

## THE MISSIONARY

If you read Father Stanley's life story alongside the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, it is unmistakable how passionately he chose to live mercy in his life. He fed the hungry, sheltered the homeless, visited the sick, comforted the afflicted, bore wrongs patiently, and, even as the danger grew, he comforted, forgave, and buried the dead. Once Guatemala's violent civil war found its way to

In his final Christmas letter from the mission written to Oklahoma Catholics in 1980, he ultimately concluded: "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."

the villages surrounding beautiful Lake Atitlán, many people, like Father Rother's own catechists, began to disappear. During those tragic years, he regularly walked the roads looking for bodies of the dead to bring them home.

"It is really something to be living in the midst of all this," Father Stanley described in a letter dated a year before his death. "There was another priest killed to the North of us in Qui'che while I was gone. That makes three since the first of May. One was kidnapped, presumed

dead. And what do we do about all this? What can we do but do our work, keep our heads down, and preach the Gospel of love and nonviolence."

Father Stanley Rother lived what St. Francis of Assisi commended to the members of his community: "Let all the brothers preach by their deeds" (Rule of 1221). With humility and love, he became one with his Tz'utujil parishioners to show them — not just tell them — how much God loved them. He was, as the Year of Mercy challenged us to be, "merciful like the Father."

**Reflection:** How can I live out the corporal and spiritual works of mercy in my life?



## THE SHEPHERD

In his first apostolic exhortation, "The Joy of the Gospel," Pope Francis describes what he calls "evangelizing gestures." Often little and always powerful, these are the acts and attitudes that mark a Christian as a missionary. Because he saw the Gospel values not as a set of ideas but as an affair of the heart, Father Stanley took care of the most menial duties with his whole being. Whether listening to someone's pain, fixing a car, changing a diaper, driving someone to the doctor, or shopping for supplies for the mission, he recognized the reality of God's presence in each act — and by doing so he proclaimed the Gospel of love, joy, and hope.

Father Stanley came to understand with clarity the importance of "presence." By constantly striving to be present to the people in front of him, to the needs in front of him, he proclaimed a God who lives and suffers with his people. For Father Stanley, the choice to die for his Tz'utujil was a natural extension of the daily choice he made to live for them, and in communion with them. His death was nothing less than a proclamation of God's love for the poor of Santiago Atitlán.

To paraphrase what G. K. Chesterton wrote of St. Thomas More: if there had not been that particular man at that particular moment, our Church and history would have been different. Not only because of Father Stanley's martyrdom, but even more significantly because his life and his priestly service remain a testament to the difference that one person can, and does, make.

**Reflection:** What would my faith look like — how would my life be different — if I lived fully confident in God?

Our Sunday Visitor engages, catechizes, and inspires millions of Catholics with relevant and easy-to-read pamphlets like this one. The wide range of topics available includes:

- Church teachings
- The sacraments
- Current events
- Seasonal themes
- Stewardship
- Papal teachings

To view our current offerings and see sample PDFs online, visit [osv.com/pamphlets](http://osv.com/pamphlets).

## Our Sunday Visitor

*Bringing Your Catholic Faith to Life*

To order additional quantities of this or any other pamphlet contact:  
1-800-348-2440 • Fax: 1-800-498-6709 • [www.osv.com](http://www.osv.com)

By **María Ruiz Scaperlanda**

Copyright © by Our Sunday Visitor, Inc.  
No part of this pamphlet may be reprinted or reproduced in any form.

Inventory No. P1896  
*Nihil Obstat:* Msgr. Michael Heintz, Ph.D.  
*Censor Librorum*  
*Imprimatur:* ✠ Kevin C. Rhoades  
Bishop of Fort Wayne-South Bend

The *Nihil Obstat* and *Imprimatur* are official declarations that a book or pamphlet is free of doctrinal or moral error. No implication is contained therein that those who have granted the *Nihil Obstat* or *Imprimatur* agree with the contents, opinions, or statements expressed.



9 781681 921877

## AN AMERICAN MARTYR Father Stanley Rother

*"For myself I am a Christian. For the sake of others, I am a priest."*

— Father Stanley Rother



04/17

ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARCHDIOCESE OF OKLAHOMA CITY

For Review Only. Copyright Our Sunday Visitor, Inc.



