

# Blessed James Miller, FSC

## PHILLY FACTOR INTERVIEW WITH BROTHER MATTHEW KOTEK, FSC

Philly Factor is a television program produced by the students, faculty and alumni of La Salle University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

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**Host - Paul:** [00:00:00] Hello everyone, and welcome again to the Philly Factor. I'm your host Paul Perello. For those of us here at La Salle (University), the Christian Brothers hold a special place in our hearts and even in our everyday existence. And I recently came across an article about one Christian Brother not associated directly with La Salle (University), but nonetheless a Christian Brother who is on the road to sainthood in the Roman Catholic Church.

That Brother is Brother James Miller, and we're going to learn about Brother Miller today on [00:01:00] our program. Brother Miller has been beatified by Pope Francis, and, as I said, is on his path to becoming a saint in the Roman Catholic Church. Here to talk to us about Brother James Miller is Brother Matthew Kotek, who is a member of the DeLaSalle High School Brothers community in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

He serves on the Midwest District's vocations team. He's a graduate of St. Mary's University of Minnesota and has served at: Christian Brothers High School in Memphis, Tennessee; College De LaSalle in Cairo, Egypt; and with the Fratelli Project in Lebanon. And Brother Matthew, I'd like to welcome you here to the program as we talk about Brother James Miller.

As I said, you are a Christian Brother, so my affection for the Christian Brothers, not only here in Philadelphia and at La Salle (University), extends to you and your community and Christian Brothers around the world. When I came across the story of Brother James Miller, I was intrigued to learn so much about him.

[00:02:00] And that's what we're going to discuss here today. We're also going to talk about his road to, hopefully, ultimately sainthood. So welcome to the program Brother. I do appreciate your time.

**Br. Matthew:** Thank you, Paul. It's a pleasure to be here today.

**Host - Paul:** Now, the connection between you and Brother James Miller is that you're both from the Midwest, from Wisconsin, correct?

**Br. Matthew:** That's correct, yes. I grew up in La Crosse, Wisconsin, and Brother James grew up just outside of Stevens Point, Wisconsin.

**Host - Paul:** Tell me a little bit about the man Brother James Miller. Who was he?

**Br. Matthew:** He was just your common, everyday man. He grew up on a dairy farm just outside of Stevens Point, Wisconsin, very much known and loved by his local community.

Even as a young boy, he was very gregarious, always had someone to talk to and had things to talk about. Very much known throughout his community and he was never necessarily known as being overly academic, but he always had a way of looking at things and finding ways to fix [00:03:00] things that might have been broken or to look at things that could be done in a different way.

And I think this was his call in life was to look at things and to look at things in an extraordinary way, just in ordinary everyday things. And to do so in an extraordinary way.

**Host - Paul:** His nickname was 'Brother Fix-It' because it was not uncommon to see him doing work wherever he was.

He was doing construction, or he seemed to have this knack to fix anything physical that needed to be fixed. And yet we could take that same description of Brother Miller, and he applied that to fixing communities, not only here in the United States, but in South America that were broken.

So here he is on the surface being a guy that was seen with a wrench in his hand many times fixing, whether it was a leaky faucet or a wall that needed to be painted, but yet also working to fix those people less [00:04:00] fortunate around the world.

**Br. Matthew:** Absolutely. And I think, as we mourn the loss of Pope Francis, I think Brother James Miller was such a great example of the type of man that Pope Francis calls us all to be – somebody who really identifies with the people on the margins, those on the peripheries. Brother James was definitely one that put himself on the peripheries to accompany those to give them a better life and a better future.

**Host - Paul:** He did spend time as a Christian Brother here in the United States before he is sent to South America, correct?

**Br. Matthew:** That's correct. He did his formation in Glencoe, Missouri. And then also his bachelor's degree at St. Mary's University in Winona, Minnesota. And then he taught for a while at Cretin High School in St. Paul. Now it's Cretin-Durham High School. He taught Spanish.

