn't seem like it back then, but in killing him, his assassins gave him, his life, and his message a spotlight it may not have otherwise received, one that almost forty years after his death would come to be considered for sainthood by a brother Jesuit, the Argentine Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, who happened to be elected to the papacy in 2013 as Pope

Francis. It was an unusual turn of events for a priest whose audiences in life, by and large, were small. Those who assembled to hear what he had to say were mostly in small rural communities. He was known among the Jesuits and peasants, and his influence was mostly in El Salvador because he had been a teacher to many of the country's younger priests and seminarians. Many of them admired his embrace of the recent church reforms that had taken place.

And though his friend Archbishop Romero didn't share his views on those reforms while Father Rutilio was alive, Romero seemed to absorb them almost immediately after his death. Archbishop Romero provided Father Rutilio's ideas not just with new life but with a national, and sometimes international, audience he didn't have while he lived. However, it would come at a great cost to him, too.

In the community where Father Rutilio served, things didn't seem so secure after his death. Rural peasants who had helped with evangelization efforts in the community were killed or "disappeared," a euphemism for those presumed dead but whose bodies were never found. Of those who survived, many left the area fearing for their lives, or left the country altogether, never to return. Though a wave of persecution like none other was about to come at them, the few who stayed relied on the lessons and resilience they had learned from Father Tilo and they would sustain them throughout the long period of darkness.

But even in that darkness, those who loved Father Rutilio found a way to keep the light he had brought to them alive. Jesuit Father Carranza likes to tell the story that, shortly after the attack, a group of Rutilio's followers planted three wooden crosses near the lonely road where the priest and his companions met their death. Dead branches from the tree named *jiote* are used to make decorative crosses and

though the plant appears as if it's dead, said Father Carranza, if planted on good soil, and given proper care by others, it grows roots and returns to life. It was a quiet but defiant way of saying that what Father Rutilio had started in the rural area near his hometown would not end with him and it would not end at the spot where he'd been killed.

Throughout the years, many quietly, and sometimes not so quietly, tended to his message and his memory so that it, too, would grow roots and wouldn't be carried away or silenced by the darkness. Instead of being a source of sadness, the martyrdom of Father Rutilio, and all who followed him, would serve as proof to Christians that God was present in El Salvador, no matter what was happening, and God left martyrs like him as "credible signs" of the good news and of an authentic Gospel. As Christians, it's crucial to learn what they stood for and continue their work. "The goal of remembering them and getting to know them is not primarily to return to the past, but to look to the future," Father Carranza said. "We recover their memories, yes, so that they're not lost, but they're to encourage us to make their lives as present and future novelties, and of their death a resurrection, in the search of Jesus and his cause. It is the work and the legacy they left us."⁶

CHAPTER ONE

Beginnings in El Paisnal

The journey of the man some call the “martyr of rural evangelization” began appropriately enough in a hamlet. El Paisnal, about twenty miles north of El Salvador’s capital of San Salvador, is about as understated as you can get. The nerve center of the town is a small plaza where few buildings are taller than one story and where most of the activity revolves around cars, trucks, rickshaws, and bicycles moving people in and out. The loudest sound you might hear during some periods of the day is the crow of a rooster.

Compared to its not-so-distant past, when oxen and horses made up much of the traffic that ruled its streets, the heart of El Paisnal enjoys some degree of modernity, such as paved roads coming in and out of town and public electricity, amenities that still are not commonplace for the satellite communities on its outskirts. But there’s nothing visibly remarkable about the tiny town, except for the kindness of the townsfolk and the serenity of the plaza in comparison to the frenetic pace of the crowded, car-filled neighbor city of Aguilares nearby.

During the week, El Paisnal seems rather abandoned except for the older folks en route to run the day’s errands, a

handful of vendors that dot the streets selling fresh fruit, and the sleepy decrepit dogs that lay about in the shade near the most important structure El Paisnal claims: its church. Though there are no architectural treasures inside or notable art to boast of, what calls many outsiders from near and far to the Catholic parish of San José, which honors St. Joseph in the heart of El Paisnal, are the three slabs on the floor of the church. They're located just before the altar. The middle one is the most prominent, and it's where Father Rutilio Grande, a native son, is buried, flanked by the two parishioners who died with him. Both Father Rutilio and Nelson Rutilio Lemus, the teenager, are buried just a few feet away from where they were baptized.

