At 1:30 am on July 28, 1981, three Spanish-speaking Ladino men (non-indigenous) snuck into the rectory of Santiago Apóstol church in Santiago Atitlán, Guatemala. They immediately went to the pastor’s room, but he wasn’t there. They then seized and battered the 19-year-old brother of the associate pastor, whispering to the terrified young man that they would kill him if he did not take them directly to the pastor.

He led the attackers downstairs, knocked at the door of a utility room, and called out, “Father, they are looking for you.” Aware of the threat to the young man, Father Stanley Rother opened the door and let in his killers.

There was a shot. Then another. Then silence.

46-year-old Stanley Francis Rother was one of 13 priests – and the first American priest – slain during Guatemala’s 36-year-guerrilla war, a tragedy that claimed an estimated 140,000 lives. No one has ever been prosecuted for his killing.

Thirty-seven years after his martyrdom, Padre Francisco, as he was called in Spanish – or Padre Apla’s in their native Tz’utujil – is more than remembered by the community of Santiago Atitlán. The people’s devotion make it clear that he is still witnessing the presence and love of God to His people.

A Saint in the Making

On July 20, 2010, the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City closed the three-year-old archdiocesan phase of the Cause, sending Father Stanley Rother’s cause for canonization to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints in Rome. On September 3, 2014, Most Rev. Paul S. Coakley, Archbishop of Oklahoma City, presented the Positio of Father Rother to the Prefect of the Congregation for the Cause of Saints in Rome.

Less than a year later, on June 14, 2015, the Theology Commission of the Congregation for the Cause of Saints in Rome voted to formally recognized Oklahoma’s Servant of God Father
Rother, a martyr. And, on December 2, 2016, Pope Francis officially recognized Father Rother as a martyr for the faith, clearing the way for him to be beatified. Cardinal Angelo Amato, the Prefect for the Congregation, celebrated the Rite of Beatification for Blessed Stanley on September 23, 2017, in downtown Oklahoma City. He is the first declared martyr from the United States – and the first priest from the U.S to be Beatified.

But the people of Santiago Atitlán have not waited for an official declaration. They already affirm Padre Apla’s a saint, their saint, and they come to him daily asking for his help and intercession – much as they did during the 13 years that he served them as their priest. His death, like his life, is one more outward sign of his deep and abiding holy love for them.

“He was a courageous missionary, who in spite of the violence that surrounded him, did not leave his flock. He is a great example for me, someone who gave his life for the People of God,” said Sister Ambrosia, a member of the Hermanas Misioneras de la Eucaristía, Missionary Sisters of the Eucharist, who remembers and survived the years of violent social unrest in Guatemala.

“I can’t tell you how much I admire him. He could have returned to his country, but instead he remained with his people here. He represents Jesus,” Sister Ambrosia emphasized, “who gave His life for all of us. All of Guatemala already knows that he is a saint.”

**Living the Call of Ordinary Holiness**

Born in a farmhouse on March 27, 1935, in the middle of a haunting Oklahoma dust storm, Stanley was the oldest of five children, although a sister died in infancy. The Rother family life centered on three things: faith, family, and farming. Their lives were invested within a five-mile radius of Holy Family Catholic Church in Okarche, a small farming community northwest of Oklahoma City.

Stanley and his siblings – Betty Mae, Jim, and Tom – attended Holy Trinity Catholic School, from first grade through high school. At school, Stanley pursued a myriad of interests: basketball; drama, including a title role in *Don’t Take My Penny*; Young Christian Students, and the Sodality of Our Lady. Physically, Stanley’s high school transcript described him as 5 feet, 10 inches tall, weighing a lean 162 pounds, with brown hair and eyes.
At home, as the oldest, Stanley took the lead in farming duties, working alongside his father Franz from an early age. From his mother, Gertrude, Stanley inherited a devotion to Our Lady and the rosary, a prayer the family observed every night after supper.

But the farm boy who had been elected president of the Future Farmers of America his senior year decided to plant a different kind of harvest. Stanley had such resolve in his voice as he announced his desire to become a priest, that neither Franz or Gertrude questioned the decision – except for his father's prophetic comment, "You should have taken Latin!"

By all accounts, Stanley seemed to prefer manual labor to book learning in the seminary: working in the bindery, building a shrine to Our Lady, leveling the front lawn, repairing equipment, and picking pecans. If it needed doing, he did it. If it was broken, he fixed it. Looking back at Stanley's actions during those years, his fellow seminarians noted, "His work was a way of meditation" and "I have a feeling, when he was riding on that mower he spent a lot of time praying." Academically, however, Stanley struggled to stay afloat, in particular, with Latin – failing his first year of Theology, and ultimately being asked to leave. But his bishop found Stanley a new seminary, Mount St. Mary's in Emmitsburg, Maryland, where Stanley successfully completed his studies.

On May 25, 1963, 28-year-old Stanley Francis Rother was ordained a priest forever by Bishop Victor J. Reed at the Cathedral of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Oklahoma City. The remembrance card for Stanley's ordination included one simple inscription, "For myself I am a Christian. For the sake of others I am a Priest." In succinct yet accurate fashion, the statement reflected Stanley's vision for life – and his attitude about his vocation.

