

Oblate Father Lawrence Rosebaugh killed in robbery in Guatemala

GUATEMALA CITY – Oblate Father Lawrence Rosebaugh, a U.S. priest with a long history of taking risks to aid the poor and marginalized, was killed in a highway robbery in Guatemala May 18.

A Congolese Oblate priest in the vehicle with him was wounded by the bullet that killed Father Rosebaugh, but was expected to recover. Three other Oblate priests traveling with them were uninjured.

Father Rosebaugh, who turned 74 two days before his death, was remembered by friends for his sunny, cheerful disposition and his life of extreme simplicity. One fellow U.S. Oblate, Father Seamus Finn, said it was ironic that his friend who once bicycled from Brazil to the United States, preferred to walk or take buses, and rarely set foot in a car had been killed in one.

In a homily at Father Rosebaugh's May 20 funeral at St. Cecilia Parish in a suburb of Guatemala City, Father Vincent Louwagie, Oblate provincial superior based in Mexico City, described Father Rosebaugh as "a mix between St. John the Baptist and St. Francis of Assisi ... from his smile, his eyes, to his unforgettable flowing white beard."

"He had eyes that shined when he spoke of children, of God," Father Louwagie said of the slain priest, who worked in Guatemala City since 2005. "He was a man of strong convictions. He was quiet, but he could be forceful."

Bishop Mario Molina Palma of Quiche – where Father Rosebaugh served from 1993 to 2000 – celebrated the funeral Mass. At the end of the Mass, he expressed skepticism that the government would be able to solve the murder.

Born in Appleton, Wis., Father Rosebaugh focused his ministries on street people and the forgotten in the United States and Latin America. He served as a missionary in Brazil and a volunteer in El Salvador.

While in Brazil in the 1970s he helped expose abuses by the Brazilian military dictatorship. At one point he was arrested because of his activism and was abused by prison guards while being detained. In 1977 he personally delivered a letter to then-first lady Rosalynn Carter detailing his discoveries, helping bring attention to the abuses of the Brazilian government.

Father Rosebaugh's concern for peace and human rights evolved in the years after 1963, when he was ordained a priest with the Oblate order. On Sept. 24, 1968, he joined 13 others outside a Selective Service System office in Milwaukee; they burned thousands of draft records to voice their opposition to the Vietnam War. For his role with those who became known as the Milwaukee 14 he served about a year in federal prison.

His work on behalf of human rights continued after he returned to the U.S. from El Salvador. The 1980 assassination of Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar A. Romero and the deaths of four churchwomen in the war-torn country led Father Rosebaugh to turn his efforts to closing the U.S. Army's School of the Americas, since renamed the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, at Fort Benning, Ga. The school had trained soldiers implicated in the murders.

In 1983, Father Rosebaugh joined Maryknoll Father Roy Bourgeois and activist Linda Ventimiglia in a forest at the edge of the army base near barracks where Salvadoran soldiers were staying while undergoing training. They mounted a sound system in a tree to play the last recorded words of Archbishop Romero in which he called upon Salvadoran soldiers to lay down their arms and end the attacks on innocent civilians. The trio was arrested and ultimately spent 18 months in prison for the action.

Father Rosebaugh authored two books about his experiences. The first, "Prophets Without Honor: A Requiem for Moral Patriotism," was published in 2002. His autobiography, "To Wisdom Through Failure: A Journey of Compassion, Resistance and Hope," was published in 2006.

In recent e-mails sent to a friend in Shiloh, Ill., Father Rosebaugh described his work with Guatemalans battling AIDS and with helping street people, reported the Belleville News-Democrat. He also told of leading a liturgy at a vigil for two teenage

boys murdered by gangs in one of the poorest neighborhoods of Guatemala City.

Father Rosebaugh, who often signed his letters "Lorenzo," was planning to return to the U.S. in the fall, said Carolyn Griffeth, a member of the St. Louis Catholic Worker community and one of the Oblate's friends.

"He said he wanted to spend the last chapter of his life resisting war and empire," she said.