

My Stories about Fr. Casimir Cypher, OFM Conv.

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By Dr. Mike Gable, Mission Office Director for the Archdiocese
of Cincinnati

who served with Fr. Casimir in Gualaco, Olancho, Honduras,
C.A. in 1973 & 74



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The local pastor told him to learn it with his catechists on the long mountain trails where he would ride horse back for weeks at a time. While visiting these distant, tiny farm communities, Casimir tried his best to share and dialogue about the light, hope and joy of Jesus while celebrating sacraments of baptism, reconciliation, the Eucharist, marriage and the anointing of the sick.

As Casimir was struggling to improve his Spanish, there was one special homily I witnessed several times that he loved to tell on his many journeys explaining how God loves not only people but all creation and animals as well. "Noah, had a grande boata," he would say while making gestures of a large boat. Then he said, "Here came the ani-ma-les" while demonstrating how Noah called various pairs to come on board. Casimir would swing his arm out from his nose making elephant noises. Then he sang, "Tweet, tweet", while flapping his arms as a bird. With his booming noises of thunder, you knew the rains were coming! All the while the villagers would laugh out loud with Casimir especially when he demonstrated how Noah had trouble trying to coax all the animals into the ark. What a hoot! He was a Franciscan through and through.



With the help of his catechists, Casimir reminded his parishioners, "God loves ALL nature, ALL of you, even obstinate animals and people. Just as God eventually sent the sun at the end of the flood, God sent his Son Jesus to be with us always." They got the lesson. They came to deeply love him over the next several years since they were grateful for his many visits to their remote rural communities reminding them that Jesus is their light of hope. The solidarity Casimir developed with his parishioners in spite of difficulties was not to be forgotten, including myself.

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Of Rocks and Snowballs

When Fr. Casimir was in Gualaco, not visiting his distant parishioners, we would walk about a half mile down to the stream to take our baths where the other boys and men would also go. On days when neither of us were rushed, we would sit at the bank to share insights about life and our faith but honestly, most of the time to tell jokes and stories. One day Casimir said, "Have you ever thrown a rock into the air and hit it with another one?" I replied, "Are you crazy? That's impossible." "Here, let me show you," he said. By God, Casimir did it! One after another. I was amazed and never forgot his accuracy.



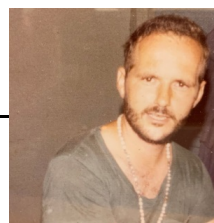
A few years later when Casimir came to witness my wedding in Cincinnati in January 1975, he stayed overnight at my parents' home. Mom was a very well dressed, organized, and proper business woman who did NOT put up with any shenanigans. As Casimir was about to get into his car up the street, he made a HUGE snow ball. With the same accuracy of throwing stones at stones, Casimir's snow ball hit mom squarely on the back. POP! My dad, I, and my siblings were stunned...what was mom going say or do?!? She turned around and saw it was Casimir. Her frown turned into a smile.

Now fast forward 40 years to 2015. Mom wanted to send something to Gualaco with me to put at Casimir's newly blessed tomb. She found two white Styrofoam balls, signed them, and told me to place them at Casimir's tomb saying, "Tell him 'I got you back twice!'" Last time I checked, those are still there. And I'm sure that with both mom and Casimir now in heaven, they've had some good laughs over that.

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"Miracles Still Happen!"

This is the most powerful memory/story I have of Fr. Casimir... Occasionally, Casimir would help me with my first aid station. One day a teenage boy was brought into my room by his very nervous, upset father.



The son was heavily bleeding from a severe and deep machete cut while cutting sugar cane. It was slit from his wrist to his elbow. I couldn't stop the hemorrhage so I yelled for Casimir's help. Nothing was working. Blood kept shooting out. Finally he suggested, "Mike, let's try saying an 'Our Father' together." After praying our hearts out, we opened our eyes and we were shocked.... the boy's bleeding had stopped! ...And he was still alive! After cleaning and taping up his wound, I turned to Casimir exclaiming, "Can you believe what just happened here? That kid should have bled to death!" He turned to me and simply said, "Michael, miracles still happen." I'll never forget his powerful faith which empowers me yet today.

