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My Co-Worker, Blessed Brother James A. Miller, FSC (1944-1982): De La Salle Christian Brother Who Might Become a Saint

Paul Joslin, FSC²

"What are you going to do about it?" was a very serious question posed to me by my co-worker Brother James (Santiago) A. Miller, FSC, on February 10, 1982, in Huehuetenango, Guatemala, at the conclusion of an extremely important meeting. Brother James was beginning his second year in Guatemala after having spent ten years in Nicaragua. We were the staff members at the Casa Indígena De La Salle, a residence for indigenous students. Five other De La Salle Brothers resided in a house next to another educational institution, Colegio De La Salle, one kilometer from the "Casa." We formed one Religious Community with two residences and two different institutions. Four of us were from the USA and three were Guatemalans. All of us were administrators and/or teachers in Colegio De La Salle – Huehuetenango.

In 1968 the Latin American Bishops met in Medellín, Colombia. One result of this meeting was to challenge all pastoral agents throughout Latin America to "give preferential option for the poor." The city of Huehuetenango was completely surrounded by indigenous villages without the availability of secondary education. Motivated by the Medellín Bishops' Conference, the De La Salle Christian Brothers made an important decision to begin a scholarship program for indigenous youth from the area surrounding Huehuetenango providing them with much needed scholarships and a place to live while finishing their secondary degrees. Once graduated from secondary school, these young men were then automatically eligible to continue on to university level.

Most of these students were the first ones in their families to have the opportunity to finish high school. At this time, university education for local indigenous people was almost unheard of in Guatemala. By 1982, the Casa Indígena program had grown to 150 borders through the generosity of benefactors from throughout the world. The scholarship recipients integrated into the already existing secondary school program at nearby Colegio De La Salle. By 1982, several graduates had already gone on to complete university studies.

We seven Brothers typically ate lunch calmly together at 1:30 PM before getting ready for afternoon and/or evening teaching and other duties. This particular day, however, turned out to be anything but typical. Everildo, one of the three Guatemalan Brothers, mentioned that Señor García (not his real name) wanted to speak with one of us in his home as soon as possible. Señor García's own son was a Brother teaching in the opposite end of Guatemala. Since Everildo was free that afternoon, he volunteered to represent us. Señor García was about to retire from the Border Patrol and was very concerned about us. His office was on the local army base. Consequently, he gave us very reliable information.

At dinnertime that same evening, we were stunned to hear the distressing message Everildo received from Señor García. Members of the G-2 (death squad) were looking for the “sub-director” of De La Salle. Why? We asked ourselves. Immediately after dinner, we continued the conversation in the community living room.

Of all the endless meetings I have ever attended, this one without a doubt turned out to be the most memorable, prayerful, and fraternal. There were no “hidden agendas.” We were sincerely concerned for the well-being of each other. The basic confusion centered on trying to answer the question of who was being targeted. Three of us had the title of “sub-director” (James for the Casa Indígena; Gustavo and I for Colegio De La Salle). Which one of us was it? And why?

On Sunday January 30, recently arrived student Epifaneo (fictitious name) from the Casa Indígena was spending some free time in the local market in front of the “Casa.” Unbeknown to him oftentimes the army “recruited” indigenous youth, in particular, during Sunday market days. Soldiers would simply approach a young male and kidnap him. The soldiers grabbed Epifaneo from behind and lifted him into a truck destined for the nearby army base. In theory, students were exempt from the military. In such situations, I would go to the army base with legal documents indicating that the “inductee” was officially enrolled as a student at Colegio De La Salle. Sometimes the student was immediately let free. At other times, though, the young men were detained until the “dust settled” and the documents were validated. When Epifaneo was not released, I returned to the army base between January 30 and February 8 not only once but twice more asking for his release.

In other words, I became very present to the military authorities at this time. As a result, the community consensus was that it was I who was being talked about by members of the G-2. At any rate, during this very important meeting we each had the opportunity to discuss if we wanted (1) to remain at Colegio De La Salle – Huehuetenango, (2) preferred to move to a school in another part of Guatemala, or (3) wanted to leave the country.

Everyone took time to reflect before saying that individually and collectively we wanted to stay in Huehuetenango for as long as possible. This turned out to be a very prayerful decision.

For security purposes, Señor García told us to (1) remain inside for the time being and (2) if need be make sure that we were accompanied by someone.

At the end of this very tense meeting, James approached me and said: “What are you going to do about it?” Spontaneously, I answered that I know what I am *not* going to do and that is return to the army base. The head of the Christian Children’s Fund for Guatemala was coming to a meeting in Huehuetenango the following day at the “Casa.” Would she use her “influence” to get Epifaneo released? Yes. Eventually he returned to his studies.

