

“A good priest is always a miracle of grace.”

Homily by Most Reverend John T. Folda, Bishop of Fargo

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“A good priest is always a miracle of grace.” This was said by one of the great theologians of our time, Hans Urs von Balthasar. The priesthood is a gift to the Church, a gift of grace, and today we are blessed to celebrate the jubilees of many good priests. Celebrating 25 years of priesthood are Fr. Chinniah Konka, Fr. Raymond Courtright, Fr. Vincent Fitzpatrick, Fr. Leo Kinney, Fr. Gary Luiten, and Msgr. Jeffrey Wald. Celebrating 50 years as a priest is Fr. Bernard Schneider, and celebrating 60 years in the priesthood is Fr. Gerald McCarthy. We are indeed greatly blessed in the miracles of grace that God has bestowed on us through these good priests, and we give thanks to God for them.

I want to reflect for a moment on another good priest, another miracle of grace. Last weekend, Fr. Stanley Francis Rother was beatified in Oklahoma City as the first martyr born in the United States. I don't think most people knew who Stanley Rother was until recently, except perhaps our brothers who attended Mount St. Mary's, the seminary that Fr. Rother attended. But he is someone we should get to know, especially those of us who are priests. Stanley Rother grew up on a farm in Okarche, Oklahoma. He was an ordinary guy. And despite his skill at farming, Stanley felt a call to the priesthood. He went to the seminary, and essentially failed because he couldn't learn Latin. But his bishop found another seminary for him, the Mount, and he was ordained in 1963. He served for five years in an Oklahoma parish, and then accepted the call to be a missionary. He followed the invitation of Jesus and put out into the deep. He went to Guatemala, where he became a beloved pastor in a small town.

But there was a price on Fr. Rother's head. After about 10 years, Guatemala was in the grip of a violent civil war, and priests were targeted for death. Finally, in July 1981, two armed men came into his church at night and asked where they could find “the red-bearded priest.” Fr. Rother opened the door to them, and he was shot twice in the head. He was martyred for his faith in Jesus Christ. Fr. Rother didn't have to be in Guatemala that night. His bishop had called him home to Oklahoma, and he stayed there for awhile. But he pleaded with his bishop to return to his parish, until the bishop finally acquiesced. He told his bishop, and his family, that “the shepherd cannot run at the first sign of danger.” He went back, knowing that he might be killed, and just a few months later, he was martyred.

I was in Oklahoma for Fr. Rother's beatification. It was a powerful, grace-filled event, and I thought then of our celebration today. I know his story is very different than ours, but I think Fr. Rother can tell us much about our own priestly lives. He was a missionary, and so are we. No, we haven't been sent to foreign lands, to people who speak obscure dialects. But we are missionaries nonetheless. Each of us is sent by Christ to serve his people. Each of us is sent out to find those on the margins, the peripheries as our Holy Father calls them. Each of us is sent to those who are distant or maybe even estranged from Christ and his Church. We are sent to the lowly and those in need, both spiritually and materially. We are sent to proclaim the Good News that Jesus loves us, that he has saved us from our sins, and that we have every reason for hope. I would dare to say that many of the people we serve are spiritually poorer than the people Fr. Rother knew. So, make no mistake, we too are missionaries.

Fr. Rother was a courageous shepherd. He was the shepherd who didn't run. He stood by his people and shared in their dangers, even at the risk of his life. He was willing to lay down his life for them, because he loved them. He was the face of Jesus to them. We don't have to face those kinds of dangers, but we do face our own challenges and trials. Sometimes we encounter indifference, or the dilemma of how to proclaim the Gospel to a culture that has grown cold towards God and his Church. We experience the seductions of materialism and secularism that try to draw us away from Christ and his people. So, we too must be men of courage, men of brave heart, good and courageous shepherds.

Fr. Rother was also a man of prayer. At the heart of his courage and confidence was his intimacy with the Lord. He knew what the Lord was calling him to do, and he proceeded faithfully and fearlessly. The Christian life is about following the will of God, without counting the cost, and that's especially true for the priest. But to do that, we need to know and hear the Lord's voice, and we need to understand the movements of the Holy Spirit in our priestly lives. To trust God can be risky and even dangerous at times. It requires courage. To be courageous requires that we know the Lord. And to know him requires that we pray. So, we must be men of prayer for our people, intercessors and even spiritual warriors for those we serve, for those who look to us to be men of God.

My brothers, not all of us are called to martyrdom, as Fr. Stanley Rother was. But what is a martyr but a witness? He witnessed to Christ by his death, and we must witness by our lives, our priestly lives. The world is looking for authentic witnesses of Christ, and that's exactly what we must be. Fr. Rother was an ordinary man from a place much like our own who was called to an extraordinary life and death. We are ordinary men, and we too are called to extraordinary lives. In his divine plan, Jesus has called each one of us to trust him, to know him, love him, and serve him bravely, to be those courageous shepherds who don't run at the first sign of danger, but who day in and day out lay down their lives for the sheep.

Brothers, today we celebrate the gift of the priesthood, and I think von Balthasar was right: a good priest is always a miracle of grace. We give thanks to God for the grace he has bestowed on us through our brothers. And we pray that Blessed Stanley Francis Rother, a priest like us, might intercede for us, and help us all to be good priests.