In 2013, just before the church underwent renovations, the prominent back wall that faces the public had featured a colorful mural showing a white-haired Father Rutilio gathered around a table with his friend Archbishop Oscar Romero, as well as young and old men, women, and children resembling the peasant population that still gathers to worship there today. It was painted around an area that has a bust of St. Joseph, the patron, displayed in a small cavity in the middle of the wall and so it looked as if the saint, too, was joining everyone in the festivities centered at the table. The mural portrayed them about to share in material and spiritual food. In folk art, the mural expressed Father Rutilio's most famous sentiment, which was that of a table—a metaphorical one—decorated with long tablecloths, the kind used for special occasions, where everyone had a place to sit, food was abundant for all, and everyone had a say in matters that affected them. In his hometown of El Paisnal and the growing city of Aguilares nearby, he and a team of missionaries had set out in the 1970s to build the foundation of the “table for all” he envisioned and often referred to in

his homilies, and which was featured in the mural. Though it specifically addressed the material necessity of food, the metaphorical table had greater meaning. It hinted at the need of building a society in El Salvador in which everyone, rich and poor, urban and rural, men and women, had a say and could play an active part, not just in building a better community but also the kingdom of God on earth.

It was a dream Rutilio Grande García, born in El Paisnal on July 5, 1928, nurtured for his beloved country of El Salvador, particularly for the rural workers such as the ones who still flock to the small church where he is buried. Many of them crowd around each March 12 to visit Father Tilo, who among them was born, among them he worshiped, and among them he died and is buried. It seems fitting that he still is in some form with them at each and every Mass. Physically, he may be long gone, but he remains spiritually in their midst.

While El Paisnal's homages to Father Rutilio naturally call to the humble of the region, in recent years the town has seen a flurry of government officials, including an increase in pilgrims from inside El Salvador but also from abroad, and even Vatican heavyweights have made notable visits to it to learn more about the life of the humble priest.

Though his parents, Cristina García and Salvador Grande, had a better life than most of the laborers and farmers around them, they weren't rich by any means. For a time they fell into that small percentage of Salvadorans who didn't have great riches but also weren't dependent, as many peasants around them were, on what they could grow for daily survival. They ran a small business selling wares out of a storefront in their home, and his father Salvador had once served as mayor of the town. Though from a modest upbringing, Salvador Grande held some political power in

the region, a place where most denizens were devastatingly illiterate, poor, and indigenous.

But fortunes for the Grande family changed as his parents' marriage dissolved a few years after Rutilio, the last of six boys, was born. The business, like the Grande-García marriage, also crumbled. Salvador left the country and went looking for a better financial future working in the banana fields in neighboring Honduras.¹ It's not clear what happened to his mother after the dissolution of the marriage, but some accounts say Cristina died. Other accounts say she remained in the hamlet but went to live with another family she had formed.

Rutilio's older brothers, Flavio, Joaquín, Luis, Alberto and Salvador, took over the household. They rented a small plot of land and went to work in the fields outside of El Paisnal, where they grew corn, rice, and beans.² As the youngest of the Grande boys, only four at the time of his parents' separation and too young to work, Rutilio spent much of his time with his paternal grandmother named Francisca. She would occupy a special place in his heart throughout his life, said Sister Ana María Pineda, a member of the Sisters of Mercy and a relative of Father Rutilio's, who wrote about her famous uncle and his friend Archbishop Romero.

Years after his grandmother Francisca's passing, Father Rutilio would remember with tenderness how she made dinner for him and his brothers. In times of scarcity, the meal was as simple as thick Salvadoran tortillas made from cornmeal, mixed with a pinch of salt on the side, which they all shared.³ Not known for being gregarious, young Rutilio found himself most comfortable at his grandmother's side. She happened to be a woman steeped in the popular religious practices of the day and exposed her young grandson to them. Wherever she went, he followed, and since most

of her activities happened to be centered around the church, whether sweeping or cleaning, praying the rosary or taking part in the richness of parish life, the boy absorbed her vast religious knowledge and fervor.