"Elizabeth"

One late night, young women in a very shabby dress knocked on my door awaking both me and Fr. Casimir. In a very soft voice she said, "¿Puede ayudarme y mi nina?" "Can you help me and my baby?" In our tiny first-aid station, I asked her to take the blanket off the baby to assess her problem. She was completely covered with measles and every bone in her tiny body shown through from severe malnutrition. Casimir took a look with me and whispered, "She not going to make it much longer." I asked the mother if she has been breast-feeding her child. She answered, "I'm too poor to eat well enough to do so."



I then had to confess to this desperate mother, "I'm not a doctor and all I have are vitamins. You are welcome to take some. I'm so sorry I can't do more." Casimir asked her, "Could I baptize your baby?" The mom answered, "Si." "What's her name," Casimir asked. "Elizabeth" she said. Right then and there Casimir baptized Elizabeth and the two of them walked off into the darkness. Casimir turned to me saying, "Elizabeth is my mom's name." We both quietly wept. The next morning we heard the baby died and went off to God.

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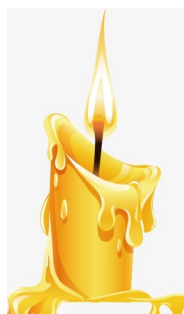
Only One DELICIOUS Brownie Was Left

In our mountainous area, big time cattle ranchers did well exporting beef out of our state of Olancho. This large territory was and is still somewhat akin to the state of Texas – proud and tough, with gun-toting, and independent cowboys. More profits were gained by shipping the beef to feed dogs in North America rather than feeding local peasants. Consequently in our village of Gualaco, like many others, we ate meat maybe three or four times a month ... but always there were beans, rice and tortillas cooked over “lena” or firewood. Few folks had dome shaped ovens handmade from clay also heated by lena. As it took a good bit of work to find and bring in enough lena to warm that clay and bake anything in those ovens, it was a very rare treat to have cake, bread, pie, etc. A visitor had brought a box of brownie mix that only produced 8 small squares. And we had seven team leaders at our mission at that time. Casimir, I, and the others slowly enjoyed every morsel. And then... there were was just ONE piece left. WHAT TO DO?? Fr. Casimir spoke up, “Who wants the last brownie?” All raised their hands. But then in one fast movement, Casimir used his bare fingers to wipe his nose and plunged them into the LAST BROWNIE. All laughed and shouted!....and Casimir grinned as he lovingly enjoyed that last taste of “heaven.”



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Theology/Counseling by Candlelight



When Fr. Casimir would return from his village sojourns to Gualaco where I was teaching English in the junior high school and doing electrical work, Casimir would stay up late telling me jokes and stories of his trips while chewing on his old cigar. The small electric generator I installed only ran from 6-9pm so we would then light a small candle. He would go one to share with me his art work and deeply spiritual poems and stories, always with a strong Franciscan love of life, simplicity and joy. That's when I really began to appreciate his study of psychology and theology. I began to seek his advice about the next steps in my life. Where does a young man like me go after this kind of intense mission experience where 50% of our babies died of simple

diseases and subsistent campesinos (peasant farmers) struggles so hard feed their families? Casimir's insights would guide me the rest of my life.

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My Reflection on the Background of Casimir's Death...Where It Led Me

At the beginning of our mission work in the early 1970s, neither Casimir nor I fully knew of the history and depth of prophetic ministries of the Franciscan missionaries in diocese Olancho since the 1940s. Cattle ranch owners bribed the local military to protect their vast tracts at the expense of hungry peasants who had legal titles to their properties. Casimir and I would soon learn that our Vatican II inspired Franciscan Bishop Nicholas D'Antonio and his fellow church workers were training peasants to become catechists and seekers of human dignity and social justice.