He's also known for having brought soccer to the Twin Cities metro area, to the Catholic schools. And as you mentioned, not only did he teach Spanish, he taught religion, but he was known for always walking around after school and [00:05:00] fixing what needed to be done.

Oftentimes, much to the chagrin to his Brothers and community, he was too busy after school doing maintenance projects or being involved with the students that sometimes he was late to prayer or missed prayer. And again, he just really was that pragmatic type of person that just everybody was attracted to.

**Host - Paul:** Yep. He's ultimately then sent to Guatemala, I believe, and that is where he serves his work in South America. And it's ultimately where he is, he is martyred. He's actually working on a project on a ladder. And, given the political tensions that were going on at that time, some would say maybe it was at the wrong place at the wrong time, or maybe it was a lesson by the political forces there trying to send a message.

But he's, he ultimately is martyred. And so tell us a little bit about, what happened on that day when Brother Miller was killed. [00:06:00]

**Br. Matthew:** As you say, it's a confluence of two different forces there, both being at the wrong place at the wrong time, but then also the community of Brothers definitely were being watched by the government because of the work that they were doing.

They were enrolling students in their school. Many of them were from the indigenous tribes there in Guatemala, in Huehuetenango, where he was serving. And when they would enroll these boys in their school, that would then exempt them from mandatory military conscription. And so oftentimes, if the military would get one of the boys and try to conscript them into the military, the Brothers, any number of the Brothers from the community would go to the local precinct and they would show paperwork to the authorities saying that you can't have this student of ours because he is enrolled, we have the paperwork to prove it.

And I think over time, the, the military, the government there just got tired of these Brothers always coming with excuses. 'Oh, here's another kid that we can't conscript into our, into the army because he's [00:07:00] enrolled at the Brothers school.'

And so again, I think the Brothers were really just being watched by the government for the activities that they were doing. And really it was just trying to give the boys in this indigenous community a better life, giving them solid education – not only in the typical subjects, of reading and writing and catechism, of course – but also to teach them agricultural skills to give them an opportunity to improve their lives in the agricultural community there.

And so when the day of his death happened. He was, like you said, he was up on a ladder. He was repairing the wall that had needed repair just outside the school property. And a group of masked men came by and they just shot at him and they shot him six times and that was enough to kill him on the spot.

And the police were called after it happened, because the shots rang out throughout the neighborhood, but the police did not come for almost, until

almost an hour later. And so there has definitely been some suspicion over the years that, of course, that the police were [00:08:00] involved, were complicit in his death.

**Host - Paul:** And they've never made an arrest in the case to this day.

**Br. Matthew:** That's correct. That's correct.

**Host - Paul:** Did he want to go? I know in, in religious life. There's comfort in being in your own environment, in your own surroundings, but I know many, many times in religious life that comfort is something that you give up to ultimately do God's work.

So when he was sent on his path that ultimately led him to Guatemala, did he want to go? Was he reluctant to go? Did he fear for his life in going there, given the political climate at the time?

**Br. Matthew:** I think in terms of religious life, I think we can say somebody like Blessed Brother James Miller – he really had a call within a call. He was called to be a Brother – called to our communal life that all of us Brothers share – but he had a special call within that call to serve the indigenous community in Central America, in Nicaragua, but [00:09:00] then of course, at the end of his life, in Guatemala.

And it was just months before he was killed that he had returned to Minnesota, where our province was located at the time, to visit family also to celebrate Christmas and to celebrate an anniversary at his local parish. And there were a number of members of his family who really asked him that question at that time.

'Do you really want to go back? You had a good run in Central America serving the people there.' And it was clear that, because of his involvement with different activities that the government was definitely watching him and watching the Brothers' community there.

And, we have many letters that he wrote to various people saying even though it could be a danger to his life, that there are risks involved in returning, he definitely did feel called to go back despite the risks. And, he even is quoted as saying something to the effect of: You never realize how well you can pray to God while you're hiding under your bed as [00:10:00] shots are ringing out in the community.

