

Archbishop Lori's Homily: Mount Saint Mary's Seminary Annual Alumni Reunion

Mass in Honor of Bl. Stanley Rother

Memorial of St. Francis of Assisi

Mount Saint Mary's Seminary Annual Alumni Reunion

Immaculate Conception Chapel; Mount Saint Mary's University

October 4, 2017

Looking ahead to this very event many months ago, I thought that perhaps the big news we'd all be rejoicing over is the fact that Mt. St. Mary's Seminary is the first and only seminary in the United States to have an accredited ESL program. This is indeed big news and welcome news, brought about by the hard work of many. Then, as I watched Msgr. Baker and his team through the spring of this year working hard to promote the seminary . . . and succeeding, I thought perhaps the big news of the Alumni Reunion might be increased enrollment, and indeed we now stand at 146, a great increase over last year. And that's wonderful news for us all to celebrate this evening. So too, as I anticipated this event, I thought we might be celebrating a victorious seminary soccer team again capturing the Vianney Cup - and so they did! Let's offer our team heartiest congratulations!

Yet, even these three great achievements have been overshadowed by another event, by the beatification of one of our own, Fr. Stanley Francis Rother, Seminary Class of 1963, a priest of Oklahoma City, the first diocesan priest in the United States to be beatified and indeed the first diocesan priest in the United States to be declared a martyr. Msgr. Baker and I, along with sixteen seminarians, traveled to Oklahoma for the beatification ceremony. The seminarians formed a wonderful schola who sang at the beatification Mass, a Eucharistic celebration that overflowed with grace and joy. How we should rejoice that the seeds of priestly virtue planted in *our* seminary have germinated and yielded a great harvest of holiness, even as we now redouble our prayers for Bl. Stanley Francis Rother's *canonization*. "*Santo*

subito," as they say in the old country!

On this feast of St. Francis of Assisi, I note that Bl. Stanley's middle name was Francis and that he lived his priesthood in the spirit of St. Francis of Assisi. Like Francis, Father Rother lived simply, was close to nature, and devoted his life to bringing the Gospel to the poor. And there were two other, related and utterly important ways Father Rother lived in the spirit of St. Francis, two ways that bring us to the core of our faith and to the heart of our calling as shepherds: First was his radically unshakeable faith in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. And second was his profound dedication to the people he served as priest & shepherd. Allow me, if you would, a word about each beginning with Fr. Rother's bedrock faith in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

His faith was same faith we all profess, only his faith outshone the faith of most. Perhaps that's because Fr. Rother grew up in a wonderful, close-knit family, a farming family, close to nature, and well-formed in the faith and thus open to those little miracles of every day existence... Those everyday miracles are events which go beyond the lines we routinely draw, marking off the possible from the impossible: friends and family who unexpectedly survived illnesses; crops harvested in years when all was thought to be lost; a son who became a priest when that goal at first seemed out of reach; a priest who was not a linguist but who became a missionary in Guatemala, learning not only Spanish but also mastering the native dialect... Extraordinary graces in the midst of all that was ordinary, even mundane!

No doubt such everyday miracles disposed Stanley Rother to take to heart the miracles of healing and conversion that fill the pages of the Gospels. Those miracles, in turn, opened his heart to the *miracle of miracles*, the Resurrection. With Jesus' death, all seemed to be finished. All hope seemed to be gone for those who had hoped for deliverance. Then it was, by the will of the Father and the strength of the Spirit, that the Crucified Son rose from the dead and appeared in his glorified humanity, opening for us the way to that "newness of life" – a newness for which we long but which we often regard as being out of reach.

For Fr. Rother the Resurrection of Jesus did not remain merely a dry fact, merely an objective article of faith. Rather, Fr. Rother's whole life was based on faith in the

Resurrection and it led to the decision to put his life on the line, to lead a dangerous existence, a life unprotected from those who would harm him as a brutal civil war raged in the already impoverished country of Guatemala; for like the Son of Man and like St. Francis, 'he had nowhere to lay his head.' At that point in his life, Fr. Rother's faith in the Resurrection far transcended the everyday miracles of nature and grace with which his priestly soul had been nurtured. Without reservation, he staked everything on the Resurrection, a decision he reached not through study or fact finding, or human calculation but rather through a life of faith and prayer that led him to accept the humanly impossible: namely, the death of Jesus as the gateway to life, and his calling in God's grace, to re-produce in his own flesh what he celebrated daily on the altar, that is, the life-giving death of the Savior.

And in that bedrock conviction, Fr. Rother served his flock in Santiago Atitlán and would not abandon them for any reason... winning their trust, living simply, visiting their homes, eating with them, defending them, providing them with healthcare, helping them with farming and irrigation, all the while leading his people more deeply into the mystery of Christ. Fr. Rother was a highly visible figure in the community and eventually was marked out for death in the struggle between the militarist government and the guerillas. In the midst of all this, Fr. Rother returned home briefly to visit his bishop and his family and friends. He also made a retreat here at Mt. St. Mary's Seminary where, aided by the prayers of Mary, he sealed his decision to return to Guatemala, knowing that this utterly pastoral decision would cost him his life. In his radical faith in the Resurrection, Fr. Rother, the shepherd, did not run at the first sign of danger. He did not abandon his flock . . . no, he laid down his life for his flock, confident that he would share in the Resurrection of the Chief Shepherd. And while his life ended in a martyrdom marked by great violence, his priesthood produced the abundant good fruit of the Gospel - for truly "The blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church". Yes, his persecutors thought that his death would end his good works but instead the mission only grew stronger as more and more were evangelized and as many vocations to the priesthood were raised up.

Dear brothers, dear friends - let us use this alumni reunion not merely as an occasion to reconnect with our classmates and friends, as pleasant as that this, but indeed to reconnect with the deepest of priestly ideals and virtues - the seeds of which were implanted in our hearts here at Mt. St. Mary's - namely, an unshakeable,

deeply personal faith in the Resurrection in the strength of which we are willing to lay down our lives for the flock, for the people that we are privileged to serve. We may not all called to be martyrs but we are all called to bear witness to the power of the Resurrection and the grace of Christ which accomplishes in us and through our pastoral ministry 'more than we could ever ask or imagine.'

Stanley Francis Rother, pray for us!