News



People stand near an image of Fr. Stanley Rother, a priest of the Oklahoma City Archdiocese, during Mass in 2006 at a church in Santiago Atitlan, Guatemala. Father Rother will be beatified Sept. 23 in Oklahoma. (CNS/Daniel LeClair, Reuters)



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Washington — August 28, 2017
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Catholics in Oklahoma have been preparing for a long time for this moment. Many, like Archbishop Paul Coakley of Oklahoma City, had faith it would come, but there's still a sense of awe, to think that a farm boy, one of their own, is about to take a step toward official sainthood.

On Sept. 23, Oklahomans will get a front row seat to the beatification of Fr. Stanley Rother, an ordinary man from an ordinary town, who died extraordinarily as a martyr in Guatemala while serving in a mission. He knew well the dangers of the Guatemalan highlands, where government forces tortured and killed anyone suspected of dissent during the most politically tumultuous moments in the country's history.

However, Rother refused to abandon the community he so loved from 1968 until his 1981 assassination. Like many of the poor and persecuted he served, he died long before he had to at age 46, shot in the head in the parish rectory.

"People are justly proud of this native son, but one wouldn't expect something like this, such a recognition to be accorded to somebody from Okarche, Oklahoma," said Coakley in a phone interview with Catholic News Service.

Okarche (pronounced oh-car-chee) is a small farming town with a lot of windmills, said Coakley, and one that's increasingly receiving visitors and pilgrims wanting to learn more about the tranquil setting that was home to Fr. Rother. He left it behind because he wanted to serve the church in a place where priests were needed and, in the late 1960s, priests were needed in the remote highlands of Guatemala, where the Oklahoma City Archdiocese had a mission in the town of Santiago Atitlan.

"We weren't talking about the peripheries 30, 35 years ago when Fr. Rother was killed but certainly he had that missionary spirit," said Coakley. "He had a heart for the people there. He recognized their dignity, he recognized that they were precious

in the Lord's sight."

Some say Fr. Rother arrived "knowing 10 words in Spanish," but the agricultural skills he imported from Okarche and his kindness endeared him to the locals. Coakley has visited Santiago Atitlan on a couple of occasions, once during a pilgrimage and also for an event honoring Fr. Rother.

"The devotion of the locals to Padre Aplas, as they call him, is amazing," he said. "He's venerated and honored as the beloved shepherd who laid down his life for them. We were there for the very special day of the anniversary of this death so there was a large festive Mass, a colorful event, processions."

"For many, many years, his heart has been enshrined in the back of the church, where people approach reverently and pray ... evidence of their esteem for him, their appreciation for him. Their devotion to him is really everywhere."

Though his heart, physically and otherwise, was left in Guatemala, the rest of his remains returned to Okarche. For years, people stopped by to pray at his grave at the Holy Trinity Cemetery in town, said Coakley, even before he was declared a martyr by the Vatican in late 2016. His remains have since been exhumed as part of the beatification process and moved to a chapel in Oklahoma City, where the ceremony declaring him Blessed Stanley Rother will take place.

Though Oklahoma is not a predominantly Catholic state, there's a lot of interest outside of Catholic circles, particularly with the upcoming beatification. Coakley said he has tried to meet with local groups eager for information about the event and recently gave a presentation to religious leaders of various faith traditions who wanted to know more about the priest and the significance of his beatification.

"Some of them undoubtedly plan to attend the beatification," he said. "It's touching people well beyond our Catholic community."

Two of Fr. Rother's siblings as well as a delegation from Guatemala will attend the ceremony at the Cox Convention Center. Guatemalans from Santiago Atitlan will participate in the liturgy, which will include the prayers of the faithful in their local dialect. A large banner that will be unveiled at the time of the beatification will display elements of Guatemalan culture, said Coakley.

He said he wants Catholics to understand that a martyr and a holy person such as Fr. Rother can come from an ordinary beginning.

"There was nothing exceptional about him," said the archbishop about Fr. Rother. "But he was extraordinarily faithful to his calling, to his vocation, to grace. He's a witness to all of us that God chooses the humble, the lowly, as he always does, to accomplish great things for those who allow themselves to be used by God."

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And God gave him the extraordinary gift of martyrdom because of Fr. Rother's fidelity and generosity, the archbishop said.

"Ultimately, if God calls a young man from Okarche, Oklahoma, to be a saint, to be beatified, to be a martyr, it reminds us that all of us, no matter our beginnings, our circumstances, are called to holiness as well," he said.

Because of Fr. Rother's sacrifice, Guatemala no longer needs help from Oklahoma, Coakley said.

"In the aftermath of Fr. Rother's death, the church's holy words proved to be true, that the blood of martyrs is the seed of Christians," said Coakley. "The church (in Santiago Atitlan) really began to flourish after Fr. Rother's death and they've seen a number of vocations from the parish and, ultimately, the local diocese thanked us for our service there but said that they could now staff the parish."

In addition to the beatification, the archdiocese also is in the midst of its first capital campaign, which includes raising $55 million—half will go toward a shrine honoring Fr. Rother.

"We have a master plan, an architect, we have a conceptual design. ... We're just beginning our fundraising for it," said Coakley.

For now, the archdiocese is squarely focused on the September beatification, which has interest beyond Oklahoma, the archbishop said.

"He is being lifted up and being offered to the whole church as a witness of holiness and fidelity to the Gospel, a witness to pastoral charity, to inspire all people," he said. "We need these kinds of heroes in light of the many challenges that priests

have had to deal with the last 15 years or so. This is good news that we have a holy heroic priest being lifted up and honored to remind us that all of us are called to holiness.