

An update on the case of

Fr. Casimir Cypher OFM Conv.

and a summary of meetings and communications regarding this case during the month of August 2014 between Bishop Joseph Bonello OFM, Ordinary of Juticalpa, Honduras, Dr. Michael Gable, mission director for the Archdiocese of Cincinnati and a personal friend and long-time advocate for the case of Fr. Casimir Cypher, Br. Joseph Wood, the Provincial's representative to coordinate a formal update of the case, Fr. Michael Zielke, Minister Provincial of St. Bonaventure Province, and Fr. Angelo Paleri OFM Conv., Postulator General.



Father Casimir Cypher (1941-1975), a member of St. Bonaventure Province (SB), USA ministered in the Conventual Franciscan mission of Honduras for a year and a half under the jurisdiction of Our Lady of Consolation Province (OLC), USA. On 25 June 1975, Fr. Casimir was murdered during an escalation of political and social unrest.

Since the moment of his death and the recovery of his remains, Fr. Casimir has been honored by the local people as a martyr for his faith. His remains were honored at the foot of the altar in the parish church of St. Jerome in the town of Gualaco, in the Province of Olancho, and in the Diocese of Juticalpa. Since that time people have regularly approached his grave asking for intercession. And every year on the anniversary of his death, the parish has held a special ceremony and procession commemorating Fr. Casimir's life and his ultimate sacrifice along with a commemoration for the many other people who were unjustly killed that same day during demonstrations for land reform.

Two years ago, in December 2012, Bishop Bonello OFM of the Diocese of Juticalpa, welcomed various American friars (members of Fr. Casimir's community) along with the public, to honor Fr. Casimir with a new tomb specifically created for him in the side wall of the same church with its own reredos painting portraying Fr. Casimir standing in a field beside the well where his body had been discovered.

At that time, the bishop met with the two American Minister Provincials, Fr. Patrick Greenough (SB) and Fr. James Kent (OLC), to share his own hope and encouragement that this case would move forward with a more formal effort at information-gathering. It must be stated that this meeting was "not" the initiation of a formal Diocesan Investigation (the first official act in the canonization process). This was a moment of sincere encouragement to the members of Fr. Casimir's religious community to be more conscientious about fact-finding and information-gathering. The bishop's canon lawyer, Fr. Francisco Giarro, offered an overview of the process for canonization.

Several points were clarified:

1. The Church offers a very thorough process to determine an individual's reputation for holiness.
2. The first step is as we have been doing, promoting Fr. Casimir's life as a role model to be imitated. But more than this, it is important to note if a wider circle of people seek him out for intercession. His reputation for holiness must live beyond just those who knew him personally.

3. A local/province postulator should be chosen; someone who may be relied upon to be consistent in following-up and coordinating the voluminous paperwork involved (interviews, testimonials, documentation, promotion of his life in a public way, etc.).

It was said at this meeting that the measuring of one's holiness is done in *meters*, meaning that truly mountains of paperwork needs to be gathered before moving to any next step. Currently our Provincial archives contain only 3 file cabinets of items referring to Casimir Cypher (one contains texts, one contains publications, one contains photocopies of the first two). When photocopied, the texts reach to a height of 18 cm (7 inches). These are substantial things, but not nearly sufficient for moving to the next level in a canonization process; not nearly as high as a meter.

4. Once a sufficient amount of material is gathered, the Province postulator will offer his documentation to the Bishop of Juticalpa.

Only a positive response from the bishop after consultation with the Conference of Bishops, will permit the cause to move to the next level.

5. Naturally, in all of this, our own Conventual Postulator General in Rome, Fr. Angelo Paleri, is to be consulted and will assist with the direction and follow-through of this extensive process.
6. During this meeting of 12 December 2010, the notes of the former Minister Provincial, Fr. Patrick Greenough, states that the canon lawyer, Fr. Francisco Giarro, continued to share that at the moment, the people of Honduras do not so much speak about Casimir's death in particular but about all of those who died on that day in general. Along with Casimir, one other priest, and 11 lay people were killed.
7. The proposal for Casimir for canonization cannot be a violent death nor can it be because it was politically motivated. Rather, it must be for a reputation of holiness.

