

## From the Homily at the Mass of Beatification for Blessed Stanley Francis Rother

The Beatification of Father Stanley Francis Rother is an historic event not only for the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City that witnesses one of its heroic priests raised to the honors of the altars, but also for the Catholic Church in the United States of America that celebrates for the first time the beatification of a priest, missionary, and martyr. In a period of great social and political turbulence in Guatemala, Father Rother lived as a perfect disciple of Christ, doing good and spreading peace and reconciliation among the people. Unfortunately, his immediate recompense on this earth was persecution and a bloody death, in accord with the words of Jesus, 'unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat. But if it dies, it produces much fruit'. His blood united to the precious blood of Jesus purifies and redeems even his enemies, they too being loved and forgiven.

Who was Father Rother?

Coming from a family of farmers, as a youngster he had known about the hard work of tilling the land. During his seminary years, Stan made use of his ability even in the manual labour of gardening or repairing and maintaining machines and structures. Everyone admired his willingness to serve and to work together. His work ethic, good sense, human holiness, and a life of prayer and zeal for souls were qualities that gave life to his young existence. On one of the commemorative cards chosen for his ordination was written, 'to bless, to baptize, to offer sacrifice, to govern, to preach'. On another card, the young man decided, however, to use the words of Saint Augustine: 'For my benefit I am a Christian. For the benefit of others I am a priest'.

In June of 1968, he was appointed assistant pastor to the mission of Santiago Atitlán in Guatemala. The population of the place was made up of an overwhelming majority of the Tz'utujil, descendants of the Mayans. The community, abandoned for many years, lived an apparently Catholic religious life but in reality was syncretistic. Furthermore, it was afflicted with sickness and malnutrition. The missionaries from Oklahoma began a program of both religious instruction and social formation. Father Rother devoted himself to learning and speaking the language of the place, so much that he was able to use it in preaching. He was diligent in his visits to newlyweds,

visiting their homes, baptizing, and catechizing their children. His pastoral work began to bear fruit: thousands of baptisms every year, hundreds of marriages and first communions, frequent participation by the people in the Mass. He was tireless in helping his neighbour during the disastrous earthquake of February 1976. With courage, he climbed ravines in order to help the very poor, pulling the wounded out of the ruins and carrying them to safety on his shoulders. Great was his love for the needy and the marginalized.

How did the martyrdom take place?

From 1971 until 1981, numerous killings of journalists, farmers, catechists, and priests, all accused falsely of communism, took place in Guatemala. This was a real and true time of bloody persecution for the Church. In this situation, Father Rother, aware of the imminent danger to his life, prepared himself for martyrdom, asking the Lord for the strength to face it without fear. He continued, however, to preach the Gospel of love and nonviolence. Both his remaining in the mission and the aid he gave to the widows and children of those who were assassinated were seen as virtuous acts. 'The good shepherd', he writes in a letter, 'cannot abandon his flock in danger'. In the face of kidnapping, martyrdom, and violence, Father Rother felt helpless, because he did not succeed in changing the situation with his words of reconciliation and forgiveness. He often cried in silence. To a Carmelite nun who asked what to do if he were killed, our martyr responded, 'raise the standard of Christ risen'.

Around 1 o'clock of the night of July the 28th, 1981, he was killed with two gunshots to the head by three armed, masked men. He was found dead in a pool of blood. It was precisely on that very morning that our courageous missionary was to go to the national hospital of Sololá in order to give blood to a patient who needed an operation. His body was brought back to his homeland, while his heart and blood-soaked bandages were interred in the pavement of the church in Atitlán. Great was the sadness of his faithful people, especially of the native Tz'utujil, who cried for him as they would for a beloved son, a father who spoke their very own language. From that time, many mothers gave their children at baptism the name Francis, or A'Plas in the local language. The martyrdom of Father Rother was a real and true martyrdom in *odium fidei*, in hatred of the faith.

He was a man with a noble heart, merciful toward sinners. He did not spare himself. He spent long hours in the confessional listening to penitents. In this way, he showed that God forgave them, and the consequence: they too had to forgive others. He was relatable, too, and generous with the poor. He brought the sick to the hospital and got medicine and money for their care. The words of Jesus can be applied to him: 'no one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends'. He left his homeland to share the love of Christ with his beloved brother and sister Tz'utujil. Upon hearing the news of his martyrdom, the church square filled up with faithful who, staring up at the church, cried and prayed in silence. Their good shepherd had been killed, the priest who loved them with all his strength and defended them from the abuses of their oppressors.

His martyrdom, if it fills us with sadness, also gives us the joy of admiring the kindness, generosity, and courage of a great man of faith. The fifteen years he spent as a missionary in Guatemala will always be remembered as the glorious epoch of a martyr of Christ, an authentic lighted torch of hope for the Church and for the world. Formed in the school of the Gospel, he saw even his enemies as fellow human beings. He didn't hate, but loved. He didn't destroy, but built up. This is the invitation that Blessed Stanley Francis Rother extends to us today: to be like him as witnesses and missionaries of the Gospel.