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Dear Friends,

There is no love greater than this but to lay down one's life for one's friends. — John 15:13

When I heard months ago, that Fr. Stanley Francis Rother, a missionary priest from Oklahoma who had served and died in a small Mayan village in Guatemala, was to be beatified on September 23, 2017, I put the date on my calendar. "I want to go," I said to a friend. Fr. Stanley Rother is the first U.S. born martyr recognized by the Catholic Church. In other words, he is on his way to being officially named a Saint. The actual ceremony of beatification was to be held in Oklahoma City, but being in Guatemala, I felt called to go to his village for the special event.

I had visited Fr. Stan's village in Santiago Atitlan before as a tourist. This time, however, I traveled alone days away from my Ixcán home no longer a tourist but a pilgrim. Pilgrimage requires another way of seeing, another way of being - more contemplative, more prayerful. It is holy travel.

I wasn't blessed to know Fr. Stan personally. What I learned was he was born in 1935, grew up on a farm in Okarche, Oklahoma, was ordained a priest in 1963 and at age 33 was called to mission in Santiago Atitlán where he spent the last 13 years of his life. By all accounts he was a simple, down to earth, ordinary man. His ministry not only cared for the spiritual needs of the people but extended to agriculture, education, communication and health.

Even though he had struggled academically in the seminary with the required study of Latin, Fr. Stan mastered the Maya Tzutujil language in order to better serve his people. "He spoke just like one of us," one of the local men told me. He was instrumental in translating the New Testament in Tzutujil. The people affectionately called him Padre Aplas (his middle name Francis translated in Tzutujil).

The morning of September 23rd I walked in the early light of morning from the nearby hostel where I was staying to the huge, white colonial church of St. James the Apostle. The carpet of fresh green pine needles and flowers in the main aisle stretched from the entrance to the altar. Red and white cloth danced from the ceiling. The 200-young women choir were dressed in full traditional Tzutujil attire, their woven red skirts wrapped around their lithe figures and red headdresses wound saucer-like around their heads elicited royal Mayan beauty. The 25 or more young men in their woven shirts and white pants below the knees with guitars in hands readied for worship. No ordinary choir; their song and dress reflected their faith, culture, pride and love.



The church swelled with standing room only. The beatification ceremony was televised live from Oklahoma City on screens set up throughout the church. The Spirit of God was palpable. I was immersed in the joy and the love of a people for their shepherd.

The theme that was repeated over and over about Fr. Stan was taken from his own words written in a letter months prior before his death, "El pastor no debe huir." The shepherd must not run.

In 1981 at the height of the violence of the 36 year civil war, Stan's name along with others, appeared on a death list. His life was in imminent danger. He returned to Oklahoma to the safety of the United States, but he couldn't stay; he needed to be with his people. Three months later, he returned to Santiago Atitlán, knowing full well the likely consequences of this decision.

On the fateful night of July 21, 1981 in the early morning hours of night, three masked men broke into the room where Fr. Stan was staying. He put up a fight. He was determined not to be taken and tortured only to be killed like so many others. After 15 minutes of struggle, Fr. Stan, beloved Aplas, was dead.

His body was returned to Oklahoma for burial, but the people of Santiago Atitlán insisted that his heart remain with them. So it did. When his heart was exhumed just a month ago from the side memorial in the church to be placed beneath the front altar, the Pope's Representative, el Nuncio Apostólico, informed in his beatification sermon, "His blood is still in liquid form, and his heart is still fresh."

I am writing now from Santiago Ixcán and listening from a CD to lyrics of the songs the people wrote and sang in Stan's honor. One song goes, "Blessed Apla, minister of God, true shepherd that gave himself for love. Your teaching of love, 'The shepherd must not run,' is a model for living."

Fr. Stan modeled a radical surrender to do what he perceived as God's call on his life. He didn't run even in the face of death. He embraced the consequences of staying with his people in a time of great danger. So, I ask, "What is the hard, the difficult, that I am being called to embrace, that I am being asked to not run from within my own calling, state of life and vocation?"

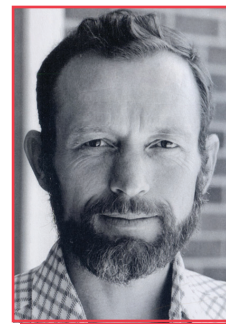
It is said, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of faith." The fruit of Fr. Stanley Rother's martyrdom is ultimately in the lives of the faithful here. Another line of their song sums this up:

"The Church today is full of joy for your great example that moves us to struggle to announce Christ."

"The shepherd cannot run at the first sign of danger. Pray for us that we may be a sign of the love of Christ for our people, that our presence among them will fortify them to endure these sufferings in preparation for the coming of the Kingdom."

— **Blessed Fr. Stanly Aplas Rother**

To learn more about Fr. Stan there is an excellent book called *The Shepherd Who Didn't Run* by Maria Ruiz Scaperlanda.



Thank you for your prayers and continued support of our ministry walking with the people of the Ixcán. May Blessed Fr. Stanley Rother, pray for us.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kathy".

Kathy Snider

OUR MISSION STATEMENT

Ixcán Ministries is a Christian lay mission serving as a ministry of presence with the Maya people in the Ixcán jungle of Guatemala. We act as a bridge between cultures for the exchange of gifts to transform lives and society.

Ixcán Ministries is a 501(c) 3 organization. Your contributions are tax deductible.

Contact us or send a donation to:
Ixcán Ministries
PO Box 51
Mandan, ND 58554

www.ixcanministries.org
ixcan_ministries@yahoo.com
Marlane Peterson, President
(701) 426-9276

Purchase Ixcán Creations products at:
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