

Pastor's Simple Obedience Sparks Revival Among Mexico's Assassins

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 September 23, 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.

“This lady from the government came,” he says. “I was giving her a hard time, saying, ‘You cannot do this. You cannot do this. This is all they have.’ 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 kids.

Murguía remembers saying, "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 when he says he heard the Lord tell him, "I want you to leave everything you're doing."

Murguía knew God was talking about his pastoral role in the church.

"I cried out to the Lord and told Him, 'You cannot do this. You're asking me to tear apart my heart. I've been loving these people as You told me to for so many years. You cannot ask this of me,'" he says. "I was having a very bad attitude. I was almost telling God, 'You need me.' He asked me one question that changed the way I was living. He said, 'Whose church is it?' When the Lord said that, I fell to my knees and scales came from my eyes, and I repented. I said, 'Thank You, God, for allowing me to serve You and serve Your people for 29 years.'"

As Murguía repented for his “temper tantrum,” as he calls it, he realized one more obstacle standing in the way. How could he break the news to María, who had faithfully served the church by his side for 29 years?

“When I finally told her, I remember so vividly, she was looking at me and a tear came from her left eye,” he says. “Then when she opened her beautiful mouth, she said, ‘Poncho, the Lord told me three years ago that He was going to ask you this. He asked me to pray for you so you would be ready. He asked me not to tell you.’ And I just couldn’t believe it. That is a suitable helper. I thought, I don’t deserve this woman as my wife.”

The next day, Murguía told the other pastors in his church about his decision to leave and, three months later, officially handed the church over to them. At this point, Murguía still had no clear directive from the Lord. He knew God was calling him to leave his pastoral role, but he didn’t know what the next step was.

“I asked the Lord, and He ... gave me words from Scripture that to this day have been one of the pillars of my life,” he says. “He said, ‘What you need to know is My grace is sufficient.’”

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.

People in governmental power began to take notice of Murguía and his impact on the people. The mayor, in particular, was so impressed with Murguía's newfound ministry that he asked him to help clean up Juárez's prison.

But this was no ordinary prison. Juárez's Cereso self-governed prison was considered one of the worst in Mexico at that time, Murguía says, with 93% of the prisoners using drugs and 60% of the guards selling them. According to Murguía, the corruption was so rampant that some prisoners had restaurants within the prison, and some even owned tigers.

"So the mayor asked me to clean it, and I'm thinking, Why is he asking me?" Murguía says. "A few months later [in 2005], we came at midnight with almost 500 soldiers in police force, and we took the prison by surprise. The prison was actually cleaned in one day. ... It's the fifth-best prison in Mexico now."

Yet Murguía sensed that the transformation he had just witnessed wouldn't be confined to the prison.

"The Lord gave us a word," he says. "He said, 'What happened to the prison is going to happen to the city.' So we were rejoicing, saying, 'Wow, the Lord is going to do something in the city.'"

Yet Murguía and his ministry partners had no idea that just five years later, Juárez would be considered the murder capital of the world. The murder rate in the city skyrocketed tenfold, from around 300 deaths in 2007 to over 3,000 in 2010, according to CNN. For three consecutive years, Juárez was ranked the most violent city in the world, according to studies published by Seguridad, Justicia y Paz.

“It was very difficult to handle, because of everything we had done, to see our city, the city that we loved, become like that,” Murguía says.

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.

Murguía tells the story of a 16-year-old sicario who asked him for help. The young man was a gang member when a drug cartel hired him as a professional hitman.

"They told him, 'You have to stay at home the whole week, and we will come three days a week and park right in front of your house, and we'll honk. Then you have to come out, and we're going to tell you who to kill,'" Murguía says.

Each time the teenage boy got into the car, his bosses gave him an AK-47 and drove around for hours. Every once in a while, they stopped the car, pointed to someone and told the teenager to kill them. On average, he killed two people a day, three times a week, Murguía says.

"How can someone like that kill people?" he says. "They have to be high on drugs, because this is not natural. Three months later, this guy calls me, and he says, 'Pastor ... I cannot sleep anymore. I get up at night screaming. I go to the bathroom and see my face in the mirror, and I see blood coming out of my face. I see blood coming out of the walls.' I mean, this guy was going crazy."

Unlike in the corporate world, though, sicarios can't simply quit their jobs. Murguía says if a sicario wants to quit, he has to take his favorite gun to his boss and let him shoot him with it. If a sicario somehow manages to get out of the

business alive, he does so with a price on his head.

But Murguía had a plan: “I said, ‘Well, this is what you’re going to do. First thing in the morning, you’re going to go’—and I never thought I would advise someone to do something like this—‘and you’re going to go into a store and steal something. It has to be worth more than 1,000 pesos. But you need to let yourself get caught so they will send you to prison.’”

While in prison, the teenager gave his life to Christ through Murguía’s ministry, and when he got out, the cartels had no interest in hiring him since he was officially in police records.

