

Faith and Zeal

Memorial of Blessed Brother James Miller, FSC
Sacred Heart Catholic Church, Polonia, Wisconsin • February 13, 2021

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Genesis 3:9–24; Psalm 90; Mark 8:1–10 [Lect. 334]

Today we celebrate the memorial of Blessed Brother James Miller, born just miles away from this church, who was martyred in Guatemala in 1982 and beatified in December of 2019. Blessed James Miller was a member of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, commonly known as the Christian Brothers, who were founded by the French priest, St. John Baptist de La Salle, and officially approved in 1725.

There is a well-known part of the Christian Brothers' history that has become known as the "heroic vow." We go back to 1691. De La Salle was in a moment of difficulty. His community of teaching brothers that he had formed a decade before was falling apart. He was in the "throes of indecision as to whether or not to continue this seemingly foolish enterprise. Brothers were dying from exhaustion. Many had left the rigor of his fledgling community. He was ridiculed by the local church and terribly misunderstood by his own family."¹ On November 21, 1691, De La Salle, along with Brothers Nicholas Vuyart and Gabriel Drolin gathered together in secret and made a vow to God that they would remain together in the society even if they would have to beg and live on bread alone. This was the *heroic vow*.

God heard the prayers of De La Salle, Vuyart, and Drolin and the community of brothers flourished. With this in mind, it should come as no surprise that a significant part of Lasallian spirituality is a focus on *faith* and *zeal*. The heroic vow itself was an act of faith and zeal. The 1718 Rule of the Christian Brothers "describes faith as the first great gift to the brothers, one that induces them to look upon everything they do in their work in light of their relationship with God. Zeal, their second special gift, is a burning desire for the instruction and spiritual welfare of their students."² It is this faith and zeal that I want to relate to Brother James Miller today.

In a meditation on the Feast of St. Andrew, St. John Baptist de La Salle writes, "You are called like the apostles to make God known, and for that purpose you need great zeal."³ Brother James Miller desired to go to Central America to minister to the indigenous people there, knowing full well that Nicaragua in the 1970s and Guatemala in the 1980s was not a safe place to be. For the Christian Brothers, the spirit of faith implies the zeal to instruct youth⁴—Brother James was not content to live a life where things were easy: he was ready to go where things were difficult. In fact, after returning from Nicaragua, during his years teaching at Cretin High School in St. Paul, Brother James wrote, "The weather hasn't been so cold this year, so I've managed. I hate snow, even the little we've gotten this year. [...] I guess it's no secret that I am anxious to return to Latin America."⁵

¹ Bro. Charles Kitson, FSC, "The Beginning of the Year of Consecrated Life" (DENA, November 21, 2014).

² Bro. Charles Hilken, FSC, "Elements of Lasallian Spirituality" (Cummins Institute, June 20, 2017).

³ Meditation 78.2 (Battersby translation) — "Feast of St. Andrew."

⁴ Bro. Maurice Hermans, FSC, "For a Better Understanding of Our Rule" (Christian Brothers Conference, 2002).

⁵ Quoted in *Hermano Santiago* by Theodore Drahmman, FSC (Christian Brothers Conference, 2019), p. 43–44.

As we know, Brother James' ministry in Central America was not without difficulty. During the violent clashes in Nicaragua in the 1970s, Brother James wrote, "The entire country is passing through some difficult days ... Pray for us and the people we serve."⁶ While in Guatemala, Brother James noted that "[t]he level of personal violence here is reaching appalling proportions and the Church is being persecuted because of its option for the poor and oppressed."⁷ While he stated that he was personally weary of violence, he continued to feel a strong commitment to the suffering poor of Central America. As we know, it was there in Guatemala, on the afternoon of February 13, 1982, while Brother James was fixing a lamp on the outside wall of the house, where he was shot and martyred. In his martyrdom, Brother James showed forth the same heroism that De La Salle, Vuyart, and Drolin had when they made the heroic vow in 1691.

Faith and zeal are the hallmarks of the spirit of the Christian Brothers. There are not two spirits of the institute but "rather a relationship between two elements of one spirit, a relationship of cause to effect. The spirit of faith is the source, and the spirit of zeal is one of its essential manifestations, one of the necessary effects."⁸ When the Church beatified Brother James Miller in 2019, the Church affirmed that Brother James had faith and we saw that faith manifested through his zeal—so strong was his faith and zeal, in fact, that he was martyred for it.

The years 2020 and 2021 have been difficult for everyone with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the political unrest in our country. St. John Baptist de La Salle once wrote to a brother and told him, "You will get nowhere if you allow yourself to give way to discouragement."⁹ Brother James could have easily given up the difficult work in Central America and given in to discouragement. He could have lived a much easier, a much more luxurious life, in the United States had he given up. But he did not. He had FAITH and ZEAL to continue to minister to the poor. As we celebrate Brother James today, we look to him as our model of encouragement, faith, and zeal.

Blessed Brother James Miller, pray for us!

⁶ Quoted in *Hermano Santiago* by Theodore Drahmman, FSC (Christian Brothers Conference, 2019), p. 40.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁸ Bro. Maurice Hermans, FSC.

⁹ Letter 39 — To Brother Robert in Darnetal, May 1, 1708.