

Guatemalan Catholics are heirs of a martyred church, bishop says

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VATICAN CITY (CNS) -- Guatemalan bishops thanked Pope Francis for recognizing the martyrdom of Father Stanley Rother of the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City, the first martyr born in the United States.

Eighteen prelates from Guatemala met with the pope May 22 during their "ad limina" visit, presenting him with an embroidered image of the slain American priest.

Bishop Gonzalo de Villa Vasquez of Solola-Chimaltenango, the diocese where Father Rother lived, worked and died, said the priest who is to be beatified in September is one of many priests and laity in the country who gave their lives for Christ during the country's brutal 1960-1996 civil war.



"That was the reason for this conversation, because we are the heirs of a martyred church," Bishop de Villa told Catholic News Service May 23.

The bishop said he was moved by the pope's affection and concern for the people of Guatemala, a closeness shared by Father Rother, who served as a missionary to the indigenous people of Santiago Atitlan until his murder July 28, 1981.

Father Rother, he said, was a man who was "very close to the people," seen not only in learning the local Mayan Tz'utujil language, but also in translating the New Testament into their native tongue.

Parishioners in Santiago Atitlan grew close to Father Rother as well. Finding it difficult to pronounce or translate his first name, the locals affectionately called him by their translation of his middle name: "Padre Aplas" ("Father Francis").

However, it was his willingness to lay down his life for his parishioners that "defines him most," Bishop de Villa said.

Priests and religious in Guatemala were targeted when government forces cracked down on leftist rebels supported by the rural poor.

The bodies of some of Father Rother's deacons and parishioners were left in front of his church, and he started receiving death threats over his opposition to the presence of the Guatemalan military in the area.

Though he went back to Oklahoma for a brief period, he returned to the Guatemalan village to remain with the people he had grown to love during the more than dozen years he lived there.

"There was a moment when, after hearing news of what was going on his parish, he said: 'A shepherd should never flee,'" Bishop de Villa told CNS. "He returned to Guatemala to be with his people, to be with his flock, his faithful. It was there where they found him and killed him."

Bishop de Villa said he also gave Pope Francis a letter "sent by the parishioners" of the church Father Rother once served.

The letter, he added, was addressed to the pope "with his name in Tz'utujil: "Tata Apla's" ("Pope Francis").

"He really liked it that they called him this way, in the Mayan indigenous language of Guatemala," Bishop de Villa said.