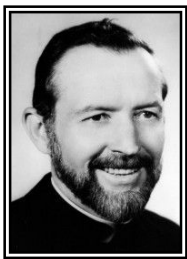


BULLETIN – DECEMBER 25

We extend sincere greetings and best wishes and prayers for a joyous Christmas and holiday season for all of our parishioners, family members, and guests this weekend. May your gatherings be warm, peaceful, exhilarating, and bonding. In other words, may they be the antidote for all those horrible images of dysfunctional families and sick individuals on parade in current “holiday” motion pictures. Unfortunately, those images seem to be all that the spiritual and mental poverty of Hollywood can come up with. They must actually assume that everyone else is at the same lowest level of human behavior that they feature. Prove them wrong and enjoy a truly blessed Christmas.

Another American saint? Our connection. By now, most of us are familiar with the name of Venerable Frederic Baraga (1797-1868), Indian missionary, first priest in the Grand River Valley, first pastor of what is now St. Andrew’s Cathedral parish, and first Bishop of what is now the Diocese of Marquette. Some of us are familiar with the name of the Servant of God Father Joseph Walijewski (1924-2006), member of St. Isidore’s and St. Adalbert’s, alumnus of Catholic Central, and missionary in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru. Most of us have not yet heard of Father Stanley Francis Rother (1935-1981), priest of the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City, missionary in Guatemala, and recently officially recognized by Pope Francis as a martyr for the faith.

Father Rother grew up on his family’s farm near Okarche, Oklahoma, on the outskirts of Oklahoma City. Ordained a priest in 1963, this soft-spoken man responded to the call of God to serve as a pastor among the poor of Latin America, and went to Guatemala in 1968. There, he became pastor of Santiago Atitlan, where he helped the people build a small hospital, a school, and a Catholic radio station. During those years, the Guatemalan military was ruthlessly cracking down on the rural poor who were thought to be supporting rebel forces. The bodies of Father Stan’s deacons and parishioners were left in front of his door, and he himself received numerous death threats due to his opposition to the brutality of the death squads operating in the area. At one point, he returned briefly to Oklahoma City; but could not stay away from the people he loved, and whom he felt like he was abandoning as their shepherd. He went back, and was gunned down in his own rectory at the age of 46. That same day, the murderers took the lives of 13 other townspeople and wounded 24 others in the isolated village. The Church in Guatemala immediately recognized him as a martyr, and was anxious to pursue the cause of his canonization. Since they lacked the resources for such an effort, the Guatemalan bishops willingly transferred the jurisdiction for the matter to the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City, where Father Rother is buried in his home town’s Holy Trinity parish cemetery.



Our connection? The archbishop in Oklahoma City from 1977 until Father Rother’s death in 1981 was our own Archbishop Charles Salatka, who grew up here at SS. Peter & Paul. When Father Rother returned to Oklahoma in January of 1981, he spent much time talking with Archbishop Salatka about his work. It was clear that “home” for him was no longer in Oklahoma, but with the people whom God had given him to serve. While Archbishop was deeply concerned for his priest’s safety, he knew he could not deny the call Father Stan had to return to his Tz’utujil people, the Mayan ethnic

group which makes up Santiago Atitlan and its surroundings. It was in Oklahoma that Father Stan learned that the Catholic radio station they had built had been destroyed and its director murdered. He *had* to return, and did so in May after bidding his family, his fellow priests, and his Archbishop farewell. He was murdered on July 28, one of ten priests killed in Guatemala's uncivil war in that year alone. When his body was going to be brought back to Oklahoma for burial, his Tz'utujil parishioners requested that his heart be buried in their church, beneath the altar. The permission was granted. His heart remains where he so often offered Christ's sacrifice, among the people whom both the Good Shepherd and their earthly shepherd loved to the end.

When he visited and stayed here, Archbishop spoke frequently and admiringly of Father Stan. He recognized the heroic virtue of a shepherd who could not flee, even when he knew the wolves were coming. Charles Salatka had the distinction of being a successor of Bishop Baraga in Marquette, of growing up on the same West Side at the same time as Father Joseph Walijewski, and of being the Archbishop of Father Stanley Rother. As I said in the homily at Archbishop's memorial Mass here in March of 2003, I can picture him arriving in heaven, meeting Bishop Baraga, and with pastoral impatience over the long process of canonization, poking Baraga in the chest and saying, "Come on, where's that miracle??" Archbishop's celestial eagerness now has a couple more targets, and I am confident he'll appreciate our prayers for their causes.

Bishop Richter centennial. Bishop Henry Joseph Richter served as our first bishop, from April 22, 1883, until his death on December 26, 1916, 100 years ago this Monday. That's a record of 33 years, and it's likely to stand unbroken from now until Jesus comes again. Richter came to the U.S. from Germany, then came here from Cincinnati, where he was a seminary professor, chaplain of the Sisters of Charity motherhouse, and pastor of a large and prosperous parish. He got used to being busy, and never gave up the habit. He was a first-hand witness to the grave financial difficulties of Cincinnati Archbishop John Baptist Purcell (1800-1883), under whose direction trusting Catholic people deposited money in the care of the Church rather than in the unstable commercial banks. That worked fine until a major economic crisis hit in 1878, and the Archdiocese could not make good on the deposits. The lesson learned was likely the reason for Richter's well-known financial caution. Like a forerunner of Dave Ramsey, he absolutely forbade any parish or institution from incurring any debt whatsoever; and at the time of his death, there was not a penny of debt owed by any entity in the diocese.

Because he was soft-spoken but by nature a disciplinarian, many of his priests and people thought of him as rather severe. He was definitely a hands-on administrator, and the Archives contain innumerable examples of his own hand-written entries in the diocesan account books. For many years, he did all his own correspondence, much of it in an unpretentious but clear longhand. He was intimately familiar with the status of each of the many parishes, in an age when the diocese included the whole Lower Peninsula north, west, and east of Grand Rapids, from Muskegon to Traverse City to Cheboygan to Alpena to Bay City and Saginaw. He was responsible for inviting many religious orders of men and women to work in the diocese, confident that their individual charisms would enrich God's people in the territory assigned to him.

I am old enough to have known five priests who served under Bishop Richter, including Monsignor Hansknecht, who officiated at my folks' wedding and baptized me

at St. Mary's; and Monsignor Bolte at Holy Trinity, whom I counted as a dear friend, mentor, and raconteur. But we all have a connection with the deep heritage of faith planted and cultivated here by Bishop Richter. His episcopal motto, "Prepare the Way of the Lord," was an apt choice, and demonstrates the marvelous insight he had about the groundbreaking work the Lord had set him about. God bless you!

Fr. Den

Thought for the week: Christmas is built upon a beautiful and intentional paradox: that the birth of the homeless should be celebrated in every home" (Gilbert Keith Chesterton, 1879-1935, English Catholic author and commentator).