

**BROTHER JAMES MILLER DAY
1994**

Bro. Theodore Drahnann

A flight from icy Washington DC and a four hour drive from St. Paul over the snowy plains and hills of central Wisconsin brought us to an auditorium in the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, to join in thinking back to an event in tropical Guatemala twelve years ago.

It was the annual commemoration of the assassination of a De La Salle Christian Brother, Brother James Miller, who was gunned down while repairing the entrance to a school for Mayan Indian boys in Huehuetenango, Guatemala, on February 13, 1982.

Winter jacketed relatives, friends, students, along with the Bishop of the diocese of La Crosse, Bishop John Paul, assembled to keep alive the memory of Wisconsin's own martyr, a martyr to help and justice for the oppressed.

As described in this magazine on October 30, 1982, Brother James' death at age 38 completed a life as a Wisconsin farm youth, a teaching Brother in a Minnesota high school, and since 1971 a laborer for the evangelization and human growth of the Indian population of Nicaragua and Guatemala.

After twelve years, how is his memory carried on? The Peace and Justice Commission of the Diocese of LaCrosse, in collaboration with the Christian Brothers of the upper Midwest, again arranged an event which, while celebrating the memory of the life-sacrifice of Brother James, sought to keep alive the ideals for which he had died.

After the welcome by a Wisconsin University faculty officer, the introduction was given by a local Lutheran pastor; who also presented the speaker of the day, Rev. Karen Bloomquist, one of the first four women ordained in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. Her address, "No Playing it Safe: the Call to do Justice Today" recalling the fact that James Miller did **not** play it safe, built on; the Biblical themes "He did not spare His only Son" and "unless you lose your life...", culminating in the highest ideal "Love thy neighbor".

She pleaded that we not try to continue "business as usual", but overcome "possessive violence" and go out practically to those not like us. It is the evil within us which prevents us from doing justice.

The energetic and committed local chairman of the diocesan Peace and Justice Commission, Mr. Ray Stroik, explained the guiding principles of his group, which are to take the initiative, be persistent and commit selves to solidarity with all, especially the poor and needy.

Bishop John Paul – whose similarity in name to the present Pope is a frequent cause of comment and even amusement – spoke of his pastoral welcome to almost 2000 Hmongs who have been resettled in the diocese, regarding them as a grace and blessing to the diocese. He touted Brother James Miller Day as an annual occasion to remind his flock of their global responsibilities, and presented the annual Brother James Miller diocesan Justice and Peace Award to Mrs. Sheila Kahlert, the indefatigable resettlement coordinator for the diocese. A prayer from the closing prayer service was Sheila's "citation":

Confront us, Lord with the hidden prejudices and fears which deny and betray our prayers. Enable us to see the causes of superiority, teach us to grow in unity with all of God's children.

The assistant provincial for the Christian Brothers of the upper Midwest, Brother Francis Carr, (a classmate of the martyred Brother) spoke for Brother James' confreres, thanking the LaCross Social Justice Commission for this annual observance.

He also announced the annual Brother James Miller Social Justice Fund grants, another method of insuring the continuance of the mission of Brother James. The small but significant grants were made to assist projects in the Philippines, the West Bank in Israel, Iowa, Nicaragua, and Tennessee.

In closing, the Lutheran pastor led a worship service which featured a choir of young Hmongs, teenagers to toddlers, who sang hymns in English and in their own language.

Who has been called upon to receive the award in the memory of Brother James over the past dozen years? The first was Sister Theo Bowman, FSPA, southern-born but Wisconsin-trained; whose person and purpose broke down so many barriers and inspired people to rid the world of prejudice and see others as God's children. Others in succeeding years have been lay men and women, Catholics and Protestants, engaged in prison ministry, in the cause of preserving family farms, missionaries to Latin America, and other apostles in the U.S. working for peace and justice in our land. The speakers have been a veritable Who's Who of active workers for peace and justice in the world, who have

wended their way to central Wisconsin to urge this message e.g. Archbishop Rembert Weakland of Milwaukee, Brother John Johnston, FSC, international superior of the Christian Brothers in Rome, Bishop Thomas Gumbleton, Parker Palmer, a noted educator, publicist and author.

Finally, the school which Brother James was working to repair when he was gunned down by unknown assailants, has been renamed in his honor and memory.

The Christian Brothers in the USA and Central America, and indeed worldwide, feel this annual surge of power from frozen Wisconsin, reminding them to keep bright their triple crown of passion for faith development and evangelization, quality human education, and concern for the poor and disadvantaged. His life may have ended twelve years ago, but the life and work of the Brothers continues worldwide, to attain the ideals for which he gave his life.

But the message of Brother James Miller for the Brothers and others is transformed from what he was personally called to do for God's disadvantaged children. James now speaks to us in what he never did when with us; he is speaking in to give solid theological call to arms to break down barriers, to

enunciate over and over again and in diverse ways the gospel principles which impel us to pray and speak and work for overcoming the evils of prejudice, violence, greed, cruelty, intolerance and insensitivity toward those whose human situation cries out for redress.

His personal activity may be halted, but others have been set in motion - small lights are lit each year in his name by humanitarian projects in the United States and abroad. Other "heroes" are recognized, not martyrs in blood as he was, but those whose life energy is being poured out to meet needs, to alleviate suffering, and to spread of the Gospel coming from central Wisconsin in the dead of winter. The message is trumpeted not so much to understand Brother James' project or his motivations, nor to keep alive his personal memory, but rather to further the desire of his founder, St. John Baptist de la Salle for the task of bringing empowerment and faith to the poor.

As intelligent as he was, James could not articulate this message as the notable speakers of the past twelve years have done. But their message would not have been given each year, had not an American Christian Brother been repairing a doorway on a Saturday afternoon in Guatemala in 1982. •