News



Work continues on the Blessed Stanley Rother Shrine, Thursday, Feb. 2, in Oklahoma City. A dedication Mass set for Friday, Feb. 17, will mark the official opening of the shrine, honoring Stanley Francis Rother, a missionary from Oklahoma, who was killed in Guatemala in 1981. (AP Photo/Sue Ogrocki)

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The birth of Stanley Francis Rother was by all accounts ordinary, aside from the weather. The Catholic farm boy came into the world during an Oklahoma dust storm.

But in life – and in death – he was extraordinary.

The 46-year-old priest, shot to death in Guatemala in 1981, became the first person born in the United States to be declared a martyr by the Catholic Church.



Sr. Marita Rother gives a reading during Mass during the beatification ceremony for her brother, Blessed Stanley Rother Sept. 23, 2017, in Oklahoma City. At rear is a large banner with the image of Blessed Stanley Rother. (AP photo/Sue Ogrocki, file)

Now a $50 million shrine built to honor the slain missionary — killed by three masked assassins who entered his rectory during Guatemala's civil war — is expected to draw thousands of pilgrims to his home state.

"People from all over the world can come and know more about him and really ask for his intercession," said María Ruiz Scaperlanda, author of *The Shepherd Who Didn't Run*, a 2015 biography of Rother.

A dedication Mass set for Friday, Feb. 17, will mark the official opening of the Blessed Stanley Rother Shrine in Oklahoma City. The Spanish colonial-style structure incorporates a 2,000-seat sanctuary as well as a visitor center, gift shop, museum and smaller chapel that will serve as Rother's final resting place.

The shrine grounds also will feature a re-creation of Tepeyac Hill, the Mexico City site where Catholics believe the Virgin Mary appeared to an Indigenous Mexican man named Juan Diego in 1531. An artist created painted bronze statues of Our Lady of Guadalupe and St. Juan Diego — each weighing thousands of pounds — for the Oklahoma site.



Work continues on the Blessed Stanley Rother Shrine Feb. 2 in Oklahoma City. A dedication Mass set for Feb. 17 will mark the official opening of the shrine. (AP photo/Sue Ogrocki)

Catholic donors funded the shrine, which was constructed debt free, Oklahoma City Archbishop Paul Coakley said.

"I think there are a lot of different things that will draw people to the campus, whether to honor Mary or Juan Diego or Blessed Stanley Rother," Coakley said. "We hope it's an opportunity for people to experience faith and grow in their relationship with the Lord."

The Oklahoma complex joins nearly 120 Catholic national and diocesan shrines in 27 states and the District of Columbia, according to the National Association of Shrine

and Pilgrimage Apostolate.

Prior to becoming the Rother shrine's executive director in 2020, Leif Arvidson oversaw the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in La Crosse, Wisconsin, for a decade. About 75,000 pilgrims visited each year, Arvidson said.

He declined to estimate how many visitors the Rother shrine might attract.



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"We're still somewhat of a minority here," Arvidson said of Oklahoma's Catholic population.

Evangelical Protestants make up the largest share of the Bible Belt state's adults at 47%, according to the Pew Research Center. Mainline Protestants follow at 18%. Catholics are next at 8%.

"I think he'll be really special not only to Catholics but to Oklahomans and just people who will recognize the beauty of the virtues that he exhibited — of service and humility and dedication to God's call in a person's life," Arvidson said.

Zac Craig, the Oklahoma City Convention and Visitors Bureau president and a Southern Baptist, echoed Arvidson's assessment.

"It really adds to the cultural mix of diverse attractions that we have. … I think it's going to be appealing to all," said Craig, citing the city's new First Americans Museum as well as the national memorial for the 1995 bombing of a federal office building.

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Rother's story begins with his 1935 birth in Okarche, a small town about 40 miles northwest of Oklahoma City.

While he served as an altar boy at his hometown Holy Trinity Catholic Church, Rother seemed destined for farm life. He studied vocational agriculture in high school, while his brother, Tom, took a Latin course – a language long associated with Catholicism.

Family members couldn't help but chuckle when Stan — not Tom — later became a clergyman. But the road to the priesthood proved a struggle. He dropped out of his

first seminary but eventually graduated from another before his ordination in 1963.

He served several Oklahoma parishes before volunteering for mission work in Santiago Atitlán, Guatemala, in 1968.



The chapel at the Blessed Stanley Rother Shrine, pictured Feb. 2 in Oklahoma City, will become the final resting place for Rother. In December 2016, Pope Francis officially recognized Rother as a martyr for his faith. In September 2017, in the final step before sainthood, Rother was beatified at a special Mass that drew an estimated 20,000 people to an Oklahoma City convention center. (AP photo/Sue Ogrocki)

During his 13 years in the Central American nation, the priest who once had trouble with Latin learned Spanish and his parishioners' Tz'utujil language. He worked to translate the New Testament's Gospels into the native dialect.

Amid political and military unrest in the late 1970s, parishioners began disappearing, their bodies found dumped on roadsides. By 1981, Rother knew he was on a "hit list," according to the Oklahoma City Archdiocese.

His last visit home came a few months before his July 28, 1981, murder. He accepted an invitation to watch his younger cousin, the Rev. Don Wolf, join the priesthood and celebrate his first Mass as a priest that May.

"We talked a lot about the dangers that he faced," recalled Wolf, now 67.

But Rother insisted on returning to Guatemala, telling loved ones, "The shepherd cannot run."



A display in the museum that is part of the Blessed Stanley Rother Shrine is pictured Feb. 2 in Oklahoma City. (AP photo/Sue Ogrocki)

Rother became one of at least 13 Catholic priests killed during the war, branded as communists in collusion with left-wing revolutionary guerrillas.

Now his cousin will serve as the shrine's first rector. Besides welcoming pilgrims, the new church will become the worship place for two of the city's growing Hispanic parishes. They will combine into one — relieving crowding at existing facilities.

Wolf said it's an exciting time — both for the memory of his cousin and the chance to grow the church in a state with a rising Latino population.

"Stan has become this incredible character," Wolf said of the stories told about Rother. "I've always been proud to be a part of his family. But I've always felt more closely connected to Stan because I'm a priest of the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City than because he has the same last name as my mother."



Rev. Don Wolf, a cousin of the Blessed Stan Rother, stands in the main church at the Blessed Stanley Rother Shrine Feb. 2 in Oklahoma City. Wolf will serve as the shrine's first rector. (AP photo/Sue Ogrocki)

In December 2016, Pope Francis officially recognized Rother as a martyr. In September 2017, in the final step before sainthood, Rother was beatified at a special Mass that drew about 20,000 people, making him the first U.S. priest to be beatified.

For Rother to become a saint, a miracle involving his intercession must be verified.

"It's a very rigorous process," Coakley said. "The church tends to be very skeptical about claims of miraculous healings, until they can be proven that they're not attributable to science or anything else."

"It could be a long while," the archbishop added. "It may never happen, for all we know, because we can't predict how God is going to act."

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Scaperlanda, Rother's biographer and an Oklahoma City Catholic, said she loves that a boy reared in humble circumstances in Middle America has a shrine named after him.

"He's ordinary in that sense, and I think that's one of the invaluable gifts he gives us," she said. "If he can do it, then I can live out my best life that God put me here to do. I mean, I don't have to be martyred like he was, but to give myself so fully to something, that's a value that I want.

"I can ask Father Stan to help me live as he did."

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