

**BROTHER JAMES A. MILLER,  
THE MARTYR**

**Brother Theodore Drahmman**

On February 18, 1982, the bullet-riddled body of Brother James A. Miller, FSC, was laid to rest in the country churchyard next to the church of St. Martin in Ellis, Wisconsin - the church where he had been baptized thirty-seven years before. It was a cold gray day in snow-covered Wisconsin; the mourners in their heavy winter clothing made the reason for this sad gathering seem unreal. They had gathered to inter a man from a farm family of the area, one who had grown up in this rural Midwest landscape, a man who now lay dead because of what had happened to him on a street corner in the equatorial country of Guatemala. There he had been murdered.

Brother James Miller was buried, following the local funeral Mass in Sacred Heart Church in nearby Polonia, Wisconsin. Around his grave were gathered his parents, Lorraine and Arnold Miller, his brothers, William and Ralph, his sisters, Patricia Richterand and Louise Shafranski, along with many other relatives, parishioners, and friends. Present were Brother John Johnston, Vicar General of the Brothers of the Christian Schools from Rome, representatives of each of the eight provinces of the Christian Brothers in the United States, and many other Brothers, priests, and religious.

The funeral Mass itself had been delayed for a half hour because of the recurrence of Bishop Frederick Freking's heart weakness. He recovered sufficiently to concelebrate the Mass with his auxiliary, Bishop John Paul, and speak the last words of farewell to this native son of his diocese of La Crosse, Wisconsin:

«I see in Brother James' death the witness of God's love, a witness to the dignity of the human person, and the rights to freedom and justice that should be ours...Today we need to take a stand on these rights, especially those of the poor. Thank God there are people like Brother James to do that.»

Family and friends had been surprised the previous evening, to hear Brother Stephen Markham, Auxiliary Provincial of the St. Paul/Minneapolis Province, reveal at the wake service remarks that Brother James had made in confidence to his sister, Louise, during his last home visit in December, 1982, just two months before his death.

James had said, «One of two frightening things could possibly happen to me in Guatemala. I could be kidnapped, tortured, and killed, or I could simply be gunned down.» He went on to tell his sister that perhaps the only real fear he

had in this regard, was that it might be the first. And that possibility he was spared.

These services and the interment in rural Wisconsin were the final steps in what had been a sad but truly triumphal progress from the street corner in Huehuetenango, Guatemala where he had been killed.

His body had been brought to Wisconsin from St. Paul, Minnesota, where the headquarters of the province to which he belonged was located. There a funeral liturgy was held on February 16, presided over by Archbishop John R. Roach. More than a thousand people attended this Mass in the stately hilltop cathedral in the city where James had studied for a year as a high school junior, and where he had taught at Cretin High School for two periods of time, the first being his initial teaching assignment, following his college years at St. Mary's College in Winona, Minnesota.

In his strong-worded homily, Archbishop Roach explained that he was breaking a promise by expressing exasperation over «irresponsible» Latin American governments which condone violent, retribution, and death. Roach, was serving not only as Archbishop of St. Paul and Minneapolis, but also as president of the National Council of Catholic Bishops of the United States. He stated emphatically that «I promised myself that I could not politicize this celebration, but last year the National Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a statement on Latin America (critical of government policy)...They were criticized for saying too much, but tonight in my heart I feel they said too little. In order that violence in Latin America must stop, we must somehow touch the heart of those who control life and death (in those countries). There will be others, other retributions and tragedies if we become callous to the death of the James Millers of the world.»

The Archbishop indicated that education - the role of Miller and the Christian Brothers - was one way to change peoples' attitudes and political values in Latin America. «Pray that God will open hearts and minds to this awful kind of insanity that James Miller's death was.»

Further, Roach explained that he did not use the word Martyr lightly; he claimed that Miller's work and his death «meet my usage of the word.»

In this fashion was the final welcome and farewell given by his native Midwest to the slain Brother. Feelings were strong but certainly less overtly expressed than in the ceremonies which surrounded his farewell from the country where he gave his life.