Here, we can probably best understand such a distinction – later made by Bishop Bonello – by appreciating Casimir somewhat like St. Maximilian Kolbe. Yes, there were deeply political things going on all around Kolbe before and during World War II, but he himself was not killed because of any political things in which he was engaged. Kolbe's entire life culminated in a violent death, but he was not "holy" because he died violently. He became a saint because his whole life was focused on the Lord which allowed him to die "faithfully."

So, too with Casimir, this is the distinction that we have to make with the Vatican. And it is imperative that we make this distinction between those who no doubt died "heroically" for a cause on that day, but who were not "martyrs" for their faith. This is the thin line of distinction that we need to make, that we need to document, and that Rome will judge the case on.

8. Because of this important and defining distinction, at our more recent meeting on 14 August 2014 in St. Louis, Bishop Bonello suggested that it may be more opportune for us to celebrate the anniversary of Casimir's birth, January 12, 1941, rather than the anniversary of his death since the death anniversary for all of those killed on 25 June is celebrated in Honduras by many people as a heavily-biased political rally. Again, no cause for canonization will move forward if the Vatican even senses a hint of Casimir being associated with a political cause or if his death is being manipulated by others to drive home a political point regarding the current political situation in Honduras.

9. Fr. Francisco Giarro confirmed this distinction regarding Casimir and wanted to be sure that those who were promoting his cause were sure of the importance of the distinctions between those who died “heroically” and Casimir who died “faithfully.” Fr. Francisco mentioned that the other priest who died that day had a political reputation.
10. It is believed that Casimir was faithful to his mission and to his people. It is believed he simply did not understand the political situation around him, nor was he in any way interested in getting politically involved. His personal involvement was helping to advance people’s lives through Gospel preaching and the sacraments. His was a one-on-one ideal of service in the spirit of Christ the Healer and Christ the Teacher; he was not part of a political movement attempting to reform government policies. Again, according to Fr. Patrick Greenough’s personal notes during that 2012 meeting, he states that the violence of Casimir’s death may distract us from seeing and appreciating the wider picture of Casimir’s life, and therefore hinder our reflection on his wider reputation for holiness.
11. It is now believed that Casimir “was not” murdered because of mistaken identity. He was not mistaken to be a priest named “Michael” (the legal name on his passport or identification card), another foreign priest who was an instigator of the land reform protests that day. It is now confirmed that the government and the rich land owners were looking to curb all foreign intervention, especially meddling foreign clergy. Many of these foreigners had already fled the country in fear for their lives (or would flee immediately after this moment). Casimir remained. Whether he remained in order to serve his people in the midst of these difficult times, or whether he remained because he was not aware of the seriousness of the situation, the fact is that he stayed among his people. And the forces working against reform were determined to punish the Church’s interference. Casimir fit this foreign clergy profile. He was rounded up *on purpose* that day, *even if* it was an accident that he happened to be in town, and therefore unconsciously in harm’s way.
12. On 8 December 2012 at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Juticalpa on the very feast of the Immaculate Conception, Bishop Bonello approved “private” devotion to Casimir and encouraged the faithful to seek his intercession. For this reason, Fr. Patrick Greenough created new holy cards, brochures, and posters promoting Casimir’s life and sent them to all of the ministry sites of St. Bonaventure Province.
13. Fr. Patrick Greenough again wrote in his personal notes that it is secondary whether or not Casimir becomes an officially canonized “saint.” His life and death still speaks to each of us today as we work and minister in the routine of life and pray that we too may have the courage to accept whatever comes our way.

With the approach of the 40th anniversary of Fr. Casimir’s passing (1975-2015), it was fortuitous that Bishop Joseph Bonello of Juticalpa happened to be in St. Louis, Missouri offering mission appeals when Dr. Michael Gable contacted the Provincial Office to try to settle a more definite plan-of-action for the cause of Casimir Cypher.

Fr. Michael Zielke, the newly elected Minister Provincial, met personally with Dr. Gable at the Provincial Office in Chicago. Fr. Michael invited Br. Joseph Wood to join the meeting since he had been the archivist of the Province and knew Dr. Gable personally. Br. Joseph was also aware of the case and its history and was willing and immediately available to follow-up on whatever was going to be decided.

