

Deacon Mike Mocek
Acts 2:14a, 36-41
Psalm 23
1 Peter 2:20b-25
John 10:1-10
April 26, 2026
Fourth Sunday of Easter

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke portray Jesus as the Good Shepherd through the Parable of the Lost Sheep, where he leaves ninety-nine well-behaved sheep behind so he can rescue one stray. But John takes the Good Shepherd metaphor to a higher level. According to John, the shepherd and the sheep know each other intimately. The shepherd calls his sheep by name, meaning that he knows and loves each of them uniquely. Similarly, the sheep know their shepherd's voice and will follow only him through the gate and out to pasture. In today's Gospel, Jesus used this image of an intimate relationship to enlighten the Pharisees about his ministry. They did not get it, however. So, Jesus clarified. But he did not identify himself as a shepherd. Instead, he said, "I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture. ... I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly." Each year, the Church draws from chapter 10 of John's Gospel to celebrate Good Shepherd Sunday – honoring the modern-day shepherds of our Church as we worship Jesus Christ the Good Shepherd.

I can think of no better contemporary illustration of this intimate relationship between a shepherd and his sheep than the story of Blessed Stanley Rother, a priest of the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City. Stanley Rother was born

in 1935 in Okarche, Oklahoma, a small, predominately German community about 30 miles northwest of Oklahoma City. He was raised on a farm, and his formative years were typical of that lifestyle. He worked hard at his farm chores, did well in school, was an altar server, played basketball, and was president of his Future Farmers of America chapter. But after graduation from high school in 1953, Stanley surprised his parents by telling them that he felt called to the priesthood. That fall, he entered St. John's Seminary in San Antonio. After two years, he transferred to Assumption Seminary, also in San Antonio, to study philosophy and theology. He struggled with those subjects, primarily because they were taught in Latin at that time, and he subsequently flunked out of the seminary. Dejected, he returned home in January of 1959. But he did not give up on his calling, and his bishop did not give up on him. In September 1959, Stanley was sent to Mount Saint Mary Seminary in Emmitsburg, Maryland, where he flourished. On May 25, 1963, Stanley Rother was ordained a priest of the Diocese of Oklahoma City and Tulsa. His first five years of priesthood were difficult. He bounced from parish to parish and was not respected by the so-called "best and brightest" of his fellow priests. Things changed, however, in June of 1968. In part due to skills honed on the farm,

Father Rother was selected to join Oklahoma's highly innovative mission team in Santiago Atitlan, Guatemala. He fell in love with the people of his parish in Guatemala, and they came to love him as well. This priest who struggled with Latin in the seminary became fluent in both Spanish and Tz'utujil, the unwritten Mayan dialect spoken by many of the indigenous people. He helped them build a clinic, distribute water and electricity, improve agricultural practices, and market their crops. But most importantly, he ministered to their spiritual needs, and he became one of them. As Pope Francis would later say, he was a shepherd who took on the smell of his sheep.

Tensions between the Church and the ruling class of Guatemala frayed in the mid-1970s when the Church began to take more seriously our "preferential option for the poor." Father Rother did not play politics, but he was a strong advocate for the impoverished people of his parish, and he became a target for criticism by the government and military. After several anonymous death threats, Father Rother was called home in January 1981. He spent two and one-half months in Oklahoma and returned to Santiago Atitlan on April 11, 1981, so he could be with his people during Holy Week. When questioned about the safety of his return, Father Rother replied, "A shepherd cannot run from his flock." Only three months later, on July 28, 1981, three masked men broke into his rectory at 1:30 in the morning and murdered him. He is the first recognized martyr from the United States and the first US-born priest to be beatified. His body is entombed at the Blessed Stanley Rother Shrine in Oklahoma City, but his heart remains in Guatemala at the request of the people.

In today's first reading, we heard the conclusion of Peter's speech to the crowds gathered in Jerusalem at Pentecost. He calls for repentance and conversion of heart, but his call does not end there. Peter exhorts the people to receive the gift of salvation from the Holy Spirit and to save themselves from what he termed "this corrupt generation." It is a reminder for us that while our salvation comes from Christ's sacrifice on the cross, we have an ethical imperative to live out our response to Christ's sacrifice. Blessed Stanley Rother responded to Christ's sacrifice by answering his call to the priesthood and by serving the people of Santiago Atitlan, Guatemala. Similarly, Father Hoa and Father Ike answered their calls to the priesthood and are serving our community. Pope Leo is responding to Christ's sacrifice by serving as our moral compass and with his impassioned calls for peace in our world. But the imperative to live out our response to Christ's sacrifice is not only for priests, bishops, and popes. We all have that responsibility. We live out our response to Christ's sacrifice with the actions of our daily lives, with our love of God and neighbor, with our work for justice and for peace, and with our prayers. On this Good Shepherd Sunday, let us pray especially for vocations to the priesthood, diaconate, and religious life.