And so I think, that's just a little example of how much he felt that the work he was doing was so important and he personally felt called to be doing it, that he was willing to risk his own life in order to fulfill that call.

**Host - Paul:** Brother Miller died on February 13, 1982, at the age of 37 – a relatively young man to die in doing God's work.

He was beatified on December 7, 2019. He is on, for us Catholics, we understand what that process entails. And, given the recent papacies of not only Pope Francis, but even Benedict and John Paul II, we have seen the path to sainthood move along a bit quicker than many, many, many years ago.

At times, in my case, I went to Bishop Newman High School in Philadelphia, and I graduated in 1975. In 1976, Bishop Newman became St. [00:11:00] John Newman, but Bishop Newman lived a hundred years plus before that. In the case of Mother Katherine Drexel, she was more of a contemporary and was canonized – her cause moved along swiftly. So we've seen these causes come to light and we've seen people elevated. In this process toward sainthood a bit quicker than, there's some people that have been beatified for hundreds of years and have never made it to that next step.

Why do you think that Brother Miller, his case and his cause has moved so quickly through the church?

Because I suspect because he is a man, he is a Christian Brother, his mission in doing God's work resonated with so many people, whether here in the United States or in South America.

**Br. Matthew:** Absolutely. And I think just in legalistic terms, if you will, typically somebody needs to have two miracles attributed to them, to be canonized.

That case of course is different for somebody who is declared a [00:12:00] martyr as a Brother James is. And I think as you say, he really does resonate for so many different people, whether it be the, the farming community where he's from in central Wisconsin.

Whether it be, the Archdiocese of St. Paul, Minneapolis, where he served as a young teacher or even in, Central America, in Guatemala and in Nicaragua where he served. Because of his witness and all of those various places, a lot of people in various walks of life can really resonate, as you said, with his story.

And I think people like that, who are willing to follow God's call for them even in the midst of the dangers and the risks that can accompany that, they really are a witness for all of us as we strive to become holy ourselves.

**Host - Paul:** So has there been a miracle attributed to him? You just explained in his case, when you're a martyr for the faith the sort of the guidelines, for lack of a better term here, might be a little bit different. But has there been a miracle?

And I know in some cases when you to, in order to [00:13:00] make it to sainthood, a second miracle needs to be attributed to that person. But has there at least been one miracle attributed to him?

**Br. Matthew:** We have had some indications that some people have, prayed through his intercessions and they have been healed.

But none of those healings yet have been verified as being miracles. And so we are as a congregation, we are still looking for that verified miracle in that case. And to that point, one of the things that we as Brothers in the United States and our Lasallian network is doing is we've started the Brother James Miller Guild.

And this is a website where people can sign up for more information about Brother James Miller. Learn more about his life, learn more about his call and his witness to serve the church through his faith. And in part of joining that guild, there's a place on the website ([www.brotherjamesmiller.org](http://www.brotherjamesmiller.org)) where people can actually share their stories. If they have prayed through Brother James Miller's intercession and they believe that they have been healed or that they potentially could have that miracle [00:14:00] attributed to them, we do have the vehicle there for that case to be verified so it could be potentially attributed to him and that could be the miracle that kind of takes him to the next step to be canonized a saint.

**Host - Paul:** Sure. And we're having all that information pop up on the screen ([www.brotherjamesmiller.org](http://www.brotherjamesmiller.org)) so you can find more information out about the guild and even how you can become involved in the work of the guild. I do want to mention that Brother Miller is the first religious Brother from the United States to be beatified. And so that's pretty significant in that respect.

What's it like then for the Christian Brothers? And I know this is a general question, but it's got to be an exciting time for the Christian Brothers. Exciting, yet sad because of the loss of Brother Miller, but it's got to be exciting that this honor of beatification has been bestowed on Brother Miller and I suspect his family, though probably is still living out in the middle of the country, it's got to be exciting for them too to have [00:15:00] this honor bestowed on Brother Miller. What's it like for the Christian Brothers first and have you had any conversations with any of his relatives given the fact of his he's been beatified by the Catholic Church?

