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Oklahoma missioner put forth for sainthood

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Fr. Stanley Rother (CNS/Charlene Scott)

The call to mission has transformed the lives of priests, religious and people in U.S. and Latin American parishes and dioceses. One dramatic example is the story of Fr. Stanley Rother and Santiago Atitlán, Guatemala.

Rother, an Oklahoma City archdiocesan priest, became pastor of Santiago Atitlán, just 10 miles west of San Lucas Tolimán, in 1965. Guatemalan government death squads murdered him in 1981 because of his work with the poor.

In 2007, Oklahoma City Archbishop Eusebius Beltran opened the cause for canonization for Rother, the first for a person from Oklahoma to be considered for sainthood.

The mission of Santiago Atitlán was connected with the then-diocese of Oklahoma City-Tulsa in 1964, according to the Oklahoma City archdiocese?s website.

Santiago Atitlán served the Tzutuhil people, descendants of the Maya-Quiché people. Rother?s daily life was fully integrated into the lives of his people. He worked alongside them on farms, learned to preach in the Tzutuhil dialect, and opened the rectory to the people and their problems.

Rother and the Tzutuhil people lived in a broader context of political turmoil and violence during the 1970s. Death squads lurked in the night. Townspeople, his deacons and his parishioners were picked up, later found dead along the roadside or at the church. Some disappeared forever. He received death threats. All priests and catechists were under this constant threat.

In a Christmas 1980 letter to Catholics in Oklahoma, Rother wrote: ?A nice compliment was given to me recently when a supposed leader of the church and town was complaining that ?Father is defending the people.? He wants me deported. This is one of the reasons I have for staying in the face of physical harm. The shepherd cannot run at the first sign of danger.?

On July 28, 1981, three men attacked, shot and killed Rother in the rectory.

Guatemalan government officials blamed the Catholic church for the country?s unrest, which they said led to Rother?s death.

Many priests and religious lost their lives and thousands of civilians were kidnapped and killed during the years of state-sponsored oppression in the country.

Though Rother?s body was flown home to Oklahoma, the Tzutuhil received permission to keep his heart and blood to put in the floor of the church.

[Information for this article was provided by *NCR*?s Tom Gallagher (*NCR*, Aug. 6, 2010) and Catholic News Service.]

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