



## A Life for Others: Brother James Miller

**BY BROTHER STEPHEN MARKHAM, FSC**

Brother James (Santiago) Miller was born on September 21, 1944, in a farming community of central Wisconsin. This country setting instilled in Jim a love for his family and an identity with farm life that remained with him all his life.

The last year during Jim's life he lived and worked at a boarding center where he taught methods in farming to poor Indian youth from the mountain villages surrounding Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Jim was repairing a wall at the center late in the afternoon of February 13, 1982 when he was shot and killed by men wearing facemasks and army uniforms, and firing sub-machine guns. He died instantly.

Bill Miller, Jim's brother, remembers Jim as an energetic, religious and friendly boy who always wanted to be a priest – until he met the Christian Brothers at Pacelli High School in Stevens Point, Wisconsin. All his life Jim was known for his energy and enthusiasm. He was always on the go. He was outgoing and had the "gift of gab." He made friends easily and always showed an interest in people whether they be young or old. Jim's father, Arnold, said, "he was sensitive to people of all ages; he understood their moods. He was close to his neighbors and he often went to help them on their farms." Wilfred Staffanus, a neighbor who farms across the road from the Miller homestead, was Jim's sponsor at confirmation. Steffanus was always proud of Jim. He recalls how Jim would help him pick stones in the fields and how he was always cheerful about it. Jim never complained about anything.

Brother Jim was home visiting his parents in December 1981, while Wilfred Staffanus' mother was dying. Jim went over and talked with her. He prayed with her and read the psalms to her. Wilfred said, "Jim was a great consolation to her because he was so cheerful." Mrs. Staffanus died the day Jim left for his mission in Guatemala. Jim's mother, Lorraine, recalls when Jim returned from being with Mrs. Steffanus he said, "If death is always like hers, then I don't know what people are afraid of."

Jim was inquisitive and always anxious to learn. He received a World Book Encyclopedia as a gift when he entered Pacelli High School. His mother said

she never saw any boy more excited. He read it from cover to cover. He was always looking up something about foreign countries, about geography, or about science. And he remembered what he read. Brother Theodore Drahmman, his director in the scholasticate and his principal at Cretin High School, remembers Jim as being very conscientious and serious about his studies as well as his teaching.

Jim grew from a rather simple, enthusiastic and intelligent farm boy into a capable and zealous teacher. He never lost the quality of simplicity nor the capacity for hard work. He was sociable person, well like by his students and colleagues, yet always maintaining a private element. Brother Theodore writes: "I believe this private element was the source of his faith and his commitment to the young and to the unfortunate." Brother Theodore also recalls how completely human Jim was and how his procrastination was something that those in charge of him constantly had to put up with.

He loved to talk about his students, his soccer teams, his maintenance or construction work and he was fun to listen to. While he was still attending Edison Public School in Ellis, Wisconsin, about a mile and quarter from home, he walked back and forth to school every day. Jim's mother recalls how "when he got home he would tell us everything he had seen that day," and she said, "He was entertaining in his descriptions."

A number of sources confirm that even as a young boy Jim wanted to be a priest. He himself wrote that in 1958 the collective good influence of the 11 Brothers at Pacelli High School in Stevens Point, Wisconsin, made him decide to join the Christian Brothers.

The Miller family notes that Jim was always religious and recall how he expressed his religious interests in authentic and simple ways. His brother Bill remembers that when Jim was small he used to play at saying Mass and benediction. Jim made a tabernacle from an old clock, and a monstrance from a tinker toy set. When he was somewhere around 10 or 12 years old, he was half way home from confession when he exclaimed, "Oh! I forgot to say my penance." So he knelt right down there on the road and prayed. One of Jim's jobs on the farm when he was a boy was to tend to the chickens. One day his brother Bill saw him kneeling over a hurt chicken and praying for it that it would not die.

In later years Jim lived out his religious convictions in unending energy and commitment to the service of others. He loved the people he worked with in Central America. He couldn't do enough for his Indian students.