One thousand students with parents and friends walked the four miles to escort the body of Brother James to the Huehuetenango airfield after a Mass in that city offered by Bishop Victor Hugo Martinez. The next day in Guatemala City, Bishop Eduardo Fuentes first celebrated a simple community farewell liturgy in the Brothers' residence chapel. Later, the Apostolic Nuncio, Bishop Quilichas, presided over the Mass in the cathedral, attended by a large number clergy and religious from the city and surrounding areas. These were emotional occasions, as the affection and respect for Brother James were expressed by those who knew him, by their words and their attendance at the events of his final hours in the country where he had labored.

As the plane with his remains left the Guatemala City airport to transport it to Minnesota, a statement by Brother Paul Joslin, Regional Superior of the American Christian

Brothers in Guatemala, was being diffused by radio, telephone, and post.

After summarizing the details of his death and the years which preceded, Brother Paul stated that «it is extremely difficult to say with any certitude who Brother's murderers might be. The assassins wore masks; the eye-witness accounts seem to be confused and garbled. . nor can it be said that Brother Miller was singled out as an individual. Indeed, any priest or religious Brother or Sister, any teacher, American or Guatemalan, of the De La Salle High School or Indian House might have been the possible victim of groups on the extreme right or left in the present conflict. At the same time I was to state very clearly that Brother's death was no accident. Brother Santiago Miller died for what he was and what he stood for - A Christian educator, an apostle of the poor and the under privileged, a worker for justice and for social change.»

Throughout the world - in the USA and beyond - in schools, colleges and other institutions affiliated with the Christian Brothers publicly celebrated the memory of Brother James Miller; archives bulge with copies of the programs and liturgies which were held in these institutions. Students and teachers faced the fact of martyrdom in our time, often from the lips of Brothers and other colleagues who had personally known Brother James.

How about the American media? The national Catholic and diocesan press reported it widely, especially in the dioceses of the upper Midwest. The event was reported by the Associated Press and picked up by a number of newspapers around the country - in marked contrast to the era of the Spanish Civil War in the 1930's when only the American Catholic press reported the butchery of Catholic clergy and religious in the name of «democracy», as the war was depicted in the secular media.

*Newsweek*, in its issue of March 8, 1982, described the event:

«James Miller had come to Guatemala to help the Indians of Huehuetenango. A Roman Catholic missionary known to

his flock as »Brother Santiago," he had joined the Christian Brothers straight out of high school in Wisconsin. Late one afternoon, he stood outside the local Indian center where he worked, preparing to patch a wall. Suddenly a car came speeding down the dusty road. Miller only had time to push an Indian youth aside before four hooded gunmen leaned from the car and shot him in the neck and chest. He was dead before he hit the ground."

Publications in the Twin Cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis widely noted the sad event with commentary of condemnation, which included the American policy of aid to Guatemala authorities. The *Minneapolis Tribune*, usually not noted for sympathy for Catholic causes and activities, editorialized on «Murder and Military Aid in Guatemala», pointing out with severe criticism the fact that the killing took place on the day after the Reagan administration announced plans for giving Guatemala a quarter-million dollars of military aid (2-18-82).

*The Minnesota Daily* organ for student voices on the campus of the University of Minnesota, displayed a telling cartoon, showing a Guatemalan military type carrying off a box of military aid, having traded for it the coffin of Brother James Miller.

Mordecai Specktor, writing in the ultra liberal *Twin Cities Weekly* concluded his long essay on the death of Brother James with the words: «Much work remains to be done; Brother Santiago's Christian life is complete». 2-25-82.

Such a remarkable end to a human life leads one to examine the previous years of this American martyr, to look at the his development as a person, as a Christian educator, as a worker for the poor and disadvantaged. His honored burial as a martyr can bring special enlightenment to the trajectory of a life beginning in Polonia, Wisconsin, and ending in blood on a street corner in Guatemala. We may even presume to compare such to the work of the evangelists who told their story of the man Jesus Christ in the light of his Resurrection. It is fair to say that the glow of martyrdom illuminates the chronicle of his death. •