

Blessed James Miller: Christian Brother martyred in Central America

INTERVIEW BY CATHOLIC FORUM, PODCAST OF THE DIOCESE OF WILMINGTON

Interviewees: Father Alan Guanella and Brother Francis Carr, FSC

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00:00

Hello, this is Bishop William Koenig. Welcome to Catholic Forum, a weekly presentation of the Office of Communication of the Diocese of Wilmington. Now here is your host, Bob Krebs.

00:12

Bob Krebs (Host): Thanks, Bishop. 1982 was a time of civil war in Guatemala. Anyone who spoke out against the regime was persecuted and even murdered. One such person was a Christian Brother named James Miller. Gunned down as he painted a wall outside the school where he taught, Brother James Miller is now Blessed James Miller as his cause for canonization is being considered at the Vatican. On this episode of Catholic Forum, after a news update from The Dialog, we will talk to Father Alan Guanella, a pastor, canon lawyer and expert on the future saint, and Brother Francis Carr, FSC, a Christian Brother and classmate of the martyr. We learn about Blessed James Miller today on Catholic Forum. I hope you find today's program informative and inspirational. Now the news.

01:05

Local news and updates

05:24

Host: This is Catholic Forum. I'm Bob Krebs. In 1982, three assailants, presumed to be from the Guatemala army's death squad, gunned down Brother James Miller as he repaired a school wall. Five years ago, Brother James Miller, FSC, a De La Salle Christian Brother was the first religious brother from the United States to be beatified. Today on Catholic Forum, we have two special guests: Father Alan Guanella, an expert on Blessed James Miller and Brother Frank Carr, FSC, a Christian Brother and classmate of Brother James Miller. My first guest today is Father Alan Guanella. He's the pastor of Our Lady Queen of Heaven in Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin, a canon lawyer and an expert on Blessed James Miller. Father, thanks so much for taking time to be with us today.

06:17

Father Alan Guanella: Thank you. Glad to be here today.

06:19

Host: We're going to be talking about Brother James' cause for canonization and about his martyrdom. Before we do that, give us a little bit of an overview. Who was Blessed James Miller?

06:30

Father Alan: Blessed James Miller was a Brother of the Christian Schools, a Christian Brother who was born in the Diocese of La Crosse, Wisconsin, where I'm a priest. He became a Christian Brother and served in Nicaragua and Guatemala and was martyred for the faith in Guatemala in 1982. He was beatified — or named Blessed by Pope Francis just a few years ago — five years ago, in December, in fact.

07:05

Host: What was his childhood like there in Wisconsin? He was a farm boy, right?

07:11

Father Alan: He was born in central Wisconsin on a farm. His brothers, still to this day, operate the family farm. It butted up against the family parish, which is no longer an operating parish, but the church is still there with the grave of Blessed Brother James Miller, who is in our diocese, buried in our diocese. He was from German stock. He was a farm boy, but a very religious young man was known for his religiosity but was a typical farm boy and loved to work with his hands. He spent one year at the high school, Catholic High School, just a few miles away from his family farm, and then transferred to the Christian Brothers High School near St. Louis, the first time he had left Wisconsin in discerning his call to be a Christian Brother.

08:11

Host: So he became a Christian Brother. He took his vows, and then his first assignment was in Nicaragua, correct?

08:20

Father Alan: No, actually, he taught in Minneapolis, St. Paul, at what was then just Cretin High School, now Cretin-Derham Hall, and he taught Spanish after he had a degree from St. Mary's University of Minnesota, my alma mater, in fact. And he had a degree in modern languages in Spanish, and there he taught Spanish. He was the maintenance man. He fixed everything. He shoveled the snow in the winter and was known as 'Brother Fix-it' because of everything he did for the school. Kind of a jack of all trades while teaching. But he always had this great desire to work in the missions, and so then was sent to Nicaragua and spent most of his time as a Christian Brother in Nicaragua. Eventually, he came back because the

regime was so antithetical to the faith, it was becoming difficult for him there. Spent a little bit more time teaching, but had this great desire to be a missionary, and eventually was sent to Guatemala and became a teacher there at an indigenous school run by the Christian Brothers. It was a school for the Native people, the native children of Guatemala. It was known as the Casa Indígena, and there taught agriculture and trades and education to the native children in Guatemala.