In December 2016, Pope Francis officially recognized Father Stanley Rother's martyrdom, making him the first American martyr and first male born in the United States approved for beatification, which will take place on September 23, 2017.

How a 46-year-old diocesan priest from a small German farming community in Oklahoma came to live and die in the remote, ancient village of Santiago Atitlán, Guatemala, is a story full of wonder and God's providence, beginning when the farm boy from Okarche decided to plant a different kind of harvest, becoming a priest for the then-Oklahoma City and Tulsa diocese on May 23, 1963, at age twenty-eight. Five years later, Father Rother volunteered for Oklahoma's mission in Guatemala, ultimately finding his heart's vocation as a priest to the Tz'utujil Mayan people — until his violent death on July 28, 1981.

## THE FARMER

Stanley and his four siblings grew up in the farmhouse where he was born, surrounded by extended family. It is in this ordinary life that Stanley first experienced a personal encounter with the Good Shepherd. This is where



he learned to be a man of prayer and a hands-on servant with a resolute desire to become a priest. It is here where he learned perseverance needed years later to trust God when academics proved to be a painful challenge in the seminary. And, it is here where he learned the love and compassion that led him to lay down his life for the Gospel and for his sheep.

His sister, Sister Marita, explained:

*This extended family, along with the experiences of the church and school communities, was inter-linked with our immediate family in developing a deep faith life and lifelong values indispensable for providing a solid Christian life.... Religion classes, daily Mass, sacramental preparation, daily Rosary in the home, and Sunday evening holy hour and benediction, along with other seasonal religious practices, were integrated into our daily lives. Our Christian values were indeed formed by the people with whom we associated, and we certainly had some of the best!*

It is no coincidence that the same values Stanley learned growing up in an Oklahoma farming community — putting family first, hard work, kindness, generosity, perseverance — are precisely the values that enabled him to become a missionary shepherd. Even his knowledge of farming and love for the land connected him in a special way to his impoverished and close-knit Mayan parishioners. It is little wonder, then, that his Santiago Atitlán community claimed him as “our priest.”

**Reflection:** *How am I making a difference in my everyday life? Where do I find God?*



## THE PRIEST

After enrolling in seminary, Stanley discovered that learning Latin would prove to be a huge obstacle to his priestly vocation. Twenty-three-year-old Stanley flunked Theology I and was sent home. Back in Oklahoma City, when asked by his bishop, Stanley reiterated his unwavering desire to follow the call to the priesthood. His supportive bishop agreed to find him a new seminary, sending Stanley to Mount St. Mary's Seminary in Emmitsburg, Maryland, where he successfully completed his studies.

Stanley never gave up pursuing the truth of his call. Years later, that young man who flunked because he couldn't master Latin volunteered to go to a foreign mission — where he not only became competent in Spanish, but by the grace of God also was able to master the challenging Tz'utujil dialect of his Mayan parishioners.



When he arrived at Santiago Atitlán in 1968, Father Stanley instantly fell in love with the volatile and stunning land of volcanoes and earthquakes, but above all with its people.

In time, Father Stanley Francis Rother, also known as *Apla's* (“Francis” in their native Tz'utujil), helped establish there the first farmers' coop, a school, the first hospital clinic, and the first Catholic radio station, used for catechesis. While he did not institute the project, he was a critical driving force in establishing Tz'utujil as a written language, which led to the publication of a New Testament in Tz'utujil. This priest and farmer who loved the land and recognized God in all of creation was never afraid to dig in and get his own hands dirty fixing tractors or plowing the land — a trait deeply loved by his Tz'utujil people.

In one of his final media interviews, Father Stanley explained: “Despite all this [hardship], you see happiness in the people. Their zest for life — to live and enjoy what they have — their friendliness, their spirit of cooperation.... They are remarkable. I want to stay as long as I can.”

And, his prayer was answered. His body was returned for burial to his hometown of Okarche in western Oklahoma, but his heart is entombed in a side altar at the Santiago Atitlán church, a request of his Tz'utujil community.

**Reflection:** *How do I live out God's call in my life?*