

Father Stanley Rother, First US-Born Martyr, Will Be Beatified in September

The beatification announcement was made by the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City on March 13.

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OKLAHOMA CITY — Father Stanley Rother, the Oklahoma-born martyr who served as a priest in Guatemala, will be beatified in Oklahoma City on Sept. 23.

The beatification announcement was made by the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City on March 13. Father Rother was a priest of the archdiocese. The beatification Mass will take place at 10am at Cox Convention Center.

In December 2016, Pope Francis officially acknowledged [Father Rother's martyrdom](#), making him the first recognized martyr to have been born in the United States.

Surrounded by good priests and a vibrant parish life, Stanley felt God calling him to the priesthood from a young age. But despite a strong calling, Stanley would struggle in the seminary, failing several classes and even out of one seminary, before graduating from Mount St. Mary's seminary in Maryland.

Hearing of Stanley's struggles, Sister Clarissa Tenbrick, his fifth-grade teacher, wrote him to offer encouragement, reminding him that the patron of all priests, St. John Vianney, also struggled in seminary.

"Both of them were simple men who knew they had a call to the priesthood and then had somebody empower them so that they could complete their studies and be priests," Maria Scaperlanda, author of *The Shepherd Who Didn't Run*, a biography of the martyr, told CNA in an interview last year.

"And they brought a goodness, simplicity and generous heart with them in (everything) they did."

When Stanley was still in seminary, St. John XXIII asked the Churches of North America to send assistance and establish missions in Central America. Soon after, the Dioceses of Oklahoma City and Tulsa established a mission in Santiago Atitlan in Guatemala, a poor rural community of mostly indigenous people.

A few years after he was ordained, Father Rother accepted an invitation to join the mission team, where he would spend the next 13 years of his life.

When he arrived at the mission, the Tz'utujil Mayan Indians in the village took to calling him Padre Francisco, after his baptismal name of Francis.

The beloved Padre Francisco was also known for his kindness, selflessness, joy and attentive presence among his parishioners.

Over the years, the violence of the Guatemalan civil war inched closer to the once-peaceful village. Disappearances, killings and danger soon became a part of daily life, but Father Rother remained steadfast and supportive of his people.

In 1980-1981, the violence escalated to an almost unbearable point. In a letter to Oklahoma Catholics during what would be his last Christmas, the priest relayed to the people back home the dangers his mission parish faced daily.

“The reality is that we are in danger. But we don’t know when or what form the government will use to further repress the Church. ... Given the situation, I am not ready to leave here just yet. ... But if it is my destiny that I should give my life here, then so be it. ... I don’t want to desert these people, and that is what will be said, even after all these years. There is still a lot of good that can be done under the circumstances.”

He ended the letter with what would become his signature quote:

“The shepherd cannot run at the first sign of danger. Pray for us, that we may be a sign of the love of Christ for our people, that our presence among them will fortify them to endure these sufferings in preparation for the coming of the Kingdom.”

In January 1981, in immediate danger and his name on a death list, Father Rother returned to Oklahoma for a few months. But as Easter approached, he wanted to spend Holy Week with his people in Guatemala.

“Father Stanley could not abandon his people,” Scaperlanda said. “He made a point of returning to his Guatemala parish in time to celebrate Holy Week with his parishioners that year — and ultimately was killed for living out his Catholic faith” on the morning of July 28, 1981.