09:51

Host: And so he's there, he's working, he's teaching, he's ministering to these folks. And then what happened? How and why did he lose his life?

10:03

Father Alan: Yeah, so the government was very corrupt at this time. It could take an hour or more to try to explain all of the governmental challenges going on in South America at that time, but the government was not pleased with religious missionaries and those and there was a statement that came out that there may be someone shot because of the government death squad going out. He was not worried about this. He wanted to continue his work, and this thought that somebody might be assassinated or murdered didn't bother him.

There's a great meditation by Saint John Baptist de La Salle, the founder of the Christian Brothers, who says that teachers should be willing to give even of their blood for their students. And so, while he was there, he was fixing a wall on the outside of the school, and sent one of the boys inside to get a tool or something, and (three) masked men came and shot him, murdered him right there outside of the school and shot six times, and they disappeared. They figure that it was government-operated because they ran to the police department or toward the police department. This was not something that would have been done if it was not authorized by that. And so, it was seen as a true martyrdom. That is, he died in hatred of the faith because of who he was as a Christian Brother, not just as a political killing or something like that. And that that when he – the Vatican has to research this and study this and they proclaimed him a martyr, which allowed the beatification to go on because of this.

But he spent his life in education, teaching, especially in Guatemala, the native children. But he was such a jack of all trades – he not only taught Spanish, and then he taught some English when he was in South America. But he started a volunteer fire department in the village in Nicaragua. He was a ham radio operator. He learned welding, different trades. He had to teach Central American Guatemalan art history, which apparently he was thrown into that – that wouldn't be something that anyone would know off the top of their head. Whatever needed to be done, he did it.

There's a great line in a letter that he wrote that says, with all of the worrisome things going on with the shootings and everything they said, he wrote that he didn't know how much he could pray, or how well he could pray under his bed, because he was so worried about some of the shootings and things going on. But there's a beautiful letter that he wrote to his former novice master, who says, who he wrote that he places all of his trust in divine providence his entire life in God's hands, and that really is just a wonderful testament to who he was, and the example that he gives us now as a martyr for the faith.

13:32

Host: So he was martyred in 1982. His cause for canonization was kicked off about five years ago. Give us an update on his cause, if you would please.

13:45

Father Alan: Right, well, the cause was started almost immediately after he was martyred in 1982. It took some time to kind of get going. There's some history there of who, whether it be the Christian Brothers or the Diocese of Huehuetenango in Guatemala were going to do it. So it took 20 years, practically, to really get going, but he was beatified – that is declared blessed by the church – five years ago. The cause now is waiting for another miracle, praying for another miracle through his intercession, and so the Christian Brothers have set up a guild at brotherjamesmiller.org. The guild allows for prayer requests to be submitted, any miracles that might have occurred through his intercession. There's different classroom activities, family activities, prayers that are all available at brotherjamesmiller.org and to learn more about his life. The guild is that which we're trying to promote so that people learn about his history and his cause for canonization. One more miracle, that's proven a miracle by the Vatican, would allow him to be canonized a saint. People may be familiar with Blessed Stanley Rother from Oklahoma. This is a very similar situation. They were both in South America, and you know, both Americans declared blessed by the church as well.

15:22

Host: So you would like to urge people to go to brotherjamesmiller.org and maybe join the guild and pray. Pray for Brother James and pray for his intercession.

15:38

Father Alan: Right, we pray for the intercession of Brother James, especially for those causes that seem hopeless – miracles of healing, medical issues, different things like that, that might cause a miracle to take place through God's work and the intercession of Blessed James Miller. People, families, students can join the guild to learn more about Brother James Miller, and to promote his cause and his life. We want everyone to be able to learn more about Brother James Miller. And if you happen to be coming through Central Wisconsin, come to the little, tiny community of Ellis, where he is buried, make a pilgrimage. You can see his grave. It's outside. You can visit any time, and then just two

miles up the road is the Church of Sacred Heart in Polonia, Wisconsin, where he was buried from, where the funeral took place, and where his brothers and family still attend Mass every week.

