

# Brother Jim foretold assassins' bullets in letter to friend

Following is the second half of the article "A Teacher and a Martyr in Guatemala" about deceased Brother James Miller of Custer, WI. The story written by Edward and Donna Brett appeared in the Oct. 30, 1982 issue of "America" Magazine. It is reprinted with the permission of America Press, Inc., 106 West 56th St., New York, NY, 10019.

Brother Miller was no leftist — indeed, leftists are not forced to flee Nicaragua. Why then was he killed?

The answer may lie in the relations between the brothers at the Casa Indigena and the Guatemalan army. The government, to meet its quota of conscripts, often rounds up Indian boys who happen to be on the streets, forcing them into the army.

Even though students are exempt from military service, those from the Indian school are often impressed into the army. When this happens, a brother presents proof to the authorities that the particular boy in question is a student. The military then reluctantly releases him.

Two days prior to the shooting of Brother Miller, a Mayan pupil was forced into the army in accordance with the above pattern. A Christian Brother, but not James Miller, went to the authorities to obtain his release.

This time the military refused to relinquish their catch. Adamant in his demands, the brother infuriated them. The murder of Brother Miller was probably meant as a warning to the brothers at the Casa Indigena to cease interfering in governmental affairs.

This is a difficult order to obey in a country where 80 percent of the land is in the hands of one percent of the population, where the vast majority of this land is used to grow food for export to the United States, Japan, and Europe, rather than for home consumption, and where 75 percent of children under five suffer from malnutrition.

A short time before his death Brother James returned to the United States for knee surgery. While recovering, he wrote the following letter to his former teacher, Greg Robertson, who read it at a memorial Mass celebrated by Father Loren Koziol at the College of Santa Fe. His words seem to flow from an inner source of strength and compassion and quietly ask to be heard:

"After nearly 10 years of service in Nicaragua and a year-and-a-half in the States, I arrived in Huehuetenango, Guatemala, in early January, 1981. Our community of brothers there for 1981 consisted of three from the States and three from Guatemala. I had a double assignment from the

beginning: to teach in our school in Huehuetenango and to help direct the Indian Center (Casa Indigena De La Salle) in the same city. Both assignments were challenging: the former, because I was assigned to teach the history of Guatemalan art (I had to become an 'expert' overnight!) in addition to several English classes and was given the responsibility for guidance in a school of 900 pupils; the latter, because it meant living and working with 150 Indian boys (grades 7-12) in a boarding school situation with the help of two other brothers.

"Besides supervision and counseling, my duties at the Indian Center also included the maintenance of a large building and the responsibility for the small farm (10-12 acres) that is one of the educational projects of the Indian Center (there is also a carpentry shop).

"The days were often long, and many demands were placed on my time at the Indian Center, but I thoroughly enjoyed my work with the Indian boys. Through my close daily association with them, I have come to respect and love them all and to have a deep respect for the many centuries of Mayan history and tradition that is their cultural heritage.

"Guatemala is a beautiful country of mountains, valleys, lakes, lush tropical forests and fertile coastal plains. It is probably one of the most colorful countries in the world. The ancient Mayan modes of dress and customs blend with those of the Spanish conquerors to form a rich panorama of colors, sounds and special traditions.

**'I pray to God for the grace and strength to serve Him faithfully by my presence among the poor and oppressed of Guatemala. I place my life in His Providence; I place my trust in Him.'**

"The Indians still speak their traditional Mayan tongues (seven or eight Indian tongues are spoken among the boys at the Indian Center—Spanish has to be the common language).

"The Indians are industrious farmers, honest, peaceloving, simple people whose hospitality is proverbial. I always find it a joy to visit the homes of the boys from the Indian Center.

"The Indians of Guatemala form about 50 percent of the seven-million-plus population of the country; but they are the poor, the oppressed, the forgotten ones of Guatemala. Many



Picture courtesy Maryknoll Mission Society

## Brother James Miller, the good shepherd.

of them are desperately poor, the majority are illiterate, and malnutrition and infant mortality are endemic problems.

"Our apostolate at the Indian Center has for its principal purpose the formation of educated leaders among the Indian population. We have hundreds of requests each year from priests, sisters and village leaders to accept boys from their towns and villages, but we can accept only 150, including those who are already in the six-year high school program.

"The selection process is difficult, but we try to accept those with the most leadership potential. We ask the families to pay \$12.50 a month for their sons' room and board and schooling, but many can pay only a fraction of that (real costs are \$50 per boy per month).

The rest of our funding comes from donations of the Christian Brothers in the United States, the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers and from many generous relatives and friends in the United States and Europe.

"CARE provides some rice, wheat flour, cooking oil, etc., each month. God must smile on our venture with those fine lads, because somehow we always manage to receive help from someone just when we need it most.

"I can't end this letter without asking for your prayers for Guatemala (and for all of Central America). The level of personal violence here is reaching appalling proportions (murders, torture, kidnappings, threats, etc.), and the church is being persecuted because of its option for the poor and the oppressed.

"The Indian population of Guatemala, caught defenseless between the army and rebel forces opera-

ting in the country, is taking the brunt of this violence. We pray a long for peace and a just solution. Guatemala's many social and economic problems (most of which date from the Conquest in 1524), but now peace and justice elude us.

"Aware of the many difficulties and risks that we face in the future, I continue to work with faith and hope and trust in God's Providence. Please join your prayers with ours every day.

"Many selfish, blind and harder hearts must be converted to the love of Christ before a lasting solution can be found. Armed force will not solve the problems; only dialogue and mutual understanding can be viable solutions.

"I am personally weary of violence, but I continue to feel a strong commitment to the suffering poor of Central America. 'God's ways are not man's ways', says the Bible.

"God knows why He continued to call me to Guatemala when so many friends and relatives encouraged me to pull out for my own comfort and safety. I have been a Christian Brother for nearly 20 years now, and my commitment to my vocation grows steadily stronger in the context of my work in Central America.

"I pray to God for the grace and strength to serve Him faithfully by my presence among the poor and oppressed of Guatemala. I place my life in His Providence; I place my trust in Him.

"I hope you understand my position. The intensity of the past year in Guatemala has come out in these paragraphs. Please pardon so many personal references, but I can't talk about the situations and experiences of the past year out of a personal context.