Because he spent so much time in the town's church, young Rutilio came into contact early on with the men and women who toiled in the sugarcane fields that surrounded El Paisnal. He worshiped with them and likely formed his early idea of who Jesus was, based on the peasants because he was surrounded by them. For Rutilio, the Messiah didn't have sandy brown hair or green or blue eyes. He was olive-skinned and had a lot of the indigenous facial features that he saw every day. Later in life, he would say that he'd always pictured Jesus as a Salvadoran peasant, said his biographer and fellow Jesuit Father Rodolfo Cardenal.

Though Rutilio as a boy, and even later as an adult, never really worked in agriculture, his identity was shaped by the life, language, and reality of the rural world around him. It was a trait he would carry into the priesthood later on by wearing the most simple of clothes instead of clerical garb, being neighborly to his parishioners, and using words and phrases native to people who lived in the countryside. Miguel Cavada Diez, a former colleague, once said that Father Rutilio's language was that of a peasant who, despite his extensive education, "never stopped being a peasant."⁴ He knew how the rural populations he served spoke, their way of thinking, and tailored his message to them.

Sometimes the words in the few homilies that still exist written by Rutilio are hard to translate into another language because of what might be referred to in modern parlance as "Rutilio-isms." Some of his language can prove difficult to understand even for city folks in nearby San Salvador. His language was clearly ingrained in his childhood

and later reinforced in his adult experience of living in the countryside. Sometimes he would make up names to make the saints or Jesus feel more familiar and accessible. He would refer to Jesus as “the man from Nazareth,” or use “Mr. Saint Joseph” to refer to the patron of his town. To mock his peculiar way of speaking, his friends sometimes jokingly called him “the man from El Paisnal.”

But that’s why peasants paid attention to him, Cavada said, because he spoke their language, tried to make biblical characters and church teachings accessible to all, and, as such, he resembled the greatest spiritual teacher of them all: Jesus. When Father Rutilio spoke to the rural populations, he used words and imagery, such as the “table for all” he often referred to, as a means to explain a larger concept. The table was an image everyone could understand and they knew what it meant to have a place to sit and be able to participate in a communal setting. He continuously found creative ways to illustrate the teachings of the Gospel in a manner that his parishioners could easily comprehend.

In a published account for the thirtieth anniversary of Father Rutilio’s death, María Ernestina Rivera, known as Niña Tina, who met the priest in the 1970s when he was the pastor in Aguilares, remembers that he “helped us to understand what God wanted for us,” which had previously been difficult to understand.⁵ He organized small groups in which the peasants would meet to talk about the Bible, to have it be read out loud so that the inability to read and write would not be an impediment to understanding it. He tied biblical lessons to the realities many of them were living so they could see themselves as the people of God described in the Bible. One popular way Father Rutilio set out to illustrate what God wanted among the peasants took place during the 1976 corn festival, she remembers. Though the idea of the corn

festival, celebrated in many communities of faith in El Salvador to honor the popular crop, didn't begin with Rutilio, the priest put a unique spin on it that year.

All activities surrounding the corn festival would feature corn in some form. He asked everyone in his parish community to contribute a supply of corn for a community feast. With the corn they all gathered, they would make "atol de elote," a popular sweet corn chowder, and corn tamales that would be shared by all. He asked the parishioners to use the leftover husks to craft art—flowers or nativity scenes, whatever sparked their imagination. He asked them to contribute the biggest ear of corn they had produced for a contest to see who grew the biggest corn. Some composed songs honoring their work picking or cultivating corn. Father Rutilio announced that there would be a corn festival queen chosen from among the women and she would be honored for her contributions to the community. People were happy because it brought their community together and celebrated their work and a crop that they all depended on, Niña Tina recalled.