As mentioned earlier, it was providential that on 14 August 2014, the feast day of St. Maximilian Kolbe, Dr. Gable and Br. Joseph Wood journeyed to St. Louis to meet Bishop Bonello in person at Presentation Parish. It was every one's intention to be more proactive in this cause and to clarify a very concrete "plan-of-action."

Together the three men discussed a number of things quite honestly, both hopes and cautions:

Question: Should we move forward at all? The reason for this question was a social justice issue. It happens too frequently that foreigners/European missionaries who die tragically are presented for canonization sooner than any local/native member of the clergy who may also have been violently abused or murdered for the same or similar causes. Would it look like American imperialism if we promote an American martyred missionary but the Diocese of Juticalpa does not promote any of its own local clergy? This same question was raised by the Delegate General for Justice and Peace in 1991 with the promotion of our two Polish Conventual martyrs of Peru.

Response: This question was answered honestly by admitting that this perception is a concern; this perception of Americans having more money and thus being able to promote their own causes over other poorer nations. It would externally appear as one more insult to the people to whom we were ministering. However, as Fr. Francisco stated above, in this particular case we are looking at the holiness of a person's whole life. We are making the distinction between Casimir as a "martyr" (dying for his faith, for his love of God), and those who died "heroically," for a political cause. We need to focus on the person, not on the event (of his death). Examining his life has merit in itself. Casimir loved his people who were living in difficult circumstances. He was faithful. He lived a sacrificial life.

Question: This cause has been in the works for nearly 40 years and not much has happened by way of paperwork. Although there have been a few articles, some local Honduran devotions, and a lot of table conversations about Casimir's life and death, there has not been a concerted bureaucratic movement of formal information-gathering and documentation. And after nearly 40 years, most of the eye-witnesses are dead and their stories or impressions can no longer be documented first-hand.

Our driving issue is how to transform basic "interest" in Casimir's story to something "inspiring"? We must ask ourselves, is there an organic cult that has sprung up spontaneously? Is there a ground swell of devotion? Otherwise, no cause for canonization can move forward.

Response: Actually, in Honduras there has been a good deal of regular devotion focused on Casimir. There have been private prayers by individuals and there have been public services and processions. Once Casimir's body was recovered, it was honored immediately by being prominently placed in the church at the foot of the altar. Recently, two years ago, a new more elaborate tomb was created in a wall to the side of the altar. Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez of Tegucigalpa, the capital, and the former bishop of Juticalpa, Bishop Maurus Muldoon, have both remained solidly behind Casimir's cause ever since they were in a position to promote his life and virtues in a more formal way. Bishop Bonello stated that he personally believes that Casimir was a holy man and that he died a holy death. In his own heart as a priest and as a missionary in a foreign land, Bishop Bonello said that by his own will he wants to promote this cause because we need to hold up someone who can live in that environment, who can work among the people, and who can change the world by being focused on Gospel values.

Question: In the past few months Bishop Bonello told us that witnesses with conflicting information have come forward (Luis Armando Verde, among others) offering different views about exactly what happened that fateful night of 25 June 1975. It has been said that because there was so much chaos going on that night in between the soldiers, the ranchers, the campesinos, etc., that we are now not sure if Casimir is actually in his own tomb. It is said that there were bribes offered to soldiers to reclaim bodies, etc. Someone who was looking for Casimir determined his remains only because his body seemed *more gringo* than the others (it had lighter skin. But wouldn't Casimir have been pretty tanned after living there for so long?). The workmen who exhumed Casimir's body and who built his new tomb (2012) attest to moving a whole body (not body parts). In fact, the body of the man in Casimir's tomb is whole enough to be doubled over. He was also doubled over in the earlier sacristy wall-tomb (because both tombs were hollowed out niches in the very thick walls of the church).

This new evidence, which these workmen attested to in writing, offers us a different interpretation of the story that Casimir was placed into a well with others which was afterward dynamited. Now we have to ask that perhaps he wasn't put into the well. Perhaps he did not blow up into little pieces. Perhaps his body was laid to the side (because of a bribe or because it had been overlooked?). If a soldier was bribed, as is being suggested, then that is why we have a "whole" body. Recent witnesses also testify to Casimir resisting arrest for which he was pistol whipped. This may be the reason why he was not recognizable by his face, only by the lighter color of his skin. ???