Brother Bob Walsh, a confrere in Nicaragua, writes: “For Santiago, I think manual work was play, was recreation. I could not even attempt nor could I ever do all the things he was doing here in Puerto Cabezas for the people — teaching, administration, parish catechesis, civic projects and good old-fashioned manual labor. Brother Nicholas Geimer, also from Nicaragua, writes: I remember Jim for his emery and forcefulness. When he arrived in a Community, he jumped right into a dozen jobs. When he arrived in Bluefields, Nicaragua, he replaced almost all of the plumbing in the house. He began fixing up the house as soon as he arrived in Puerto Cabezas as well.”

Don Geng knew Brother Jim both as his Spanish teacher and later as a fellow faculty member at Cretin High School in Saint Paul, Minnesota, but he believed his true calling was to the poor of Central America. He gave nine years of his life serving the poor of Central America: eight years in Nicaragua and one in Guatemala where he gave of his life and in the end was gunned down because of who he was, because of what he believed, because he loved and served people who were denied the freedom, the dignity, and the right of self-determination. Brother Paul Joslin, Regional Superior of the American Christian Brothers in Guatemala, accompanied the body of Brother James to Saint Paul, Minnesota. When arriving in Saint Paul, Brother Paul released the following statement to the press: “I want to state very clearly that Brother’s death was no accident. Brother Santiago died for what he was and for what he stood for – a Christian educator, an apostle of the poor and the underprivileged, a worker for justice and of social change.”

Santiago, as Jim was known in Central America, developed friendly relationships with people – all people – regardless of their position. He would take time to visit with the humblest, the simplest, most common people of the town. Brother Bob Walsh writes from Puerto Cabezas, “It seems the humble, simple, common people appreciated most their relationship with Santiago because they were the people who came to our door or stopped us in the street to extend their sympathy upon hearing of Santiago’s death.” There were also many non-Catholics who came to pray for their friend Santiago. It seemed that Santiago always met the person, he didn’t put labels on people and was not selective about who he would help or relate to.”

Santiago won the hearts of the people for whom he worked and served and it is not wonder that he did. He had ideas – he was always looking for ways to help the people, their schools, and their town. He had determination – the reason he was so busy was that he always became involved in the “carrying out” of his ideas and plans.

Jim was constantly being asked to serve on committees or do other jobs. For example in January, 1976, he was teaching two university classes in linguistics, teaching two typing classes, practicing with the volunteer firemen and trying to get their trucks working, attending meetings of the Wisconsin-Nicaraguan Partners, serving on the university extension curriculum committee, on a committee to plan a new library for the city, and on a committee to establish an educational radio station. He was also supervising the beginning of construction for a shop building. Meanwhile he and Brother Benildo were taking turns staying with Brother Michael Ponikvar in intensive care. And all this was during school vacation.

The people of Puerto Cabezas credit Jim with the building of the school's shop building, office complex, auditorium and science building. Actually, the government was building similar additions and expansions on most of the schools on the Atlantic coast. What Jim really did accomplish was to get most of these buildings built 25-50% larger than originally planned. Needless to say, the architects and foremen didn't appreciate his constant pressure and even going over their heads to government officials to get his revisions included in the plans.

The volunteer fire department in Puerto Cabezas has existed for many years, but mostly in name only. After each major fire, they reorganized but soon withered. When Jim got involved, they really prospered. He got a uniform of sorts for parades, visited most of the fire stations in the capitol and begged for unused nozzles, hoses, even a truck, and arranged a training course (in which he scored highest of all in the final exam). After he left, of course, the fire department went back to where it was before.

