

Beatification Homily – Blessed Brother James Miller, FSC

*Cardinal José Luis Lacunza Maestrojuán, OAR, Bishop of David, Panama Delegate of Pope Francis for the Beatification of Brother James Miller, FSC
Huehuetenango, Guatemala – December 7, 2019*

Dear brother and friend, Cardinal Álvaro Ramazzini, bishop of this Diocese of Huehuetenango; Your Excellency, Archbishop Nicolas Thévenin, [immediate past] Apostolic Nuncio of Pope Francis in Guatemala; dear brother bishop and brother Augustinian Recollect, Archbishop Mario Alberto Molina Palma, OAR, Archbishop of Los Altos Quetzaltenango-Totonicapán, to which this Diocese of Huehuetenango is suffragan; dear brother Bishop Gonzalo de Villa y Vásquez, SJ, President of the Episcopal Conference of Guatemala; brother bishops of Guatemala and Nicaragua who have come to share the joy and gratitude of this moment for the Church of Guatemala, the Universal Church, and our Central American Church; dear Brother Superior General of the Lasallian Brothers; dear Brother Rodolfo Meoli, FSC, Postulator General of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools; dear [Louise Shafranski], sister of Brother James and your husband, of the family of Brother James Miller who are here with us representing the entire family, and reminding us that they are part of us, because James Miller was made one of us and for us he gave his life; dear Lasallian brothers of Guatemala and of all Central America, present here in this celebration; religious sisters, priests, and faithful of this Diocese of Huehuetenango.

On November 7, Pope Francis, in an audience granted to the Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, Cardinal Angelo Becciu, authorized the Congregation to publish the Decree of Martyrdom of the Servant of God James Alfred Miller who was despicably and cowardly martyred on February 13, 1982, when he was barely thirty-seven years old—only a few blocks away from where we are now. The apostolic letter with which the Holy Father, Pope Francis, proclaimed blessed the Servant of God James Alfred Miller, a professed religious of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, and which was read at the beginning of this ceremony, describes Brother James in three aspects: it describes him as a martyr, as an excellent educator of youth, and as an evangelical defender of the poor and oppressed.

We heard Brother Rodolfo Meoli, FSC remind us of Brother James' life in a brief biography before the proclamation of Brother James as blessed: his birth, his first contact with the Brothers of the Christian Schools, his decision to enter the Christian Brothers, his entry to the novitiate, his reception of the habit, and his first assignment at Cretin High School in Saint Paul, Minnesota, where, besides his duties as a Spanish, English, and religion teacher, he was also in charge of building maintenance and coached a student soccer team. We also heard how in 1969, after taking his perpetual vows, he was sent to Bluefields, Nicaragua (and we have with us here the Bishop of Bluefields, Bishop Pablo Smith, OFM Cap.). After five years, he was transferred to Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua where he served with great success as school principal and with great recognition by a government that was going through bad times. This was the Somoza family dictatorial government in the final years of Anastasio Somoza Debayle. Because of this, in 1979, during the middle of the Sandinista revolution, Brother James' superiors, fearing for his safety in his work in favor of the youth, ordered him to leave Nicaragua. Brother James did not work for the government and was not a collaborator of the government. He worked to be an educator of the youth and his superiors were afraid that this could bring fatal consequences if he were identified as a possible Somocist.

Brother James was sent back to the United States to avoid a tragedy of any kind and he went back to the place where he began his path as an educator: Cretin High School. After a few years, at the insistence of Brother James that his call was to teach among the poor, especially indigenous people, his superiors decided to send him to a place that they presumed was going to be calmer: Guatemala.

He came here to Huehuetenango and worked at the Indian Center (the Casa Indígena De La Salle), where rural, indigenous Mayan youth studied and were trained in agriculture. They received training in moral principles and in the human and Christian values so typical of Lasallian education. One year after, in February of 1982, three individuals with covered faces, cowardly and from behind, shot Brother James and ended his life. I don't know if the attempts at identifying the assassins were real or not, but any such attempts were unsuccessful.

Since the beginning of his vocation as a Brother of the Christian Schools, every critique from his superiors and collaborators was very positive and very laudatory regarding his attitude of generosity, piety, honesty, and docility. He was committed to the inner life of the community and he got along with the confrères of his community and his classmates. He was a cause of unity and of communion inside the community and in the works of the community. One of the scholasticate teachers said that he was attractive, open, and sociable, with an ear-to-ear smile and those bright eyes that we can see in photographs of Brother James, which are a testament of his attractive personality, openness, sociableness, and kindness. There was nothing fake about him. His simplicity captivated people. He was very intelligent but also very, very simple.