Saturday morning February 13, James let me know that he would be accompanying a group of students on a picnic to celebrate the “día de cariño” or friendship day, which was the following day on Sunday. We Brothers were in constant communication with one another in light of the February 10 community meeting. Later that day James planned to repair a wall outside the Casa Indígena. In addition to teaching and helping to direct the farming program in the afternoons for

the indigenous students at the Casa, “Hermano Santiago” generously volunteered to take care of the endless maintenance of the Casa Indígena, which was a former Catholic school damaged in the 1976 earthquake.

Saturday afternoon February 13, I was at the Brothers’ residence next to Colegio De La Salle when all of a sudden there was pounding on the door. It was “Miguel,” a student from the Casa Indígena, who breathlessly told me that Hermano Santiago (Brother James) had been killed. *No, this simply is not possible* was my first reaction. I erroneously thought that Miguel did not know what he was talking about. Maybe Hermano Santiago was shot but certainly not killed.

Immediately I jumped onto a bicycle and raced the one seemingly endless kilometer to the Casa. It was broad daylight about 4:15 PM one block from the cathedral on a crowded shopping street. When I arrived, Jim was lying still on the pavement with several bullet casings around him. A local police officer was present and would not allow me to touch him. However, I managed to pick up the cap that he had been wearing and ran my finger around the inside perimeter. It was still full of sweat as if he were still alive. Initially I was too stunned to move but after about thirty minutes, I knew that I had to attempt to make funeral arrangements in my role as president of the small group of fifteen Brothers throughout Guatemala. The law in Guatemala was that the deceased had to be buried within twenty-four hours. Frantically, I tried to contact Major Superiors in the USA. Finally, Brother James’s provincial, Brother Cyril Litecky, FSC, providentially answered the phone. There was incredulity and shock like I have never experienced.

Unfortunately, Señor García’s information was accurate. The decision to stay that we made at the community meeting on Wednesday turned out to be an erroneous choice. In retrospect, we now know we were being closely watched. When I got a brief opportunity to speak with Bishop Martínez of Huehuetenango on Sunday after Brother James’s funeral Mass, he seemed to think that the rumors were about sub-director Brother Gustavo – a prolific writer and eloquent advocate for promoting human rights. Gustavo’s own blood brother had been “disappeared” several months previously and never located.

Since Mr. Miller, James’s father, was on dialysis, the family wanted Jim’s body returned to Ellis, Wisconsin, near Stevens Point. His grave is in a cemetery at the base of the Miller family dairy farm in Ellis. Brother James was one of over 200,000 innocent victims in Guatemala’s civil war that was triggered in 1954 when the USA overthrew a democratically elected government.

In a 1981 Christmas letter to his cousin Jane Campbell, James wrote:

The level of personal violence is reaching appalling proportions (murders, tortures, kidnappings, threats, etc.) and the Catholic Church is being persecuted because of its option for the poor and oppressed. God knows why He continues to call me to Guatemala when some friends and relatives encourage me to pull out for comfort and safety. I have been a De La Salle Christian Brother for nearly twenty years now, and my commitment to my vocation grows steadily in the context of my work in Central America. I pray to God for the grace and strength to serve Him faithfully by my presence among the poor

and oppressed of Guatemala. I place my life in His providence; I place my trust in Him . . .

In the late seventeenth century, Saint John Baptist de La Salle, Founder of the De La Salle Christian Brothers, wrote that “Your zeal must go so far that in order to achieve it, you are ready to give your very life, so dear are the children entrusted to you.” Saint La Salle was a visionary who foresaw what could happen and does happen to anyone like Brother James who is reaching out to the children of the working class.

In his eulogy for Brother James, Bishop Freking (Diocese of La Crosse, Wisconsin) said that:

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

In closing, I think that it is appropriate to recall the eloquent insight and challenge, too, of Archbishop Roach, who in 1982 as President of the USA Bishops’ Conference said that Brother James “took young people from the hills that had no chance and gave them a combination of hope and life.” Today, may we also imitate Brother James Miller (Hermano Santiago), FSC, by giving the neediest in our midst “hope and life.”

Endnotes

1. On December 7, 2019, the Catholic Church officially beatified Brother James Miller as a martyr. The ceremony proclaiming him Blessed Brother James (Santiago) Miller was celebrated at an open-air Mass on the property of the residence in Guatemala where he was killed in 1982.

2. Brother Paul Joslin, who presently resides at La Salle University in Pennsylvania, earned his Masters’ degrees in Spanish literature and education administration from Millersville State University in Pennsylvania and Saint Peter’s University in Jersey City, NJ. Prior to retiring, he taught at Lewis University in Illinois, taught in several secondary schools on the East Coast of the USA, and spent twelve years in administration and teaching in Guatemala.