

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

My cousin Mary is a School Sister of Notre Dame from the Mankato province, and she has worked nearly forty years as a missionary in Guatemala. For many of those years, civil war made that country a dangerous place to work. Early in her ministry my cousin met a missionary from Oklahoma, Father Stanley Rother, born in 1935, ordained a priest in 1963. He had spent a short time as a student at Conception Seminary here in this diocese. Rother worked 13 years as a priest in Guatemala, even through the time when many Catholic missionaries were in danger from death squads. He learned Spanish and Tzutuhil, preaching, celebrating mass and even translating the bible into that indigenous language. Through preaching and radio broadcasts, Catholic missionaries were giving confidence to indigenous people, in opposition to a corrupt government. Armed forces therefore slaughtered many parishioners and missionaries. Friends had warned Father Rother that his name was on a hit list. He reluctantly returned to Oklahoma, but then asked his archbishop for permission to return. His own brother tried to dissuade him, fearing for his life. Father Rother said, "Well, a shepherd cannot run from his flock." He returned to Guatemala, and three months later, on July 28, 1981, gunmen broke into his rectory and shot him dead with two bullets. He was one of ten Catholic priests killed in Guatemala that year.

All of us have experienced anger and hatred. We have received hatred from other people, friends and strangers alike. We have expressed anger toward others, or said mean things about others when that was easier than saying them to their face. Anger does not always lead to violence, but it can, so it needs to be watched. Sometimes our anger is not directed toward criminals and sinners, but toward people who hold different viewpoints, whether in politics or religion. We often forget that the other person with whom we are angry is another person like us, a child of God. If they have hurt us, we may distrust them, but if they repent, forgiveness may help them. And let's be honest - we all need forgiveness too. We crave the love and support of others, yet we often feed a culture that works against forgiveness. We are told, if you want to advance, never admit you were wrong, never forgive someone else; repentance is weakness, anger is strength.

Here's what the Book of Sirach says: "Wrath and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner hugs them tight.... Forgive your neighbor's injustice; then when you pray, your own sins will be forgiven. Could anyone nourish anger against another and expect healing from the LORD? Could anyone refuse mercy to another like himself, can he seek pardon for his own sins? If [you who are] but flesh [cherish] wrath, who will forgive [your] sins?"

Overcoming anger is not easy. However, even when it does not lead to reconciliation with another person, deep inner peace comes to the one who lets anger go.

Last December Pope Francis took note of the story of Father Stanley Rother and advanced his cause closer toward sainthood in the Catholic Church. He declared Father Stanley a martyr, killed out of hatred for the faith. The beatification ceremony will take place in Oklahoma City this coming Saturday. Anger can lead to violence; anger can be costly. Its results may also lead to a resolve never to let our anger get out of control again.

Sunday, September 17, 2017