When he was voted on in the Christian Brothers—as happens in every religious community and mostly in clerical seminaries, when a seminarian is going to be promoted to profession or to orders and is put under a strict examination—and in his examination for the profession of perpetual vows, the voters spoke about his generosity, his positive influence, and pointed to his great interest and desire of working in the missions. The director of the scholasticate remembered him as an intelligent person, although not an intellectual, jovial, easy to relate with, preferring physical work to sports, with a deep faith and love for his religious vocation, but with a certain tendency to come late to class and community prayers (as if he were preparing himself to work in Central America or in Latin America, where punctuality is not one of our virtues). Being in Nicaragua, his long-held desire of working in a missionary project became a reality. From Nicaragua, he wrote that he felt a great satisfaction for working with the poorest. When someone asked him if he was afraid of the shootings that happened in the surrounding areas of where he lived, he answered by letter: “Are you kidding? I never thought I could pray with such fervor when I go to bed.”

When he arrived in Guatemala, he was very conscious about the situation that existed in Guatemala:

namely, the well-known death squads and the possible consequences that could follow him. In a letter that he wrote in January 1982, he stated: “I am personally weary of violence, but I continue to feel a strong commitment to the suffering poor of Central America. The Church is being persecuted because of its option for the poor. Aware of numerous dangers and difficulties, we continue working with faith and hope and trusting in God's Providence.” He added: “I have been a Brother of the Christian Schools for nearly 20 years now, and commitment to my vocation grows steadily stronger in my work

in Central America. I pray to God for the grace and strength to serve Him faithfully among the poor and oppressed in Guatemala. I place my life in His Providence. I place my trust in Him.” One month after he wrote these words, he fell under the bullets of the three, anonymous killers.

Without any doubt, Brother James’ call, work, and martyrdom is a benchmark—for the Lasallian community and for every Christian educator—about the validity of educational ministry. When the Second General Conference of the Episcopal Conference of Latin America (the Conference of Medellín) spoke about liberating education and after the Third General Conference of the Episcopal Conference of Latin America (the Conference of Puebla) took it up as evangelizing education, they were not only highlighting the transformative force of education, but an understanding that education is not only a transmission of knowledge, but the configuration of the person around values and attitudes, that, in the case of the Church, are the values of the Gospel.

It is true, as was stated at the Conference of Puebla, that education as such does not belong to the essential content of evangelization, but to its content as a whole. Catholic education belongs to the evangelizing mission of the Church and must explicitly announce Christ as our liberator. The concluding document of the Fifth General Conference of the Episcopal Conference of Latin America (the Conference of Aparecida) said: “Christian faith shows us Jesus Christ as the ultimate truth of the human being, the model in which being human is displayed in all its ontological and existential magnificence. Proclaiming it fully in our days requires courage and prophetic spirit. Counteracting the culture of death with the Christian culture of solidarity is an imperative for all of us, and has been a constant objective of the Church’s social teaching.”

Do not be surprised, then, that the pastoral action of Brother James bothered some so much to the point of killing him for it. There is nothing that bothers totalitarian regimes, of left or right, of yesterday or today, more than education. Therein lies their efforts to suppress the freedom of teaching and their support for nationalized education, even going so far as trampling on a human right so fundamental as the right of parents to choose the education they think best for their children. Of course, there are no people more docile than ignorant people. There are no people more submissive than a domesticated people and there are no people more manipulable than people without a conscience, without criteria, without values.

Brother James, in his ministry among the indigenous people—the poorest among the poor—made them conscious about their dignity, their rights, and their responsibilities. This cracked the authoritarian, exploitative, and abusive system of those who saw in them only a cheap workforce to do the most thankless and dangerous jobs, subjecting them to subhuman living conditions. At the same time, Brother James trained them to have access to new and better opportunities, breaking the vicious cycle of poverty, exclusion, and rejection.

Brother Cyril Litecky, FSC, then the Visitor (Provincial) of Brother James, wrote soon after Brother James’ death that it is important not to forget Brother James Miller. He said: “What he lived for—and what he ultimately died for—is the Gospel message of freedom, peace, justice, and truth.” Let us not forget Brother James. The best way of not forgetting him is by making liberty, justice, and the dignity of every human being our common cause, especially for the poor, the marginalized, and the excluded.

The option for the poor is not a political issue, even though it has political implications and exigencies. It is an evangelical issue—lest we do not remember that Jesus has said that

whatsoever we do to our brethren, even to the least, we do to Him. It would be unfair to the life, work, mission, and death of Brother James if we leave him to fall into oblivion—if we do not retake the flag of that Gospel struggle that he always raised. Therefore: *Brother James, pray for us! Amen.*

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