In their bible studies with fellow Catholics, they began to see that Jesus was not only as a personal savior but that God also empowered oppressed peoples throughout bible history, as in the story of Moses and the Hebrews being freed from the Pharaoh and Egyptian army. As marginalized Latinos studied the chapter 4 of Luke, among others, they rediscovered a Jesus who invited his flock to seek God's reign where the darkness of economic and political exploitation and oppression could be eliminated. Campesino/farmer unions, as well as mother and youth groups were forming to transform their lives as well.

Casimir and I also began to realize the tensions that had long been brewing as large rancher owners despised these efforts. While Casimir was never involved in the political or economic issues, he continued to stand in solidarity with the struggling farmers by visiting them and celebrating the sacraments with them, regardless of the distance and the rough horseback rides.



After my two years of service in Honduras, thanks to Casimir's counseling, I returned home to the Cincinnati area to teach and study religious education as well as to marry my girlfriend Kathy in January 1975, per photo left. Fr. Casimir was able to witness at our candlelight wedding mass there which was to be the last time I would see him in this life. Prior to my wedding, Casimir needed to return to the U.S. to deal with medical problems but he was able to join us before

making his choice to return to a now more dangerous Olancho diocese.

Five months later on June 25, 1975, the local military and ranch owners in Olancho decided to finally destroy these diocesan efforts of empowering the poor. Fr. Casimir, Columbian Fr. Ivan Betancourt, local catechists, and others were rounded up, tortured and slaughtered. I personally had never really understood what the word "devastated" meant until then. The lights went out for me. I would not forget the same intense pain, darkness, and lost my co-workers and parishioners in Honduras were feeling for years to come. And yet Casimir was a person who let God's light of hope and love shine.

Casimir's example led me to work with the Maryknoll Father's Justice and Peace Office in New York in the 1980s that was sponsored in part by the OFM Conventuals in Chicago. In 1988, I, my wife, and four sons joined the Maryknoll lay missionaries in Bolivia and Venezuela. Eventually I returned with my family to serve in a parish in Cincinnati and teach theology at Xavier University. During these past 20 years, I've been the director of the Mission Office for the Archdiocese of Cincinnati that also permitted me to develop 40 parish twinning relationships, some located in Honduras. This allowed me to remain connected with my friends there and work on Casimir's canonization process, for which I'm ever grateful to God.

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Fr. Casimir's Witness Continues to Inspire Hondurans

Some years ago in a visit to the seminary of Cardinal Rodriguez in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, he asked to introduce myself and shared my story of Casimir. When I ended, a seminarian by the name of Juan Carlos Padilla, came up to me and said, "I need to tell you Miguel, it was your amigo, Padre Casimiro, who inspired me to become a priest. He died before I was born but my parents and all of Olancho still speak of and honor him. He stayed with us through difficult times, even though he could have remained in United States." Juan Carlos turned to a group of ten other seminarians stating, "Miguel, meet my other seminarian friends from Olancho who are also inspired by your friend's solidarity! We are rebuilding the diocese!"



A few years later, I participated in the ordination of Juan Carlos where I profoundly felt the presence of Casimir. Later that day, along with the local Bishop Bonello, we blessed a new tomb we had built in his memory where he had served in the mountain village of Gualaco, Olancho. The church was packed, all praising God for Casimir's love and solidarity.

Fr. Casimir's "The Sun" Continues to "Shine"



As I've been watching sun downs over these past 40 years, especially on June 25, I thank God for the radiating light of Casimir in my life. I've often reflected on his meditation entitled "The Sun" and over the past 45 years, I've share this with many friends, mission workshops, and all my university students.

I hope this last part of his meditation also motivates you too to seek global solidarity, social justice, and to find the personal peace, joy and light of Christ as Casimir did.

"If a bunch of chemicals (like the Sun) can do so much to affect creation, think of what is possible for a creature who has the image of God. Also think of all that we can be thankful for, of what it means to have a day of Life to spend well on the rest of creation."

Be the Sun you were created to be and you too will do all those things that the Sun can't do and you can. You can then, like the Sun, touch the whole world without census or receipt only because you are living your life. Then when your life on earth is ended you too will have given enough to the Lives that needed your Life so that it can live on. The difference between You and the Sun is that after your Life here is ended You will be watching Life."



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Village of Gualaco