

# First U.S. Born Martyr to be Beatified

Rev. Robert S. Pelton, C.S.C.

September 23, 2017

Father Stanley Rother, (fig 1) an Oklahoma-born martyr who served as a priest in Guatemala for thirteen years, will be beatified in Oklahoma City on September 23, 2017. He will become the first recognized martyr to have been born in the United States. Before highlighting his life and works, allow me to insert a little background. In 1960 I had collaborated with John Considine, M.M.<sup>i</sup> (fig 2), to promote greater interest in the Latin American Church by sponsoring a graduate course within the Notre Dame Dept. of Theology on inter-American relations. It was Considine who first suggested to the Vatican that Religious from the United States and Canada should go to Latin America and he, more than anyone else, shaped and focused the attitudes and activities of the missionaries with his three-part theory of mission: (fig 3) intensive cultural and linguistic education of the visiting Religious; creation of strong Christian communities where teaching of the gospel prepared people for eternal life while simultaneously improving their temporal well-being; and a strong solidarity with local people and a dedication to work with them for justice on their behalf.

In 1961, (fig 4) Pope (now Saint) John XXIII called for ten percent of North American Religious and priests to go to Latin America by the end of the decade.<sup>ii</sup> That call was relayed to the United States by Mons. Agostino Casaroli. Speaking in the name of the Vatican Commission for Latin America, Mons. Casaroli chose Notre Dame to announce the appeal. Although that goal was not fully met, Mons. Casaroli's invitation sparked commitments to serve in Latin America from large numbers of priests, sisters, and brothers, eventually including many of the "best and most qualified

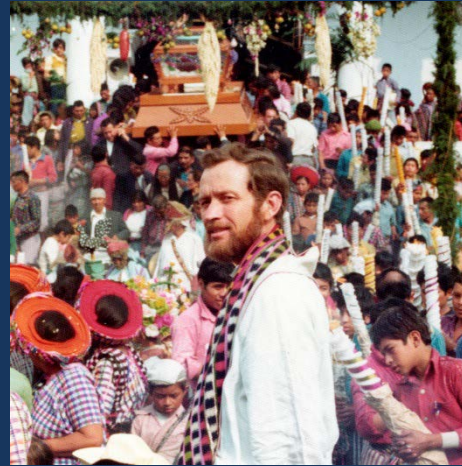


fig 1

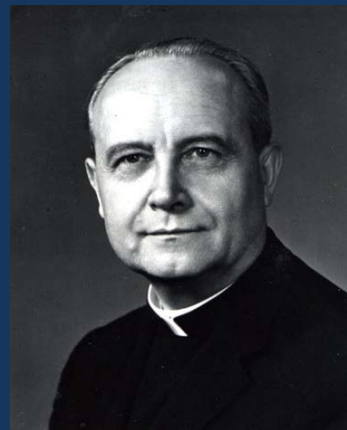


fig 2



fig 3

vocations” that Mons. Casaroli had specifically requested.

However, this foreign missionary work was sharply criticized by some, who feared a “North Americanization” of the Latin American Church. The desire of Mons. Casaroli for “matching” candidates took time to achieve. At the beginning, critics were correct because volunteers tended to come with pre-suppositions. Eventually this was worked through, and there began a type of “reverse mission” wherein the U.S. Church was able to learn much from Latin America. ii

As Chair of Notre Dame’s Theology Department, I was unable to accept Mons Casaroli’s request immediately, but I heard it in person and was moved by it. In 1959, I had taken the fourth vow. This indicated my willingness to go anywhere in the world my Superior General might wish to send me. It was soon to take effect when my Provincial asked me to accept an assignment in Chile. My fourth vow assisted me in acceptance of this assignment, which proved to be one of the main opportunities of my life.

