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MISSION MESSAGE

In Memory of a Missionary Martyr

By **Shannon Kowalski**
Diocesan Director,
Pontifical Mission Societies



For Catholics, November is a sacred time dedicated to remembering and praying for all souls, particularly our loved ones who have gone before us. The month begins with All Saints Day on Nov. 1, celebrating the saints in heaven; followed by All Souls Day on Nov. 2, which is focused on praying for the souls of all who have gone before us.

This month serves as a heartfelt reminder of the communion of saints and the belief that we stay spiritually connected to our loved ones even after they have passed. We are encouraged to visit cemeteries, offer Masses, and say prayers for the deceased throughout the month.

Who are the people who have gone before you — family members, friends, or even historical figures — whose lives, values, or faith have deeply inspired or influenced your own journey? Let

me tell you about one of my role models of faith.

In May 2016, I had the privilege to travel to San Lucas Tolimán, Guatemala, for a mission trip with Marywood University. Our group spent a week at San Lucas Mission — a Catholic mission known for its commitment to social justice and community development. Founded in 1962 by American missionary priests Father Greg Schaffer and Father John Goggin, and the School Sisters of Notre Dame, Friends of San Lucas Mission supports various community initiatives, including healthcare, education, and sustainable agriculture.

Witnessing and participating in the day-to-day operations of each of the mission’s programs cemented in me a realization of the enduring impact that faith-driven social work has in transforming lives. But the true highlight of my trip was standing on the holy ground where Blessed Stanley Rother was martyred in Santiago Atitlán, just across the lake from San Lucas Tolimán.

Born in Oklahoma in 1935, Father Stanley Rother was a devoted Catholic priest whose unwavering faith and compassion led him Guatemala in 1968 to serve as a missionary. Despite facing initial language barriers, Father Rother learned both Spanish and the indigenous Tz’utujil dialect to better connect with his parishioners. He supported his community through practical projects, such as agricultural initiatives and the production of a local radio station, which played a crucial role in disseminating educational and faith-based programs.

Rother’s mission unfolded

amid intense violence and political unrest during the Guatemalan Civil War. During this time, Catholic missionaries were often seen as adversaries by the government due to their advocacy for the poor and marginalized. Father Rother witnessed the abductions and murders of his parishioners and fellow clergy but, despite warnings and escalating threats, chose to stay with his people in Santiago Atitlán, saying, “a shepherd cannot run at the first sign of danger.”

On July 28, 1981, Father Rother’s steadfast commitment cost him his life when armed assailants entered his parish house and killed him, making him the first American-born martyr of the Catholic Church. His death was



Blessed Stanley Rother

a devastating blow to the community he had served so faithfully and a powerful testament to faith and resilience. In 2017, Father Stanley Rother was beatified and honored as a martyr who gave his life for his faith and his people. His beatification serves as a reminder of the heroic sacrifices made by missionaries who work under dangerous conditions to spread the love and teachings of Christ.

Father Rother’s life and death give witness to the often-overlooked reality that missionary work is not only about evangelization, but also about standing in solidarity with oppressed communities and advocating for justice and peace.

As Catholics honor all souls in November, the memory of Father Rother and countless other missionaries who have given their lives in service invites us to reflect on the call to live our faith with similar devotion and courage. May we all be bold enough to embody the principles of mercy, solidarity, and hope in our everyday lives.

Blessed Stanley Rother, pray for us!