His goal was to promote unity in the community, to teach parishioners to work together, to see what could happen when resources are shared. But Father Rutilio also was turning another event on its head with the corn festival that year, wrote Jesuit Father Eduardo Valdés. In 1975, as El Salvador's masses faced great social problems, government officials decided to host the international Miss Universe pageant. As most of the population, particularly the poor, was struggling to put food on the table, the government went on a spending spree to show off the country's beaches, San Salvador's best hotels, its prettiest women, and to sell the world "the image of a country without great problems and one that cultivated beauty," Father Valdés wrote.⁶

However, El Salvador at that time, while a place of great natural beauty, was facing great socioeconomic disparities. With no resources such as oil to drill for, or coal or gold to mine, the country relied on agriculture. Land suitable to grow exports such as cotton, coffee, and sugarcane was the most important of commodities but it also was scarce, unless one had lots of money. In *The Voice of Blood*, Jesuit Father William O'Malley described the situation of the country at that time. About 2 percent of the country's people, the rich, owned somewhere around 60 percent of the land suitable enough to cultivate crops. Another 20 percent of the country's land was not usable because it was too rocky and mountainous to farm. That left just 20 percent of the land to be used by about 92 percent of the population, the poor. They had no other means to feed themselves and their children, other than to work for the landowners for a pittance and to rent unproductive land from them, too, since they had no place of their own to plant crops. "El Salvador is like an over-crowded and under-stocked lifeboat," Father O'Malley wrote of the situation back then.⁷

Because of the disparities, popular movements of students, teachers, and rural workers began organizing and protesting the situation, which was made worse when they found out that the government had spent \$1 million to host the international Miss Universe beauty contest while many of its citizens went hungry. In an August 1975 article, the North American newspaper *The New York Times* reported that "while a worldwide television audience saw El Salvador's sunny beaches before the Miss Universe finals July 19, off-camera, heavily armed troops were called out to halt demonstrations by students protesting the government's expenditure."⁸

With the corn festival he helped organize, Father Rutilio set out to honor something different than physical beauty,

while also making a subtle critique of his own. He was honoring the nobility of work, particularly the work of field hands, which included many Salvadoran women who were much different than the women in the international beauty contest. “Much of the population was hungry and many Salvadoran women were being destroyed by their work picking coffee, cotton or sugarcane, aside from having to take care of children and suffering unmerciful machismo,” Father Valdés wrote.⁹

No one celebrated the work that resulted in blisters and callouses on their hands. But on the day of the corn festival, the women in the running for the “corn queen” were taken care of by others who decorated their shoes, prepared their outfits, and valued and celebrated the good deeds they had done for others. “It was an unforgettable feast,” said Niña Tina, who took part as one of the contestants.¹⁰ In the context of the festival, the corn festival queen became a symbol for the many women who labored and served their communities, their families, and society. And corn, deeply rooted in the indigenous culture of the region, wasn’t just a commodity, but a common good “shared, exchanged, talked about, sung about, and celebrated,” and it helped to manifest the kingdom of God, said Father Valdés. The parish at Aguilares, where the festival took place, became the metaphorical “table for all” come to life, a communal place where all had food, all had a place of their own, all were valued, all had a say, and all could be brothers and sisters. It was unlike the Miss Universe pageant, where only a few benefitted from its commercial gains. Conversely, the feast in Aguilares, while financially unprofitable, “became a Biblical song where the work of God resounded,” said Father Valdés, and “Aguilares became a community where work ended in a feast, in forgiveness and in a place of faith.”¹¹

It marked a new experience for the area's faithful who had never been so close to one another, their priest, or the Gospel. The work among the poor, however, didn't just benefit the people, but the church itself. With it, Father Rutilio had set out to change not just the laity but also his own Jesuit brothers. Though he knew well the people and the rural environs of El Paisnal and Aguilares, his spiritual brothers in the Society of Jesus in El Salvador back then lived largely isolated from the country's masses and their problems. They were focused on running the convent of San José de la Montaña, where most of the country's priests, including Rutilio, had received their formation, as well as a new system of Central American universities that would later become known as the UCAs.