By contrast, Stanley Rother was still in the seminary, and his advancement to ordination was being questioned. However, both of us would soon be immersed in Pastoral Activities in Latin America, I principally in Chile and Fr. Stanley Rother exclusively in Guatemala. (fig 5) This morning, we are here to honor Fr. Rother as he becomes beatified today for his heroic witness to the Gospel.

### The Early History of Stanley Rother

Fr. Stanley came from the small town of Okarche, Oklahoma, where his parish, Catholic school, and family farm were the pillars of his life. (fig 6) Fine priests were models for Stanley’s desire to become a priest. After graduation from his high school, Stanley

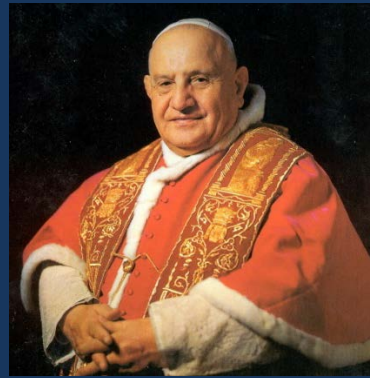


fig 4



fig. 5



fig 6

desired to enter a seminary. Despite his desire to become a priest, which had begun in 1957, Stanley had academic challenges at San Antonio's Assumption Seminary, including failure in several classes. Stanley had grown up on a farm, and he learned to do many manual tasks that were of great assistance to the seminary. (fig 7)



fig. 7

These began to take precedence over his studies. He had a particular difficulty in learning Latin. He was also asked to repeat his first year of philosophy studies. Then he was advised to drop out of the seminary. Hearing of Stanley's struggles, Sister Clarrisa Tenbrick, his fifth grade teacher, wrote to him to offer her encouragement, reminding him that the sainted Curé of Ars also had real difficulties with his seminary studies, but that he persevered. iii

In the midst of this Stanley (fig 8) was soft spoken, not an aggressive person. This was a lifelong trait. Just two weeks before his murder, he said that he could use a course in "assertiveness training." As we shall see, at the time of his death he did assert himself to save his beloved indigenous.



fig. 8

Returning to his continuing desire to become a priest, it was decided that Bishop Reed, (fig 9) his local ordinary, should be approached for assistance. Arrangements were made to include Stanley's pastor from Okarche, Fr. Van Elm, Stanley, and his father. The Bishop asked if Stanley still wanted to become a priest. Stanley replied, "That is all over for me." Bishop Reed said, "No, it isn't. It's not my smart priests who are necessarily my best priests."

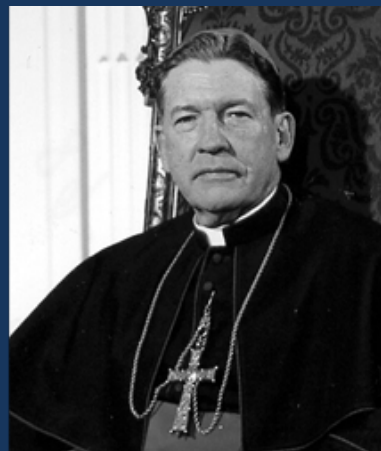


fig. 9

Bishop Reed arranged for a second opportunity for Stanley at Mount Saint Mary's Seminary, in Maryland. (fig 10) This time, he did better and he was ordained on May 25, 1963. (fig 10 inset) He had grown in maturity. After five years of parish work, he volunteered in 1968 for Oklahoma's mission in Guatemala.



Providence was preparing him for a deep commitment. In Guatemala, he became immersed in a remote culture. Direct contact with the people gave him a deep focus. (fig 11)

### The Immersion of Fr. Stanley into a Different Culture

Guatemala is a country of unique beauty. While it is only the size of Ohio, it has a special variety in its landscape. The Indian culture there attracts many foreign visitors. The Mayan ruins of Tikal are found in the flourishing rain forest in the northern province of Petén. In the west of the nation there are rows of volcanoes interspersed with lakes that regularly change color.

