

He didn't run, and now he's been recognized as a martyr

The Church in the United States is fortunate to have such a witness of faith

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It wouldn't necessarily follow that an announcement of martyrdom would be met with widespread joy and celebration, but indeed that was the case Dec. 2, when the Vatican made it known that Pope Francis had recognized the martyrdom of Father Stanley Rother.

Father Rother, a native of Oklahoma and the first U.S.-born martyr, was killed in Guatemala on July 28, 1981, while serving at a diocesan mission. He'd joined the mission in 1968 for the then-Diocese of Oklahoma City and Tulsa. The recognition of martyrdom clears the way for Father Rother's beatification.

Father Rother's cause is one that is near and dear to Our Sunday Visitor, which published the book "The Shepherd Who Didn't Run: Fr. Stanley Rother, Martyr from Oklahoma," by Maria Ruiz Scaperlanda, last year. It is the first published biography of the martyr and indeed gives much detail and thoughtful insights into his life and death.

"At this moment in the history of the Catholic Church, we need attractive models of priestly holiness," wrote Archbishop Paul S. Coakley of Oklahoma City in the book's foreword. "In the wake of the terrible scandals that have caused such devastation in our Church and in society, the recognition of this

generous parish priest's simple manner of life and the sacrificial manner of his death serves as a tremendous affirmation to priests and faithful alike in the United States and around the world.”

The story of Father Rother, who was known as Padre Francisco to his people, is inspiring. It was love at first sight when he first arrived in Guatemala, heeding the call of Pope John XXIII for North American priests to serve as missionaries to Central and South America.

During Father Rother's time there, Guatemala became embroiled in a brutal civil war, yet Father Rother determinedly continued to care for his Catholic parishioners despite living amid a culture that openly despised the Church.

Hundreds of thousands of Catholics were killed during the war, Catholic catechists disappeared, and eventually “death lists” began to circulate. When Father Rother's name appeared on one of those lists, he was brought back to Oklahoma for safety. But for him, Scaperlanda said, returning to the States was like Father Rother's “Garden of Gethsemane.”

In a letter he wrote in March 1981, Father Rother said: “After working there for 12 1/2 years, I feel almost like a Guatemalan and I still want to return.”

Return he did, and to a certain death. Father Rother was murdered early in the morning on July 28, staying true to his word that he would not run from his fate in the same way he had not run from his people.

The Church in the United States is fortunate to have such a witness of faith, loyalty and love in the person of Father Rother. Padre Francisco, pray for us!

To order the book, go to www.osvcatholicbookstore.com.