16:35

Host: Well, Father Alan Guanella, thanks so much for spending time with us today on Catholic Forum and sharing your stories about Brother James Miller. Thank you.

16:44

Father Alan: Thank you. Very glad to be here.

16:47

Host: My next guest on Catholic Forum is Brother Frank Carr, FSC. He's a classmate of Blessed James Miller during the religious formation process, and a Brother of the Midwest District of the Christian Brothers, the De La Salle Christian Brothers. Brother Frank, thanks for joining us today on Catholic Forum. I appreciate it. And first, how did you meet Brother James Miller?

17:12

Brother Francis Carr, FSC: Well, I came from a small town in northern Michigan, Escanaba, and had the Brothers for high school, and got to my parents, and they said it was OK for me to enter formation. So on June 12, 1962, we drove, my mom and aunt, and I drove to Winona, and I entered Saint Yon novitiate, and one of the other classmates was Brother - It was Jim Miller. And that's the first time I had ever met him. He had been in the formation program of the Brothers at the high school level for a few years, but this was our first meeting.

17:55

Host: What was your first impression?

18:00

Brother Frank: I keep thinking about that because you think of a guy with a halo, and he should make it a marvelous impression, but there were 43 of us, and we were all pretty much the same: a little nervous, interested in joining the Brothers. Well, we didn't know where we were going to be, but he was an ordinary guy. That's what I always tell people. He was just an ordinary guy.

18:27

Host: Was he a good student? Do you remember?

18:30

Brother Frank: Well, I think so. Our first year was novitiate, and we had all of our classes at the Brothers' residence at Saint Von Valley. And then we had three years together in what we call the scholasticate, but in terms of one another, unless we were helping one another with some project within the class, I don't know that I was aware of other people's grades or anything like - all of us were pretty good students, though.

19:03

Host: You probably have to be to get as far as you guys had gotten. Now, what age were you when you first started the novitiate?

19:13

Brother Frank: Eighteen - right after high school. I graduated on Memorial Day that year, and then June 12, I was here in Winona.

19:24

Host: And then when you got to a point where you were both assigned, or, I guess they call it missioned, where did you go right after you graduated?

19:34

Brother Frank: Well, I was assigned to a school in a small school in Iowa. But before that ever came about. I was changed to a school in St. Paul, Hill High School, where we had like 16 Brothers, and I was teaching religion and English. I think Jim was assigned to Cretin High School in St. Paul, not too far from us. The times we would get together once we were assigned to our mission, our school, was every once in a while we would have a gym night for the first year Brothers, the first to second year Brothers at one of the high schools. So we didn't see each other a lot. I think we knew that he really wanted to go to the missions, the Central American missions where we had Brothers, but that really wasn't part of our daily thinking, or anything like that.

20:32

Host: Well, he did choose again, I guess, to work in the missions. So he was then sent to Nicaragua. He was there for like, 10 years, and then he was assigned, and he came back for a little while then he went to Guatemala. When and where were you when you heard that Brother Jim was killed?

20:56

Brother Frank: Pretty sure it was a Saturday afternoon. There was some kind of, I don't know how I got this, but that a religious, yeah, a religious person had been killed in Nicaragua. Well, then you start, 'Oh, what's this? We have people there', and I think we eventually called the provincialate, or received, you know, this is in what '82? We didn't have a lot of technology then, so we didn't get text messages or anything like that, but we started getting phone calls, and I think that afternoon, I knew that he had been killed.

21:36

Host: I guess that put a real, real sense of sadness among the Brothers?

21:43

Brother Frank: Well yeah, because we had other men, you know, I said we started with 43 when we came to the postulancy, and I think nine left during the first few months, and nine left during the first year. And there was always some anxiety and unhappiness with that because they were our friends. But, but when Jim went to Nicaragua, and we had other brothers that were in Central America, but when we heard that he was killed, yeah, it knocked us for a loop. Yeah, it was, it was devastating in some ways. You know, we just kind of went around in a daze after that for a while, and then as the plans evolved for him, coming out of Nicaragua, coming to St Paul, I was a pall bearer at his funeral at the Cathedral in St. Paul. Then we went to Wisconsin near his home, and the same - we were the Brothers who knew him real well were his pall bearers. We buried him in that plot where you could see the farm, his family farm, from the cemetery. Yeah, it was, you know, in a way, it was - you're in a daze, because nothing like this had ever happened to us before.