Around Atitlán, the mission of Fr. Stanley, there is a lake that is sacred to the indigenous. (fig 12) There were, even in his time, inns springing up around the lake. In the capital, Guatemala City, today there are modern hotels decorated with different motifs. Many tourists visit due to the beauty of the country and the attractiveness of the Mayan art and decorations. (fig 13)

However, these tourists rarely experience the political terrorism of the country. Whenever the tourists are present, the terrorists—usually the military—avoids them. But the ongoing poverty of most Guatemalans is hard to avoid. Some 500 years after the Spanish conquest, Guatemalan Indians survive more as a race and culture than do most of the indigenous of the Americas. They are attached to their land and to the corn that they grow.

This is the culture that Fr. Stanley entered for thirteen years of ministry. It was there that he came to master two Mayan languages and to preach in Tz'utujil, a challenging Mayan dialect. He was called Padre Apla, his name in the Mayan dialect. He shaped community in all its aspects. His very

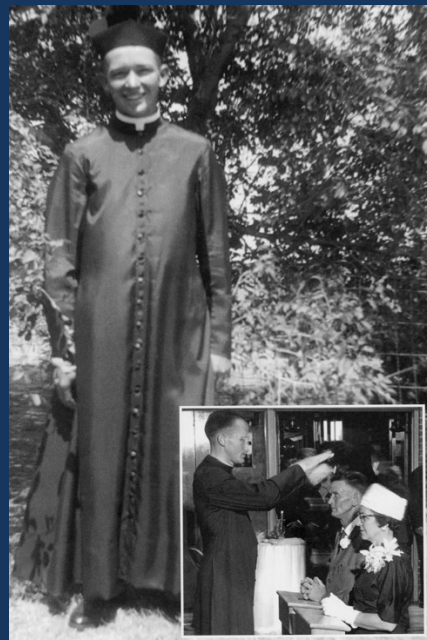


fig 10

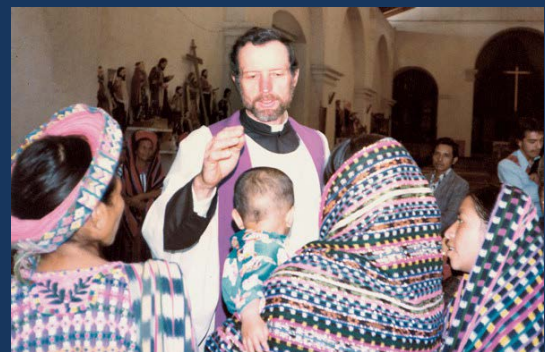


fig. 11



fig. 12

full life of prayer and service limited his awareness of contemporary theologians. (fig 14) As he became deeply immersed in this very different culture, he entered freely into the indigenous liturgical practices. (fig 15) He also began to intuit government spies more rapidly. (These spies were called *orejas* --ears. This practice was also carried out in Cuba within some Catholic Church institutions.)



fig. 13

### Fr. Stanley's Pastoral Fortitude

In January 1981, in grave danger and having seen his name on a death list, Fr. Stanley returned to Oklahoma for a few months. But as Easter approached, he decided to spend Holy Week with the indigenous, and he returned. (fig 16) He could not abandon his people, and ultimately was killed for acting out his Catholic faith.



fig. 14

As we mentioned before, Fr. Stanley was soft spoken and rarely assertive. This changed rapidly on July 28, 1981, when three non-indigenous men broke into Stanley's rectory. They planned to "disappear" him, as they had already done with nine priests and hundreds of teachers of the faith but he refused to go with them, to avoid causing danger to the others at the mission. He did not call for help, for the same reason. He fought with the intruders, and finally asked for them to kill him there. Fifteen minutes and two gunshots later, Fr. Stanley Rother was dead and his killers fled without hurting anyone else. Villagers ran to the church. By sunrise, thousands were standing in silent vigilance in the church plaza. Fr. Stanley Rother had clearly shown that he could assert "pastoral fortitude."iv (fig 17)



fig 15

His body was buried in Holy Trinity Cemetery in Okarche, Oklahoma, but the Tzutuhil people insisted that his heart be left with them. They placed his heart and blood behind his church's altar. (fig 18) This was