**Br. Matthew:** I think for us as Christian Brothers, it's definitely an important part of our history as Brothers. And again, the fact that he is a contemporary member of our congregation and from the United States has a particular witness to us. We as Brothers, of course, have over 300-year history, and so we have a number of Brother Saints. We have a number of Brothers who are blessed, but most of those are from France or from the francophone world, or they were perhaps martyred during the Spanish Civil War, which is almost, a 100 years ago now.

So for us to have someone who's a bit more contemporary, somebody that is, was alive during the lifetimes of many of our Brothers still living in the province is definitely very significant.

And to speak to your second question there about the significance to the local community, I've had the opportunity on a couple [00:16:00] of occasions to visit his family in Stevens Point and to actually pray with them and with the local community at his grave site. He's buried in a small town called Ellis, Wisconsin, just outside of Stevens Point, and just outside of this local parish cemetery, you

can see the farm fields of his family right behind the cemetery. And so that is really sacred ground. Not only for his immediate family members, some of his siblings who are still alive, but really for that local community.

I think one of the great opportunities to, to pray in that place was this past summer during the (National) Eucharistic pilgrimage. That his grave site in Ellis was one of the stops on the pilgrimage. As it came through the Diocese of La Crosse, we were able to stop on the, in that site and pray there with him, and then go to a local parish where many of the parishioners, of course, knew him as a young man and really hear their stories of him as a child, as a young man. And then they knew him during kind of his discernment period [00:17:00] about, when he was in Central America, had come back to Minnesota and then made that final choice to go back, to be with people who have known him and have accompanied him along his life's journey. That's just a huge witness to our local church in Wisconsin.

**Host - Paul:** I'm hoping that we generate more interest in Brother Miller's cause and direct them to the website where they can find out more about Brother Miller and also to go to the guild ([www.brotherjamesmiller.org](http://www.brotherjamesmiller.org)), which has been formed to help in Brother Miller's cause.

In the few minutes that we have left here, and we could go on and speak probably for hours about Brother Miller and his work, but what is it that your community hopes we, the people, the public at large can take away from Brother James Miller because he is an example, not just for people that have connections with the Christian Brothers, but other people who are watching the show who, may have never heard of Brother Miller before. What is the takeaway? What can we get from Brother James Miller?

**Br. Matthew:** I think [00:18:00] oftentimes when we think of people who are, beatified or canonized saints, we think of people who in many ways seemed very pious or overly holy, or they were very well educated in theology and philosophy and those types of things.

But I think the real takeaway is that he was really your everyday, your common man. He was willing to just roll up his shirt sleeves and get to work, doing the things that were the signs that he saw in front of him, things that needed to be fixed to be changed. He was willing to get to work.

He didn't necessarily want to talk about it. He didn't want to have meetings about it and talk about what can we do to make things better. He just took it upon himself and put himself in the place where he could get his hands dirty, as we say, to really live out his call to serve others and serve and serve his Lord in that way. I think that's a great call for all of us in the church.

**Host - Paul:** What do you think his reaction would be to all this attention that has now been? Most people don't go out and seek attention. [00:19:00] They go out there and they do the job. Whether they're a car mechanic, they're a street sweeper, they're a nurse, a doctor, they're going out there because that's their



life's their work that's what they're meant to do. So what do you think Brother Miller would be saying about all of this attention that has been focused on him now?

**Br. Matthew:** I think, as you know, he was a very humble man. I think the one thing he would probably say about the attention that he's receiving is he would want to make sure that the attention that he's receiving is directed toward the mission, the mission, especially in Central America.

The schools where he served are still in operation serving the indigenous community there in Guatemala. And so I think he would say, don't focus too much on him, focus on the mission of the Christian Brothers, the mission to bring that human and Christian education to the young, but especially the poor and marginalized, making sure that they are always at the forefront of every decision that is made.

