

How One Pastor's Simple Obedience Brought Revival to 'Murder Capital of the World'

"God, how do I pray for a city?"

That was Pastor Alfonso "Poncho" Murguía's question as he set up camp in a public park in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, almost 20 years ago. A public park may not seem like the safest place to spend the night, especially in Juárez, the largest city in Chihuahua state—and one of the most dangerous. Yet Murguía knew God was calling him to stay in the park for 21 days to fast and pray, consuming nothing but water and the Word of God.

The first few days of Murguía's fast didn't go quite as he planned, though. He recalls sitting in the park, unsure of his next step—or even his next prayer.

"I just said, 'Lord, I don't know what I'm doing here. Should I pray for the lights to be working pretty well? How do you pray for a city?'" he tells Charisma. "So I started opening the Bible and going through the Bible, looking for what God thinks about cities, and amazing things started happening."

For 14 to 15 hours a day, Murguía interceded for his city. His prayerful desperation would appear to be prophetic, since only nine years later, the crime rate in Juárez reached its peak, earning it the moniker "The Murder Capital of the World." In 2010, the Chihuahua state attorney general's office recorded 3,116 homicides in Juárez alone.

At the heart of that violence were the city's sicarios, or hit men. At \$30 to \$40 per murder, these assassins make bloodshed their business as they take orders from gang leaders and drug cartels.

But something happened in Juárez just a few years later that surprised the world. The city's crime rate plummeted by 2014, when the attorney general's office recorded 430 murders in Juárez. In 2015, the number dropped to 311.

Secular media sources, including National Geographic, have given most of the credit for this transformation to the government's hard work and the people's lack of money to purchase drugs. But Murguía knows there is much more to the story. At the center of Juárez's transformation are several miracles that only God could have accomplished—and Murguía says he knows because he got to play a part in them.

The First Radical Call

Murguía's walk with the Lord could be described as a series of radical steps of obedience. While many in the city of Juárez saw the pastor's 21-day fast in the park as an extreme act, he never would have done it if he hadn't made his first radical decision when he was 18 years old.

That was when Murguía first heard the gospel—not that those who knew him thought he needed it. Murguía was the proverbial boy next door. He didn't smoke. He didn't drink. He didn't have sex outside of marriage. And he married the first young woman he dated. He worked hard to be a good person, and he thought he had succeeded.

"I was a very devoted Catholic, but I never knew the Lord," he says. "I never heard the gospel. So a good friend of mine shared the gospel, and to me, it was a very strong revelation. I was born again on the 23rd of September of 1973. Since that day, I've been more and more in love with my Lord Jesus."

If the gospel was Murguía's first outlandish call, the second came two months later when he was discussing his recent conversion with a family friend. She asked him: "So what are you going to do about it?"

“And that was a very good question to ask, because that question has been behind my back since that day,” Murguía says. “So I thought, What am I going to do about that? And she said, ‘We’re helping a lady who is dying of cancer, and she’s at the hospital. What are you going to do about that?’ And I said, ‘Well, I can go visit her and pray for her.’ So I did.”

At the hospital, Murguía saw a 34-year-old woman who looked like she was 60. He began visiting her every day, sharing the gospel and praying for her healing. Eventually, the two became good friends, and the woman asked Murguía to check on her six children who lived 45 minutes away from the city.

But before he had a chance to visit them, Murguía received a phone call from the hospital saying that the woman had died. He knew it was up to him to tell her children.

“I knock on the door [of the woman’s home,] and there’s this 12-year-old,” he says. “She opens the door with this [8-month-old] on her lap, and then four more kids with her, and I have to tell her that her mom just passed away. And they don’t know me, I don’t know them. I don’t have any experience with a situation like this. So I just told her, and of course she started crying.

“By this time, I was having ministry in my home. We had [around] 12 kids who were studying the Bible, so we went to do the funeral in this old town. And then after that, I couldn’t just leave them like that, so I started coming back every single day to visit them.”

When the government got involved and tried to send the children to different orphanages, Murguía fought to keep them together.