Response: Casimir's body (someone's body) has been moved four times. Once from the well where his body was found, and three times in the church of St. Jerome in Gualaco: once in the floor in front of the main altar, once to a wall in the sacristy, and this final resting place, in a wall again in the main church. We are at least sure that it has been the same body being moved. But we are not sure that it is the body of Casimir Cypher.

In 2012, this body was exhumed and exposed before being placed in its new tomb in the side wall. It was found to be fleshy and pliable. In fact, fluid (blood?) oozed out of the body onto a sheet on which it was laying. This is considered to be a possible miracle because after nearly 40 years in the grave no body should have fluid in it.

Because of this doubt – that Casimir may not be in his own tomb – we must cooperate in scheduling a DNA test to determine the remains of the person in the wall-tomb. If it is Casimir, the case is settled. If it is not, then do we need to do DNA testing on all of the other 12 bodies? We would need the permission of the many different families or the government to perform these DNA tests. And where are they all buried?

Bishop Bonello believes that Casimir's cause can still move forward even if the wrong body is in Casimir's tomb. There are saints that have been declared even when no body exists (i.e. Maximilian Kolbe). However, in this case, because there are many bodies that in fact do exist (from that one day of murders), it would be a mandate of ours to confirm which one is Casimir.

A plan-of-action:

1. Bishop Bonello has suggested that we engage two people who can do some of the leg-work of interviewing people who knew Casimir personally or who knew the situation in June 1975. One is a priest, Fr. Celio Mencias, Vicar General of Juticalpa. The other is a Honduran and student-friar studying in Washington DC, fr. Maximilian Avila. The bishop also suggested that some of his seminarians, who are gifted with writing skills, could be engaged in such an important project.

2. Name a Province postulator.
3. Schedule DNA tests on the body in Casimir's tomb (or perhaps on the liquid that flowed from the body onto a linen sheet after it had been exhumed which was cut up and given away as relics).
4. Someone needs to be hired to write a definitive biography of Casimir Cypher (we have many resources already in our archives). Can a local Master's or Doctoral candidate be asked about this possibility? Sr. Maria Garcia has written a book about the period and has many references to Casimir. Her bibliography would be extremely helpful.
5. Invite the Postulator General to the Province to provide a day on the canonization process and perhaps offer some concrete advice about Casimir Cypher's case in particular.
6. Continue to gather books, articles, stories of intercession, etc., about Casimir. Fr. Mark Weaver, of Our Lady of Consolation Province, should be particularly interviewed since he lived and worked in Central America for 25 years. And although he did not know Casimir personally – having arrived after his death – Fr. Mark knew the political situation and he knew many people who personally knew Casimir. Fr. Mark has also written articles on the topic of Casimir's life and on the human and political situation in which he (Casimir) found himself.
7. Coordinate interviews with Casimir's family, with parishioners in Rockford, California, and elsewhere who may still be alive and who personally knew him. These should be formal interviews, i.e. written or recorded and signed.
8. Copies of all of this paperwork should be continuously forwarded to Bishop Bonello in Honduras and to Fr. Angelo Paleri at the Curia (both of whom have said that they have very little or nothing on Casimir Cypher's case).
9. Once Bishop Bonello believes that he has a sufficient amount of material to justify moving forward, he will consult with the Bishops Conference of Honduras about formally opening a "Diocesan Investigation."
10. There is no "official/canonical" naming someone a "Servant of God," the presumed first stage in the canonization process. But it was explained that as a rule-of-thumb, once the Bishops' Conference authorizes an investigation, then the investigation is considered "official" and then Casimir may be unquestionably entitled a "Servant of God."

It is presumed that at this time we could then create small reliquaries holding perhaps bits of Casimir's habit for display at each of our ministry sites. These reliquaries could be used for private prayer, public prayer services, taken to hospitals on sick calls, etc.