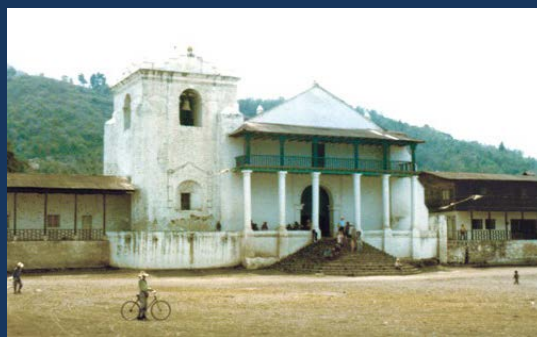


fig 16



appropriate since his heart was clearly with the people.

Before expressing the signature prayer of Fr. Stanley, I wish to point out that Pope Francis has also emphasized the importance of the indigenous people in Latin America. Last year, when he visited Chiapas, Mexico, it was evident that Bishop Luis Ruiz had done similar work with the indigenous in Chiapas.v

#### The Signature Prayer of Fr. Stanley Rother

“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 sufferings in preparation for the coming of the Kingdom.”

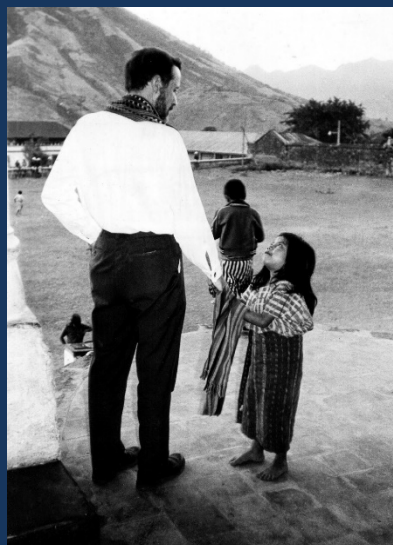


fig 17



fig 18



fig 19

---

<sup>i</sup> Robert Hurteau, *A Worldwide Heart: A life of Father John Considine*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press (2013)

ii For more on Latin American/North American Church interaction see Mary M. McGlone, *Sharing Faith across the Hemisphere (Compartiendo la Fe Hemisferio)*. Washington: U.S. Catholic Conference (1997; also available as a VHS videotape (in English only, with discussion guide in audio cassette recording). This is a comprehensive study of inter-American Church relations conducted by USCC in 1995-96. James Ronan, then the Executive Director of the Secretariat for Latin America, oversaw the project; Robert Pelton, C.S.C. coordinated it. This study clearly demonstrates the influence that the Latin American Church has on many of the pastoral and intellectual dimensions of the U. S. Catholic Church.

iii Catholic News Agency 3/13/2017

iv When asked by the Pope how he had displayed so much courage in the face of any death threats, the Blessed Monsignor Oscar Romero replied that his courage was the result of “pastoral fortitude.” Father Stanley Rother clearly had the same “pastoral fortitude” in returning to Guatemala, in ignoring the death threats, and in refusing to allow any of his beloved indigenous to be killed along with himself.

v “Bishop Samuel Ruiz, Mexican Prophet” *America*, August 21, 2017

#### Image Citations:

Fig 1. Archdiocese of Oklahoma City. *Father Stanley Rother during a carnival in Guatemala*. No date. Courtesy Archdiocese of Oklahoma City. Web. accessed 8 Sept 2017.

Fig 2. Gillgannon, Michale J. *Maryknoller’s pastoral approach to problems evoked positive response*. 1 Oct 2014. *National Catholic Reporter*. Web. accessed 8 Sept 2017.