“So this lady from the government came, and I was giving her a hard time, saying, ‘You cannot do this. You cannot do this. This is all they have,’” he says. “She looked at me and said, ‘I’m going to ask you a question. If I give them to you, will

you take care of them?'"

Murguía was unmarried and only 18 years old, but he said yes anyway. With the help of his then-girlfriend, María—whom he married three years later—Murguía adopted the six orphans. His group of Bible study friends supported Murguía as he and María took care of the six children for over 15 years. Later, the couple had three biological children of their own and adopted three more.

But the Murguías' heart for children went beyond those they could raise themselves. The couple eventually started an orphanage, which for 19 years was a temporary home for hundreds of children.

"The whole concept of God adopting me as His child blew me away," Murguía says. "So I said, 'Lord, if I can imitate what You've done for me with these kids, that would be a way to honor You.'"

The small Bible study in the Murguías home also grew. What started as a "no-name church" in their living room soon became a congregation of hundreds by the name of Sovereign Grace Church.

But Murguía's thriving ministry came to an abrupt halt in 2001, when God gave him his third outlandish call. He recalls painting his daughter's room one day when he says he heard the Lord tell him to leave his pastoral role in the church. Though he initially resisted, he eventually listened and followed God.

Less than a year later, God called Murguía to the 21-day fast of water and the Word for the city of Juárez. And although he struggled to know how to pray for an entire city, he says as he began studying Scripture on the topic, God began changing his perspective. He realized that during his pastoral ministry, he wasn't serving his city. Even his evangelism efforts were tainted with the goal of growing his own church.

After that mindset shift, Murguía says, God began to do some incredible things. Within a week of beginning his fast, a reporter approached him for an interview.

"Why are you hunger striking?" Murguía says the reporter asked him. "Tell me, who are you mad at? What are your petitions? We're the most important newspaper in the city. We'll put it in there, and we'll back you up."

But Murguía had no petition. He wasn't hunger striking. And he wasn't mad at anyone. So that's what he told the reporter: "I'm just praying and fasting for my city because I want God to bless my city."

"The guy scratched his head and said, 'Nah, that won't sell,' and he turned around and he left," Murguía says. "But the amazing thing was that he went to his boss and said, 'This crazy guy is not eating. ... He's spending the night there and he's not even hunger striking. He's not mad. He just says he wants God to bless the city. Boss, what do you want me to do?'"

Instead of telling the reporter to drop the story, the editor told him to go back to Murguía every day and ask him what God was telling him to pray. Each time the reporter came to Murguía, the pastor shared what God had laid on his heart, and the paper published it.

"What happened was people started coming to the park to be prayed for," he says. "I remember the first ones who started coming were the prostitutes, drug addicts and gang members, and then housewives, and then people from the government, and then businesspeople. And all of a sudden within those 21 days, I could actually feel the city by talking and praying for anybody who would come. And that gave me one of the biggest lessons at that time: I began to learn how to love my city."

Murguía says that lesson hinged on a fresh understanding of John 3:16, which says, "For God so loved the world that He

gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.” Murguía understood the latter part of that verse about believing in the Son. But he realized he fell short when it came to the former—loving the world as God does.

“The part that got me was that the whole thing was initiated when Jesus came to the earth,” he says. “It was all initiated by the Father who loved the world. ... I was preaching what was wrong with the world, but I wasn’t loving the world the way God did.”

Word of Murguía’s 21-day fast spread throughout the city, to the point that 4,000 people came on the final day of the fast to receive ministry and pray for Juárez.

Loving the Sicarios

Soon after the fast in the park, Murguía began pastoring a new congregation, Cruz de Gracia (Cross of Grace). But this time, he had a new perspective. His goal was to love the world just like Jesus did. To do that, though, he had to learn how to love the most unlovable people in Juárez.

Murguía told his congregation one Sunday morning that God had given them a new task—love the sicarios. To start, he taught his congregation how to pray and bless them.

“We don’t want them to benefit from their business, but we bless them by praying for somebody to come and preach the gospel to them and that God would have mercy on them so they could open their eyes,” Murguía says.