Immediate decisions:

1. With the 40th anniversary of his death drawing near, the Province should make a concerted effort to celebrate and to commemorate Casimir's life somehow – especially in connection with Bishop Bonello and the Diocese of Juticalpa. Some big celebrations are being planned there, but highlighting Casimir's life by itself – not in connection with the others who died on that same day.

2. Dr. Michael Gable has visited Honduras perhaps 30 times since 1975. He will be returning to Honduras in February. This would be the perfect opportunity to organize a 40th anniversary pilgrimage to the sites where Casimir lived and worked to anyone interested in the Province.
3. In October, for the anniversary of the founding of the Diocese of Juticalpa, Bishop Bonello will be visiting a small shrine dedicated to Santa Maria de la Paz (Our Lady of Peace), but he will also be stopping at the shrine of Casimir to honor him and to try to initiate more regular devotion toward him.
4. During the December 2012 meeting in Honduras, Fr. Patrick Greenough chose to offer Bishop Bonello and his diocese a regular financial contribution from our Province as a good will gesture confirming our continuing relationship. \$1000.00 a month is sent to support the seminary. Bishop Bonello remains grateful for this generous gift and hopes that our Province will be able to maintain it.
5. Bishop Bonello also stated that because he comes to the States once a year to offer mission appeals for his diocese, he would be very happy to visit our Province, to meet everyone, and to update the Province and Definitory on any progress in this cause. Perhaps the bishop could come with Fr. Juan Carlos Padilla, a newly ordained priest whose vocation was inspired by Casimir's life. Bishop Bonello is already scheduled to be in Cincinnati between June-August 2015. Perhaps this would be the perfect time to plan a 40th anniversary celebration in the Province while Bishop Bonello is in the country.
6. Any celebrations for Casimir Cypher should include our other American Provinces, but especially Our Lady of Consolation Province, since Casimir died under their jurisdiction and in their mission. They have also been very generous in assisting with archival documentation.

Respectfully submitted,
Br. Joseph Wood OFM Conv.

20 September 2014

- This text was reviewed by both Bishop Bonello and Dr. Michael Gable who attested to its correctness.
- This text was presented to the St. Bonaventure Province Definitory on 18 November 2014, at which time they voted to move forward.

Contacts:

Bishop Jose Bonello, current bishop of Juticalpa

504-2785-2011
bonelloofm@gmail.com

+ Bishop Maurus Muldoon, retired bishop of Juticalpa

maurusmuldoon@yahoo.com

Cardinal Oscar Andres Rodriguez Maradia

cardoscar@yahoo.es

Joyce Keller, Fr. Casimir Cypher's niece
Assisted Living - Medford

joyceakeller@hotmail.com

Dr. Michael Gable, friend and promoter of Casimir Cypher's life and cause
mgable@catholiccincinnati.org

Fr. Daniel Medina *is from Honduras, but works in Newark, NJ now. Knows the wife of the man who killed Casimir and others (Mel Zeleya). He is willing to interview the wife of this man. Fr. Daniel was the secretary to Bishop Muldoon, former bishop of Juticalpa.*
Danmed172002@yahoo.com / also phone: 937-342-1813

+ Sr. Maria Garcia OSF (author)
Holy Family Church
326 N. Whitcomb St.
Ft. Collins, CO 80521

Or the Motherhouse
School Sisters of St. Francis
1501 S. Layton Blvd.
Milwaukee, WI 53215

fr. Maximilian Avila OFM Conv. Fraymaxkolbe@gmail.com
301-437-6782

+ Fr. Celio Mencias, Vicar General of Juticalpa celmenp@yahoo.com
Parroquia Santa Geltrudis,
Juticalpa, Olancho. Honduras.

Luis Armando Verde (new witness)
c/o Obispado (bishop's residence)
Apartado Postal No. 2
Juticalpa, Olancho.
16101 Honduras CA.

Fr. Michael Zielke OFM Conv. michaelzielk@gmail.com

+ Fr. Mark Weaver OFM Conv. mweaver@tiscali.it

Fr. James Kent OFM Conv. *OKC* friarjk@aol.com

Fr. Angelo Paleri, Postulator General postulator@ofmconv.net

Fr. Victor Abegg *St. Augustine*
Fr. Ronald Olsen
Fr. Allen ramirez
Fr/Bishop Callahan - *La Crosse*