The Jesuits, as the members of the Society of Jesus are popularly known, had largely focused their energies on formation at the seminary, the pulpit, and the university classrooms. Father Salvador Carranza was part of a small team of missionaries who worked with Father Rutilio in the rural areas in the 1970s. When the archbishop of San Salvador assigned Rutilio to the parish in Aguilares in 1972, it opened the door to a new experience for the Society of Jesus in El Salvador in many ways. First of all, it was a novelty that the archbishop had allowed a Jesuit to take charge of a parish, but Monseñor Luis Chávez y González, who'd personally put Father Rutilio on the path to the priesthood out of El Paisnal, thought of him as a son, and had great trust in him, Father Carranza said.¹²

However, the archbishop seemed perplexed by the project that the Jesuits, who had largely concentrated on urban centers, were proposing in rural communities. "If we had [proposed it] without Rutilio, he would not have allowed us," said Father Carranza. Father Rutilio, however, had been born

in a rural community, and he was the one pushing for the order to become more involved in rural evangelization, so it made sense to the archbishop. He gave him the green light.

Originally, Rutilio had wanted to go as far away as possible from the city, to municipalities deep inside the country to serve the poorest and most remote communities. But because a vacancy opened up in nearby Aguilares, back then a rural area, and the archbishop needed it filled, the obedient Father Rutilio went there with his team.

For Father Carranza, then a young Spaniard who had been ordained just three years prior to joining Father Rutilio's "mission," the opportunity, as crazy as some viewed it, was too good to pass up. "We were so enthusiastic . . . to bring Catholicism to a continent that was said to be Catholic, and very Catholic, but in name only," he said. Being part of the church back then was more of a social tradition in Latin America and focused on the sacraments, but being Catholic the way Vatican II and the Latin American bishops had recently spelled out was largely absent in El Salvador in the 1970s. And the experience of leaving the city behind meant the start of "a new experience with a lot of challenges and novelties, a true exodus," for the Jesuits.¹³

In the rural environs of El Paisnal and Aguilares is where the Jesuits in El Salvador first saw the calamities of the life of the peasants, which Father Rutilio knew well from his childhood. Far from the comforting halls of academia, they came into direct contact with those who worked in the sugarcane fields, who had a tougher life than most other field workers. Not only was their work physically demanding but it was also temporary work. That meant the workers had to survive year-round on the scant amount of money they made during the harvest and had to rent small parcels of rocky, unproductive land to grow crops to survive on the

rest of the year. The struggle for land and the inequality associated with it became very clear once the Jesuits began living among the poor.

The Jesuits also saw up close some of the fatalism many field hands and farmers resigned themselves to, thinking that their hard life and reality was the will of God. For the Jesuits, men who had been deeply moved by the new ways of thinking in the church, the rural areas became a canvas of sorts, a place where they could begin a new kind of work for themselves, for the society, and for the church.

“As we started getting closer to the rural world and the world of the poor, I think it was the start of *our* first and great evangelization,” recalled Father Carranza. “The closeness, the friendship, the love [of the community] was of great impact for many of us, more than for Rutilio himself, perhaps because he carried all of it in his blood and could breathe it all in more naturally among his people.” For Father Carranza, “wandering the valleys and the farmhouses” of the region, hearing the plight of the people, but also receiving the people’s affection and seeing the richness of their faith, even in the midst of misery, was something new and different, and it served as a form of “baptism by the people.”¹⁴

However, it didn’t start out that way. The work was very new for the Jesuits but also for people they were approaching. Many initially saw the two young priests and their lay assistants as oddballs, Father Carranza said. The missionaries began by walking around the impoverished homes of the countryside. Then they started saying hello to groups of people who had never seen a priest outside of a church before. Father Rutilio took the initiative and Father Carranza remembers that he would say, “We’ve come to offer you a new mission . . . one where we will form with you a

new community, a community in which no one is a chief or a master, where we are all brothers.” Some were perplexed, others were intrigued. Slowly, a few began attending the meetings the missionaries organized, where they put up big signs that emphasized what they were after: community, community, community.¹⁵