Arturo Laredo was another young man who spent years of his life making money as a sicario. He tells Charisma that sicarios in Juárez used to bribe corrupt police officers and captains to gain control over a certain area of the city, making it easier for them to kill their targets. In fact, it was his job to know the police officers and their routes.

Laredo was serving a five-year sentence for drug trafficking when believers told him about Jesus, and he gave his life to Christ.

“What amazed me so much when I was coming to know Jesus was the love God had poured out in the hearts of the brothers who came to visit us [in prison]—even at Christmastime, a time to spend with their families,” he says. “They dedicated their time and love to those of us who were considered unfit to be in society.”

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.

"I was thinking at least 70% of the people would not come," he says.

But that Sunday, a family with young children was the first to arrive. Then an elderly woman sat down. Then the next person came, and the next. That Sunday, the entire church came, despite the danger.

"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."

But it took more than saving sicarios to transform Juárez.

"We started loving the city in those years and working with the government and with the police and with the schools, where a lot of parents were being assassinated," Murguía says. "We did everything we could, and God did amazing miracles all over the place."

He and several other pastors in the city worked together not only to serve the community, but also to invite God into the process of citywide transformation. One of those pastors was José Luís Aguilar, who, although he considers Murguía his pastor, leads his own congregation called Rey de Gloria (King of Glory). Aguilar also served as a councilman on the City Council of Juárez from 2013 to 2016.

The pastors focused on the areas in Juárez where the most drugs were sold, reaching the community with messages of

respect, morals and hope, Aguilar says. They cleaned parks, painted schools and streets, and continued transforming the prisons by providing ethics classes, education and jobs.

“We reached out with music, dramas, movie showings and workshops for kids,” he says. “In whatever way we could, we began to give the people another way of life. But it all began when the church ... understood there needs to be light outside. There needs to be light in the streets—light that’s not just inside. Rather, God calls us and commands us always to go.”

Juárez also implemented a program called Avanza sin Tranza (which, loosely translated, means “Advance Without Corruption”). The program focused on helping Mexican citizens and officials create a moral society. According to Aguilar, Juárez became the first municipality to implement Avanza sin Tranza, which eventually became a popular program throughout Mexico. With the help of journalist Daniel Valles, Aguilar says he helped implement an ethics course that each of Juárez’s 7,000 government employees had to take. The goal was to stamp out widespread corruption in Juárez’s government.

Murguía says God was at the center of this governmental reformation, and much of it was thanks to State Attorney General Carlos Salas.

Before becoming fiscal general of the state of Chihuahua, Carlos Salas attended Cruz de Gracia, Murguía says. One day, Salas received a call asking him to take the position of state attorney general. But he had an issue—doing so would force him to send his family out of the country for their protection, and it was practically suicide for him.

“But he prayed and prayed, and we believed that this call was from God, so he was assigned to be the state attorney general,” Murguía says. “I remember the first day we were there. He was sworn in, and then he dedicated the office with 60,000 employees to the Lord. He said, ‘I’m going to serve

God, and I'm going to do the right thing. I'm not going to get into corruption, and we're going to do whatever God wants me to do.'"

Five minutes later, Salas received a phone call saying an American woman had been kidnapped. At that time, Murguía says, there were around 20 kidnappings per day in Chihuahua. Under Salas' direction, though, the woman was recovered unharmed. One by one, kidnapped victims were rescued—with no civilian casualties—through Salas' trained teams.

"The reporters said, 'This is impossible. The only explanation is that God is intervening. ... This is God; there's no other explanation,'" Murguía says.

It took only 18 months for Juárez's crime rate to plummet, Murguía says. Such a fast transformation is largely unheard of, he points out, especially with cities with a strong reputation of violence and crime. For instance, in the 1990s, New York City's crime rate dropped dramatically, more so than in the U.S. as a whole, according to the U.S. National Bureau of Economic Research. That process took nearly a decade, by comparison. Murguía calls Juárez's transformation a "miracle."

Yet it has proven to be an ongoing battle. In 2018, Juárez was listed as the fifth-most violent city in the world, with 1,251 murders. But Murguía is confident in God's ability to continue transforming Juárez and even the rest of Mexico. Instead of pastoring one church, Murguía now oversees more than 100 congregations in Mexico.

Murguía is part of a movement called Transform Our World, which works with churches in more than 400 cities worldwide. The movement's goal is to equip congregations to change their cities for Christ, to go beyond the four walls of their church buildings, work with their governments and see God do miracles in the streets.

"If we want to love the world the way God the Father does,

it's going to cost," Murguía says. "We have to pay; it's a sacrifice, whatever the Lord asks us to do in our situation. I learned that because my life was threatened. People came into my office to do that."

And although the threat on his life has lessened—since most of the people who wanted to kill him are dead—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."

READ MORE: To learn more, listen to the Inverse Podcast's "Poncho Murguia: Cartels and Christ," available wherever you listen to podcasts.

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