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Blessed Stanley Rother, priest and martyr

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Most of us probably have never heard of Father Stanley Rother. Father Rother was born in 1935 in the German farming community of Okarche, Okla. He grew up in a loving, faith-filled family, and he had all the skills to be a good farmer, but he also felt a strong call to the priesthood. He answered that call and entered the seminary. When he struggled with studies, his bishop encouraged him to persevere and sent him to Mount St. Mary's Seminary in Maryland to complete his formation. Father Rother was ordained a priest in 1963 and first served in his home state of Oklahoma. Then, five years later, he volunteered to serve in the diocesan mission of Guatemala.

Soon Father Rother found himself in the midst of a civil war that gripped Guatemala. Priests were a favorite target, and as the violence escalated, Father Rother's life was in danger. He briefly returned to Oklahoma, but chose to return to Guatemala to remain with the people of his parish, and to share in the danger they faced. He was killed in his rectory by three unknown assailants on July 28, 1981.

Last December, Pope Francis declared Father Stanley Rother a martyr, and on Sept. 23, he was beatified in Oklahoma City by Cardinal Angelo Amato from the Vatican. Father Rother's beatification is the final step before his eventual canonization as a saint, a day that we can all hope and pray for.

The beatification or canonization of any person from the United States is always a cause for celebration, and enriches the spiritual heritage of our nation. But Father Rother's beatification is especially notable because he is the first person born in the United States to be declared a martyr. By giving his life for the people and Church that he loved, he united himself in a particular way to Christ on the cross and to the great multitude of martyrs that the Church celebrates year after year. The word martyr means "witness," and Father Rother witnessed to his love for God and his people with his own blood.

We might wonder what connection we have with a missionary priest in Guatemala who died as a martyr. First, it is a reminder that saints and martyrs don't only come from far off places in past centuries. Father Rother was a man of our time, and he grew up in a place and in a family much like our own. He was an ordinary man who was called to an extraordinary destiny. Archbishop Paul Coakley of Oklahoma City put it this way: "Ultimately, if God calls a young man from Okarche, Oklahoma to be a saint, to be beatified, to be a martyr, it reminds us that all of us, no matter our beginnings, our circumstances, are called to holiness as well."

Father Rother also proves that God can accomplish wonders through us that we would never expect. As a seminarian, he failed Latin and was considered a mediocre student. But while in Guatemala, he became fluent in Spanish and mastered the local dialect of the people, Tz'utujil, even helping to translate the Bible into the language of his flock. God doesn't call us because we are brilliant and talented. He calls us to be his instruments, and he forms us to carry out the mission he has in mind for us. Archbishop Coakley observes that Father Rother is "a witness to all of us that God chooses the humble, the lowly, as he always does, to accomplish great things for those who allow themselves to be used by God."

Father Rother was also a man of great courage. He knew the dangers that surrounded him. Although he could have left Guatemala and returned to a more tranquil, conventional life as a priest in Oklahoma, he remained with the people that had adopted him as their own. As he wrote to his archbishop, "A shepherd cannot run at the first sign of danger." Father Rother manifested the courage we all need to live our faith and to stand up for what is right and true. Especially at a moment when truth and justice are under assault in so many ways, Father Rother is a model both for priests and for the lay faithful.

Father Rother was a missionary, and he shows us that each one of us is called to be a missionary disciple, to use the phrase of Pope Francis. In fact, already 50 years ago, Father Rother was living what Pope Francis has been preaching: a discipleship and priesthood that looks outward and that goes out to the margins. Missionary work isn't only for priests and religious, and it isn't limited to foreign countries. It is

for every member of the Church. If we allow him to do so, our Lord will send us out to those in need, to the poor and to those who do not know the love of God in their lives. Every day, Christ says to us what he said to the apostles: “Go, and make disciples of all nations.” Father Rother allowed himself to be sent, and he shows that we all have a mission from our Lord in the life of the Church.

In a time that is marked by racial tensions, Father Rother also demonstrates a Christ-like love for people of all races. He served among the indigenous poor of rural Guatemala. He loved them, and they loved him. He embraced them as brothers and sisters, and shows that race should never keep us from reaching out to one another.

I had the privilege of attending the beatification in Oklahoma of Blessed Stanley Rother, priest and martyr, and I am happy that his story will now be more widely known among the faithful. May the example and prayers of this holy man of God help each of us to be courageous witnesses and missionary disciples for Christ.