This year is the 30th anniversary of the martyrdom of Brother James (Santiago) Miller, an American missionary in Guatemala. On February 13th, 1982, whilst James was repairing a wall for the Brother’s school for Mayan Indian boys, three men approached him and shot him, each emptying their guns to make sure he was dead. A few days after his death the De La Salle Brothers Regional Superior in Guatemala, 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, and apostle of the poor and underprivileged, a worker for justice and of social change.’

James’ murder was actually witnessed by boys in the second story of the centre immediately above the scene. They heard the first shots and looked down from their window. What they saw horrified them. Three men with drawn guns had just emptied them into James’ body now prone on the sidewalk. One of the men looked up and the boys pulled back, terrified that they might be shot. It actually took them weeks before they could admit that they had seen the killers.

As Brother Paul, Regional Superior for Guatemala, wrote at the time of the murder ‘It is extremely difficult to say with any certitude who Brother’s murderers might be… Nor can it be said that Brother Santiago was singled out as an individual. Indeed, any priest or religious Brother or Sister, any teacher, American or Guatemalan, of the Colegio De La Salle or the Casa Indígena might have been the possible victim of groups on the extreme right or left in the present conflict…’

Brother John Johnston, who had known James as a youth and as a young Brother, recalled that:

Jim grew up on a farm and was proud of his roots. He was profoundly attached to the soil and to rural life. He was simple, enthusiastic, intelligent, filled with energy always ‘on the go’. He was outgoing in temperament, cheerful and sensitive; he was a conscientious, capable, and zealous teacher; he talked a lot and loved to relate farm stories. He had a loud laugh; for Jim Miller, manual work was recreation; no work was below his dignity; he mopped floors and scoured toilets.”

I leave the final words on Brother James to Bishop Frederick Freking, who at the funeral mass in Wisconsin said,

"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”.

Resources:
De La Salle Institute Bulletin No. 244 (1988) – Lasallian Martyrology

DVD/CD on James Miller produced by Christian Brother Midwest District ($10), email: info@cbmidwest.org

Icon Note:
The James Miller icon was painted by Nicholas Markell. The gold circular surrounding the head of Brother James Miller is called a “nimbus.” As with most sacred art, the nimbus is symbolic. Unlike the halo in Western spirituality that represents a canonized saint, the nimbus in Eastern spirituality represents the indwelling of Christ in the person. As Christ is the light of the world, Brother James Miller strove to live in that light.