23:07

Host: What did you think when you found out that Pope Francis had beatified Brother Jim?

23:16

Brother Frank: That's amazing, you know? I still think about it. I tell people who know me and who may have known him, that 'of the two of us, he will be where he should be, I'm right here.' I'm not going to become Blessed Frank Carr. but he was, I mean, I was committed to the students at my school. I worked hard there, but being in the missions is a unique situation, and he really put himself out to help those young kids up in the hills who had no education. The Brothers there were so tremendous in trying to get them to school. I mean, now we have schools in their area, but they had to come into the city. And there was always issues with the military of recruiting these kids for being soldiers. And this is what happened the day before Jim was killed, two Brothers went to the military and said, 'this kid is not eligible to be recruited for the military. He should be released back to us.' That ticked someone off, I guess. And they just were looking for someone to show that they were in charge.

24:29

Host: Give us a little bit of a background, if you would please, about the Christian Brothers.

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Brother Frank: Well, we were founded by Saint John Baptist de La Salle in France. He died in 1719. He had started 1651 – I might have some of these dates mixed up. But we were in France for the most part until the early 19th century. And the Brothers started, when they

were kicked out of France, sort of or their roles were diminished in France, they started sending Brothers to other European countries, Africa, some came to the U.S. And we had a province in the United States as early as 1850s, I think, and it grew. We were one time we had 19,000 brothers and a lot more here. Now, because we're aging and we don't have a lot of young Brothers coming in, it's a different situation now, which was trying to maintain the Lasallian, what we call Lasallian presence. What did De La Salle stand for in the schools that we have been part of? And we have a lot of laymen and women who are very engaged in that process. They believe in what De La Salle wanted. They're working really hard for these kids.

26:03

Host: Would you say the Christian Brothers now their primary ministry is in education?

26:09

Brother Frank: Oh, always has been, yeah. Really, always has been, yeah.

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Host: Do you still have missionaries in in Central America?

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Brother Frank: We have – to a large extent, it's men from their own area now who are Christian Brothers there. Occasionally we'll have a man, you know, we just had a man die in the Philippines from this Province. We've had other guys who have been in other countries working with the native Brothers. But we don't have as many people of our own who are now in what we would call in the missions.

26:48

Host: It's a good life. If you would run into a young man who's who might say, you know, 'Brother Frank, I'm thinking about being a Christian Brother.' What advice would you give him?

27:01

Brother Frank: To spend some time with us, to listen, to express himself. We just had a young man from one of the universities in the Dakotas visit us for the weekend because he's interested. The Brothers have been present there and on Vocation Days. He's curious about who we are and wants to explore whether or not he wants to become one of us. We're still educators, so we're looking for guys who are interested in teaching. We have a program coming up called LIFT, where we're trying to form young men who are still in college to become teachers and possibly to join our community.

27:47

Host: Good. And if someone would like some more information, is there a website? I think it's, it's brothersvocation.org, something like that, right?

27:56

Brother Frank: Yes, yeah, yeah. Or they can write to the provincialate. I live with one of the brothers who's in charge of vocations here in our province. It's lschatz@cbmidwest.org.

28:21

Host: Absolutely. Brother Frank Carr, thanks so much for being with us today on Catholic Forum. I apologize for the for the technical difficulties, but you're a real trooper for hanging in there, and thanks for telling us about Brother James Miller and his story.

28:38

Brother Frank: Well, enjoy doing that. If you have any other questions, I'll try to answer them. I don't make much up. I try to have the facts.

28:46

Host: Thanks so much, Brother. God bless. Have a great day. Bye bye.

28:50

Brother Frank: Thank you. Bye bye.

28:51

Podcast closing remarks