**Host - Paul:** You didn't know him. I'm just looking, you're relatively young guy, but I don't think [00:20:00] you may have known, maybe you did. I'm not sure that Midwest living could be completely different than us on the East Coast. But you didn't know Brother Miller at all, did you?

**Br. Matthew:** No, I did not. But I have met many Brothers who lived in community with him, who did were in formation with him and again all of them are very inspired by his life.

**Host - Paul:** And his work continues to this day, like you said.

**Br. Matthew:** Absolutely.

**Host - Paul:** And I think that's what's so remarkable about him and others. that given the circumstances of his martyrdom. You would've thought that the Christian Brothers would've pulled up stakes and would've gotten out of, Guatemala or Nicaragua or wherever they're being sent, but his work continues. And that's so important because at the end of the day, you're here today. You may not be here tomorrow, but that work continues in in putting our best foot forward. And whether it's in North Philadelphia, or whether it's in Chicago or Los Angeles, or Nicaragua or Guatemala, it's so important, vital that the work of men and women, religious [00:21:00] women, people in general, that that work continues. It's so important.

**Br. Matthew:** Absolutely. That was always the focus of any of the Brothers who were down in Central America. They were sent as missionaries from the United States, but one of their, first goals was to not only, of course, provide that education to the young people there, but also encourage them to follow their own vocation to become teachers, so that way they could then turn around and educate the next generation in their local community. And to this day, we do not have any other American Brothers who are missioned in Central America, but we do have plenty of local Brothers, who have discovered their vocation, probably because of the Americans that were there.



But now there are many generations of the young Brothers there who never knew that some of these American missionaries were there at one time because they themselves were encouraged by local Brothers who they encountered. And the mission is still there. There's still that need, there's still people living on the margins. And so there's always that need to continue serving them [00:22:00].

**Host - Paul:** in a minute or two that we have left. What is it that we – regardless of who we are, where we live – what is it that we could do to help the Christian Brothers in promoting the cause of Brother James Miller? What could we do?

**Br. Matthew:** As I mentioned before, you can visit the guild website ([www.brotherjamesmiller.org](http://www.brotherjamesmiller.org)) where there are plenty of resources to learn about him.

If you are engaged in parish ministry or in a Catholic school, there are lesson plans. There are different prayer cards, prayer services that you can use to help encourage people to learn about Blessed Brother James Miller's life, and to learn about the mission work that he did in Central America and to just encourage one another to really look at what are the needs in your local area.

How can you be called and respond to those needs that you find in your local community just as he did where he went.

**Host - Paul:** I've been reading so much about Brother Miller. I've become inspired by his tremendous work. For you Brother Matt, how has this touched you? How has [00:23:00] this impacted you? How does this inspire you to continue in the mission of the Christian Brothers?

**Br. Matthew:** Like you said, I've read much about him, but I think for me, the real inspiration was being at the grave site and visiting his family and the local community to just recognize that any of us, from any part of the country or the world leading our daily life, we can do the extraordinary in the ordinary — meeting people where they are, meeting people on the margins, the peripheries, and being that accompanying voice, that accompanier, that Brother, as you will, to walk alongside people who are in need.

That's really who Brother James Miller is for me, one who walked alongside those in need. And that's the type of Brother I try to be to the students that are entrusted to my care.

**Host - Paul:** A wonderful job, Brother Matt, I can't thank you enough for shedding your personal reflections and the work of the Christian Brothers and of the guild in promoting the cause of Brother James Miller. And I [00:24:00] wish you well, continued success.

All the best, and hopefully the next time that we sit down and have this conversation we'll be talking about Saint Brother James Miller. Let's hope so.

**Br. Matthew:** Absolutely. Thank you, Paul. It was a pleasure to talk with you this afternoon.

**Host - Paul:** Same here, Brother Matt. Thanks for being with us. Until the next time, ladies and gentlemen, my name is Paul Perillo. Thanks so much for being with us. We'll catch you the next time around here on the Philly Factor. Have a great day.