Father Rother served the first five years of his priestly ministry without much notice in various Oklahoma towns. Then everything changed in 1968, when he answered the call to serve at the Oklahoma mission in Santiago Atitlán, Guatemala, finding his heart's vocation as a priest to the Tz'utujil Mayan people.

**Oklahoma's Missionary Martyr**

When Pope John XXIII requested in the early 1960s that a mission be established in the remote village of Santiago de Atitlán, no resident priest had been ministering to the indigenous community for 80 years. But the Catholic Church has had a presence in that area for 470 years.
The then-diocese of Oklahoma City and Tulsa took over the care of the mission of Santiago Atitlán, the oldest parish in the diocese of Sololá, sending Oklahoma priests and lay workers from 1963 to 2000, when sufficient growth in local vocations allowed the diocese of Sololá to resume pastoral care.

It is no coincidence that the same values Stanley learned growing up in an Oklahoma farming community – 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 close-knit Tz’utujil parishioners, also a farming community.

Over the years, the priest farmer was never afraid to dig in and get his own hands dirty, fixing tractors or plowing the land. He also helped establish the parish’s 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 also a critical driving force in establishing Tz’utujil as a written language, which led to a New Testament in Tz’utujil being published after his death.

In what seems nothing short of a miracle, the same young man who couldn’t master Latin and failed out of the seminary became not only competent in Spanish, but by the grace of God, a master of the challenging Tz’utujil language. It is little wonder that his Tz’utujil parishioners claimed him as “our priest.”

But his love for the people could not stop the violence surrounding the peaceful mission. Once Guatemala’s civil war found its way to the villages surrounding beautiful Lake Atitlán in the late 1970s, many people, like Father Rother’s own catechists, began to disappear regularly.

“It is really something to be living in the midst of all this,” he described in a letter dated 1980, 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.”

It is undoubtedly providential that in the midst of a dangerous situation and very difficult circumstances, Father Stanley Rother not only remained certain about his vocation, but he also cemented his conviction as a missionary. He knew with complete confidence that in his missionary ministry to the Tz’utujil, he had found the place and the people where God’s
providence willed him to be. Likewise, the missionary from Okarche dared to love Jesus with everything he had – and that changed everything.

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. And his gift of presence, especially in the mist of their suffering, spoke volumes about Christ’s redeeming love for them.

“The people treasure that he was, and is, one of them,” noted Sister María Victoria, who worked for five years at the parish in Santiago. “Apla’s shared everything with the Tz’utujil. In spite of his different background, he embraced our culture and the poor and simple people. He ate with the people and drove out in the trucks to work the fields with them,” she added. “He shared everything with them.”

Each year the Guatemala mission sent a Christmas letter for publication in the two Oklahoma diocesan newspapers. Father Rother’s final Christmas, he wrote, “This is one of the reasons I have for staying in the face of physical harm. 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.”

On July 12, 1981, in a statement read in all the nation’s parishes, the Guatemalan bishops denounced “a carefully studied plan” by the government “to intimidate the Church and silence its prophetic voice.”

“Just before he returned to Guatemala for the last time, he told me how much he desired to come back. He knew the dangers that existed here at that time and was greatly concerned about the safety and security of the people,” remembered Archbishop Emeritus Eusebius J. Beltran in a homily to the community of Cerro de Oro, a mission church near Santiago Atitlán, on the 30th anniversary of Father Rother’s death. “Despite these threats and danger, he returned and resumed his great priestly ministry to you… It is very clear that Padre Apla’s died for you and for the faith,” said Beltran, who served as Bishop of Tulsa in 1981 when Father Rother was killed.

Blessed Stanley Rother is buried in Oklahoma City, but his heart – at the request of his parishioners in Santiago Atitlán – rests forever with the people closest to his heart, behind the main altar of the big colonial church built by Franciscan missionaries in 1540.
A Patron for Missionary Disciples

Stanley Rother’s confidence in God and in God’s plan for his life – and for his people – was deeply rooted in the knowledge that God is love, and that each of us are called to live fully that love in everything we do and with everyone we encounter. As Pope Francis emphasized in 2013 at the beatification of 522 Spanish martyrs who were killed during the anti-Christian persecutions of the 1930s, “There is no such thing as love in installments, no such thing as portions of love. Total love: and when we love, we love till the end.”

Stanley Rother, the shepherd who chose to face death rather than abandon his flock – the shepherd who didn’t run – loved to the extreme limit. He loved till the end. And in so doing, he made God’s presence real and tangible to the people in his life.

In giving himself completely in his death, Father Rother models the challenge every Christian must face in life, how to faithfully and whole-heartedly live our call to holiness, even in our ordinary life. By his simplicity and heroism, Blessed Stanley Rother challenges us to believe that we can do the same – a message of good news indeed.

*María de Lourdes Ruiz Scaperlanda, a Catholic writer and journalist, is the author of The Shepherd Who Didn’t Run: Fr. Stanley Rother, Martyr from Oklahoma.*