

A cross holding blood-stained dirt from the site in the Amazon where Notre Dame de Namur Sister Dorothy Stang was killed in 2005 and one of her sweaters sit on an altar at the shrine of new martyrs in the Basilica of St. Bartholomew on Tiber Island in Rome Jan. 10, 2025. Relics from St. Oscar Romero of San Salvador and Blessed Stanley Rother, an Oklahoma priest shot in Guatemala in 1981, are on the same altar. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

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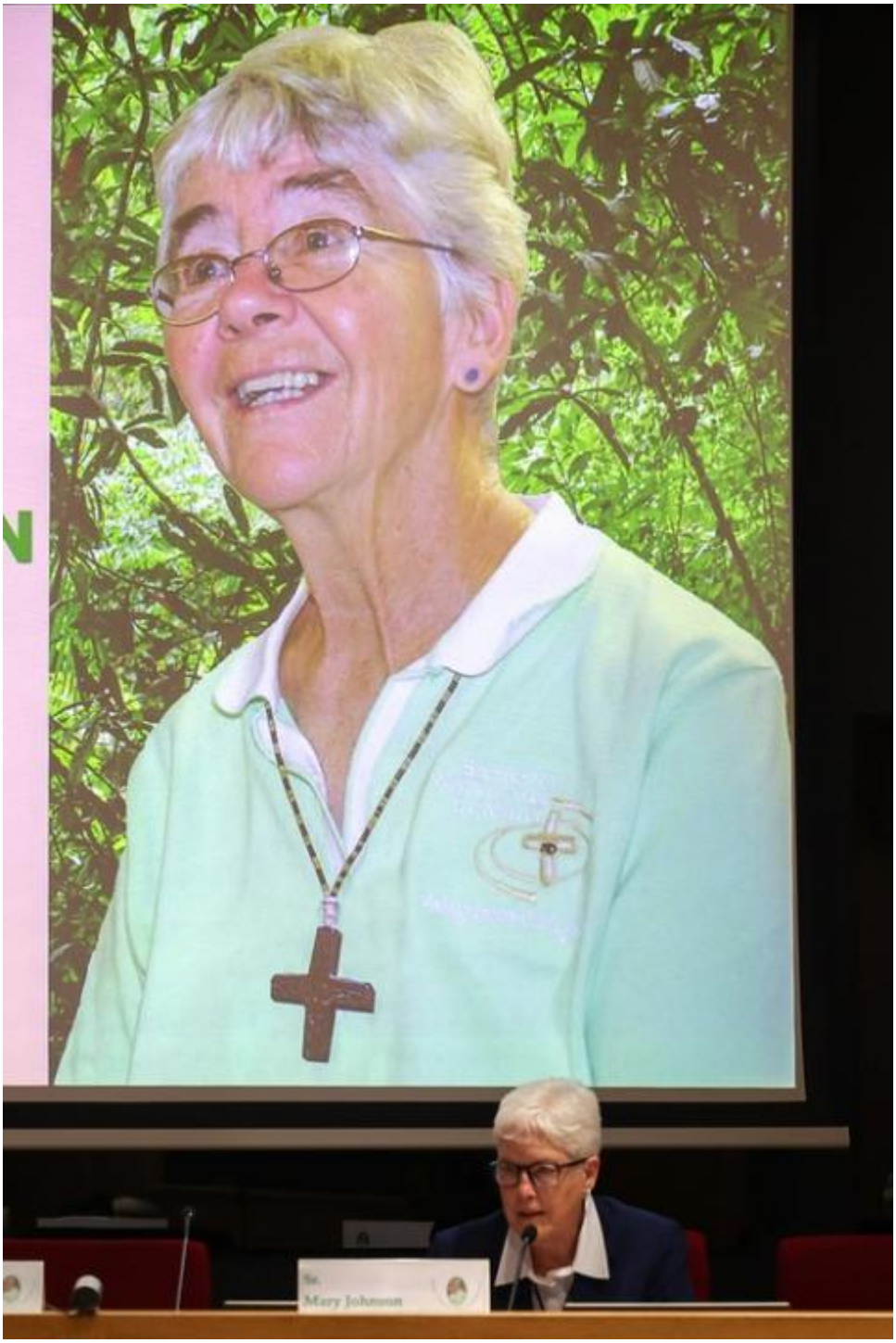
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"It's quite an honor for her to be here with the likes of St. Oscar Romero," Tom Stang said after a relic of his sister was placed on an altar in Rome alongside a relic of the martyred archbishop from El Salvador.