Jim lived each day to the fullest. Those of us who knew him are aware of the long hard days he put in at work. He loved his work and he loved the people he worked for. We have heard, since the time of his death, many testimonies that he was brave and courageous, so brave and courageous he gave his life for what he believed. I recall visiting with him when he was recovering from knee surgery at Saint Mary's Hospital in Minneapolis in December of 1981. Aware of the violence and the devastating conflicts in Guatemala, I asked Jim if he wasn't frightened of the thought of returning. Jim responded, "You don't think about that, that's not why you're there. There's too much to be done, you can't waste your energies worrying about what might happen. If it happens, it happens."

Jim was himself. He followed no other star but his own. He was proud of his farm background and never hesitated to share his farm stories no matter who

the audience. He loved his roots and he loved his family dearly. The last two times Jim was home on leave from Central America I was privileged to take him to his farm. When you would get close to the farm and he could see it, he would light up with enthusiasm; he'd say, "There it is," and proceed to explain the different things that his brothers, Ralph and Bill, had done to the farm since he left home and, talking with real enthusiasm, he would explain how it was when he was growing up.

Jim was noticeably happy. A natural smile was part of his personality, he was jovial, loved to talk, loved people, and was always friendly. When Jim was anywhere near, you knew it because you could hear him laugh.

Jim died as he lived – for others. At the funeral Mass celebrated in the Saint Paul Cathedral on February 16, 1982, Archbishop John Roach said, "Brother James took people from the hills, Indian boys, who had no chance in life and gave them a combination of knowledge and hope. He had touched the lives of many people." Jim was a Christian Brother. We Brothers are proud to call him our own and we are proud to know that he worked in a mission so important that he would give his life for it.

Jim did not waste time making decisions. He made them when he had to and he did not fret over them. I recall asking him, while he was in the hospital in December, just weeks before he was killed, if he really intended to go back to Guatemala. He responded immediately, "Of course," and there seemed to be almost surprise that I would even ask the question. It wasn't something he would worry about. That is where he belonged; he loved those people; he wanted to be there.

After the funeral Mass in Saint Paul, I was privileged to spend some time with his two sisters, Patty and Louise, and their husbands. Louise recalled that when Jim was home the month before he died he said to her, "One of two frightening things could happen to me in Guatemala. I could be kidnapped, tortured, and killed, or, I could simply be gunned down." Louise said the biggest fear he had, perhaps the only fear in this regard, was that it might be the first. It seems that he knew of the danger involved in doing what he was doing. Yet he focused his time and energy on carrying out his mission, the Church's mission of serving the poor and the oppressed.

Jim was a man of faith. He lived and gave his life helping poor Indian boys learn the trade of farming so they could feed themselves. He lived and gave his life teaching in the Brothers' school to help educate the poor youth of Guatemala so that someday they could free themselves. Jim was devoted

teacher. He wanted to see his students become teachers, to see them return to their highland villages and teach basic subjects in their native dialects. Jim was a faithful disciple of our Founder, Saint John Baptist De La Salle. In his Meditations For A Time of Retreat, De La Salle writes, “Your zeal must go so far that you are ready to give your very life, so dear to you are the children entrusted to you.”

Jim is a witness of Christ’s love. Bishop Frederick Freking expressed this very well in his concluding remarks at the funeral mass celebrated in Sacred Heart Church in Polonia, Wisconsin on February 18, 1982:

“I see in Brother James’ 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.”

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*Brother Stephen Markham, FSC, was Auxiliary Visitor of the Winona District when Brother James was killed. In the days following Brother James death, Brother Stephen oversaw the return of Brother James’ body back to the United States from Guatemala, and was a spokesperson of the Brothers to the press.*

### **BROTHER JAMES MILLER GUILD**

The Brother James Miller Guild is an intentional community of those committed to promoting Blessed James Miller’s cause. Guild members actively share Brother James story, pray for his intercession and take part in community events in-person and online. To learn more about the guild, its benefits and to become a member, visit [brotherjamesmiller.com/guild](http://brotherjamesmiller.com/guild).



This resource is provided by the Brother James Miller Guild, which is housed at Christian Brothers Conference, the office for the Lasallian Region of North America.