Culture

Fr. Stanley Rother is seen in an image from the documentary "American Martyr: The Stanley R

Fr. Stanley Rother is seen in an image from the documentary "American Martyr: The Stanley Rother Story," which is scheduled to be released in theaters nationwide Aug. 25-27. Rother was martyred in 1981 and beatified in 2017. (OSV News/Archdiocese of Oklahoma City)

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On Sept. 23, 2017, some 20,000 congregants gathered at Oklahoma City's Cox Convention Center for the beatification of Fr. Stanley Rother. It was a landmark event in that Rother was the first U.S priest to be declared blessed on the basis of martyrdom.

Nine years on, viewers will have the opportunity to learn more about this unique figure with the limited release of "American Martyr: The Stanley Rother Story" (Fathom). The documentary will be screened in English Aug. 25 and 26 and in Spanish Aug. 27.

Narrated by Martin Sheen, director Derek Watson's informative profile follows Rother from his birth on an Oklahoma farm through his work as a missionary in Guatemala

to his 1981 death there at the hands of violent extremists. As on-screen reminiscences make clear, the cleric had a lasting influence on the population of his rural Guatemalan base, Santiago Atitlan.

Before being caught up in the turmoil of his adopted country's protracted civil war, Rother guided his parishioners spiritually while also working to improve their material situation. To advance their knowledge of the Catholic faith, for instance, he trained a cadre of traveling catechists. He also established a radio station to broadcast Mass and catechetical lessons.

With an eye to the physical welfare of his mostly indigenous flock, Rother organized a collective farm, introduced more advanced agricultural practices and, once the national conflict eventually reached remote Santiago, supported his congregants in the face of military repression. His courage in doing so was to cost him his life.

A presentation of the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City, Watson's biography provides viewers with insights into the various stages of Rother's life through interviews with his family members, lay collaborators and fellow clergymen as well through the use of archival footage and photos.

While Rother's story is ultimately uplifting, its grimmer aspects obviously make it an unsuitable tale for kids. For teens and their elders, on the other hand, this retrospective will prove both educational and inspiring.

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