Fig. 3 Archdiocese of Oklahoma City. *Father Rother with Tz’utujil family*. No date. *Courtesy of the Rother Family and the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City Archives*.

Fig 4. Gedoughty02. *Portrait of Pope Saint John XXIII*. 4 Oct 2012 *Wikimedia Commons*. Web. accessed 5 Sept 2017.

Fig 5. *Father Stanley Rother with Tz’utujil men*. 1 Jul 2016. *Maryknoll Magazine*. Courtesy of Archdiocese of Oklahoma City. Web. accessed 5 Sept 2017.

Fig 6. Archdiocese of Oklahoma City. *Young Stanley on the steps of the Rother farmhouse porch. Inset: Eleven-year-old Stanley, a fifth-grader at Holy Trinity School*. No date. *Courtesy of the Rother Family and the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City Archives*. Web. accessed 5 Sept 2017.

Fig. 7. Archdiocese of Oklahoma City. *Franz and Gertrude Rother at their Okarche farmhouse with their children. c1944*. *Courtesy of the Rother Family and the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City Archives*.

Fig. 8. Archdiocese of Oklahoma City. *Father Stanley R. Rother (1935-1981), martyr from Oklahoma*. No date. *Courtesy of the Rother Family and the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City Archives*.

Fig. 9. Archdiocese of Oklahoma City. *Bishop Victor Joseph Reed*. 5 Sept 2017. *Archdiocese of Oklahoma City Archives*.

---

Fig. 10. Courtesy of the Rother Family. *Seminarian Stanley Rother dressed for classes. Inset: Following Stanley's ordination, Gertrude and Franz Rother kneel before their oldest child to receive his blessing.* 25 May 1963. Archdiocese of Oklahoma City Archives.

Fig. 11. Archdiocese of Oklahoma City. *Father Stanley Rother Blessing a Tz'utujil Baby.* Santiago Apostle Church, Santiago Atitlán. No date. Courtesy Archdiocese of Oklahoma City Archives.

Fig. 12. Chensiyuan. *View of Lake Atitlán and the Atitlán volcano (center) in Guatemala.* 2009. *Wikimedia Commons.* Web. accessed 5 Sept 2017.

Fig. 13. Daderot. *Tz'utujil Maya, Santiago Atitlán. Exhibit in the Textile Museum of Canada.* 4 Jul 2013. *Wikimedia Commons Public Domain.* Web. accessed 5 Sept 2017.

Fig. 14. Archdiocese of Oklahoma City. *Father Stanley Rother Enjoying coffee with Religious sisters, both mission volunteers.* Santiago Apostle Church, Santiago Atitlán. No date. Courtesy Archdiocese of Oklahoma City Archives.

Fig. 15. Archdiocese of Oklahoma City. *Father Stanley Rother sits with his parishioners in Santiago Atitlán.* No date. Courtesy of Archdiocese of Oklahoma City Archives.

Fig. 16. Archdiocese of Oklahoma City. *Santiago Apostle Church, in Santiago Atitlán, in the time of Father Stanley Rother.* No date. Courtesy Archdiocese of Oklahoma City Archives.

Fig. 17. Archdiocese of Oklahoma City. *Father Stanley Rother and a Tz'utujil Girl.* Santiago Apostle Church, Santiago Atitlán. No date. Courtesy Archdiocese of Oklahoma City Archives.

Fig. 18. Archdiocese of Oklahoma City. *Two large jars containing the blood of Father Stanley Rother and the pastor's bloody gauze, placed on the altar during his Burial Mass at Santiago Apostle Church, Santiago Atitlán.* No date. Courtesy of Archdiocese of Oklahoma City.

Fig. 19. Archdiocese of Oklahoma City. *Father Stanley Rother with Tz'utujil children.* No date. Courtesy of Archdiocese of Oklahoma City Archives.