Such a prayer required faith. After all, seeing a sicario come to the Lord wasn’t something that happened every day in Juárez. On the contrary, sicarios were well-known for their ruthless murders, often for only \$30 to \$40 per hit. On a “good day,” they earn \$200, Murguía says.

Sicarios first became a trend in Colombia when the infamous drug lord Pablo Escobar recruited teenagers to murder others on behalf of his cartel, according to Time magazine. As the Reagan administration intensified its war on drugs, focusing primarily on those coming from Colombia, drug cartels and the sicarios that worked for them focused on other countries, specifically Mexico and Honduras.

Although the media often glamorizes the sicario lifestyle as one full of wealth, power and sex, Murguía says these so-called advantages actually represent only a small part of their lives. What the media doesn't depict as often is the trauma sicarios experience due to the mass amounts of murders they commit—and the high volume of drugs they take to make those murders bearable.

Arturo Laredo was one such young man who spent years of his life making money as a sicario. He was serving a five-year sentence for drug trafficking when believers told him about Jesus, and he gave his life to Christ. When he got out of prison, he asked God to lead him to a good church where he could grow in his faith.

"I asked the Lord to lead me to where I should go to church, and He led me to Cruz de Gracia church with Poncho Murguía," Laredo says.

When he arrived the first time, he says, Murguía was preaching on agape love from 1 Corinthians 13. Laredo had experienced love in the world, and he had even experienced Jesus' love at salvation, but seeing Murguía's passionate love for his city touched Laredo more deeply than he expected.

One day, he approached Murguía with a burden to reach out to a man he led to the Lord while in prison. The two men were released from prison around the same time. But while Laredo got plugged into Murguía's church, the other man got involved with another drug cartel in a small town close to Juárez.

"This guy's responsibility was to train 80 assassins, and his job would be to kill people in the United States and Mexico," Murguía says. "The Lord told [Laredo] to go to the city [where this guy was] and tell him that God loves him and wants him back."

It took a prophetic insight from the Lord to find Laredo's friend, Murguía says, but after a series of God-inspired events, the man's heart softened, and he came back to the Lord.

But there was just one problem. The prodigal sicario wanted to come to Murguía's church.

"I'm thinking, I cannot have this man in the congregation, because [the cartel he worked for] can kill him in the parking lot; they could kill him inside," Murguía says. "And I didn't want to be the kind of pastor that people would come to and say, 'Because of you, my 5-year-old child is dead.'"

But he says the Lord rebuked him, saying, "Poncho, when you came to Me, did I close the doors to My church?"

Murguía knew he had to have an uncomfortable conversation with his congregation. That Sunday, he told them an ex-sicario was coming who likely had a price on his head. He understood, he said, if they were afraid of the danger and wanted to go to another church from then on.

"The next Sunday comes, and I can't sleep, of course," he says. "I was thinking at least 70% of the people would not come. ... But we were trusting God. That Sunday, I remember very vividly, the first couple that came was maybe in their middle 30s with a 5-year-old and a 2-year-old. And they come in and sit down, and I'm thinking, I don't deserve to pastor these people."

The next member to arrive was an elderly woman. Then the next person came, and the next. That Sunday, the entire church

came, despite the dangers Murguía warned them about the week prior.

“I was saying, ‘I don’t deserve to serve people like this,’” he says. “So the sicario came—and praise God, nothing happened—and then he started sharing. And we started sharing [the gospel] with other sicarios. Other sicarios started coming, and all of a sudden, we had dozens of sicarios coming to the congregation. The word spread out in the sicario world that ‘If you want to change your life, that’s a good place to go, because they are willing to risk their lives for you.’ And that’s how a lot of them started coming to the Lord and getting out of the profession they were in.”

Murguía knows that each call of God requires a sacrifice. That’s why he’s made it a habit, ever since he received the radical call of the gospel at 18, to follow every outlandish command God has given him—no matter the cost.

“We need to wake up to the most amazing message,” he says. “At the end, Jesus says there are 10 commandments, but there are actually two, and there’s really only one—love God and love your neighbor. That’s loving the world.” {eoa}

To read the full story, check out the April issue of Charisma. You can purchase a copy [here](#).

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