A cross containing dirt stained with the blood of Sister Dorothy Stang, a U.S. member of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur shot down in the Amazon 20 years ago, and one of her sweaters were placed Jan. 10 on the altar of the "new martyrs of the Americas" in Rome's Basilica of St. Bartholomew.

Stang was sent on mission to the Brazilian Amazon in 1966 and worked closely with the Brazilian bishops' Pastoral Land Commission in favor of land rights for the poor and for sustainable development in the region. The work she did angered many large landowners, and she had received death threats. A rancher and three others were convicted of plotting her death and killing her in 2005.

The international leadership team of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur and leaders of the order's Ohio province, to which Stang belonged, along with her brother and 24 nieces, nephews and other family members were invited by the Community of Sant'Egidio to place her relics at the new martyrs' shrine and museum, which the community cares for at the basilica.



Sister Mary Johnson, congregational leader of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, speaks at a symposium honoring U.S. Sister Dorothy Stang, who was killed in the Amazon in 2005, at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome Jan. 10, 2025. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

The relics were added to the shrine during an evening prayer service led by Archbishop Fabio Fabene, secretary of the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints. The service followed a symposium at Rome's Gregorian University on Stang's life and ministry and "women's leadership in the climate movement."

Sister Mary Johnson, the international congregational leader of the sisters, told the conference that "years before Pope Francis' magnificent Laudato Si', Dorothy was hearing and articulating the cries of the poor and the cries of the earth. Her prophetic words and actions became a symbol of hope for those who struggled for life and dignity in the Amazon."

As wildfires continued to burn in Los Angeles, bringing death and destruction, Johnson said, "Dorothy's inspiration is needed to move individuals and nations beyond division and deceit regarding climate change."

"She and her inspiration call us to a deeper, broader solidarity," she said. "We need to realize her vision of a solidarity that transforms attitudes and behaviors in order to move national and global systems from dealing death to enhancing life."

Sister Maamalifar Poreku, a member of the Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Africa and a leader in the justice, peace and integrity of creation commission of the international unions of superiors of men's and women's religious orders, told the conference that, like Stang, "religious women cannot remain indifferent to how the climate crisis is impacting the people they serve."

Stang, she said, is one of many "eco-martyrs" killed for their defense of the earth and of the poorest people who rely on it for sustenance.

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Laurie Johnston, a professor of theology at the sisters' Emmanuel College in Boston, said Stang's ministry and martyrdom help people recognize the existence of what Catholic social teaching calls "structures of sin" and not just individual sins.

"One of the things martyrs point to is broader forces at work," she said; the death of martyrs helps people see whole political, social and economic systems that are unjust and feed violence, poverty and a lack of respect for human life.

At the evening prayer service, Fabene said Stang "defended the life and dignity of the poor and of the earth, because God created it for the benefit of all."

In his 2015 encyclical "Laudato Si', on Care for Our Common Home," the archbishop said, Francis insisted people must care for three fundamental relationships: with God, with their neighbors and with the earth.

"Sister Dorothy was a radical and effective witness of this triple relationship," he said.

Honoring Stang at the new martyrs' shrine is not an official Vatican recognition of her martyrdom.

Sister Kathleen Harmon, provincial of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur's Ohio province, told Catholic News Service that an official sainthood cause for Stang has not been opened.

"At the time of her death, we had many sisters in Brazil," she said, and the congregation felt that the expense and the attention required for the sainthood process would take resources away from continuing Stang's work.

"I think that was true at the time," Harmon said. "But that may be changing."