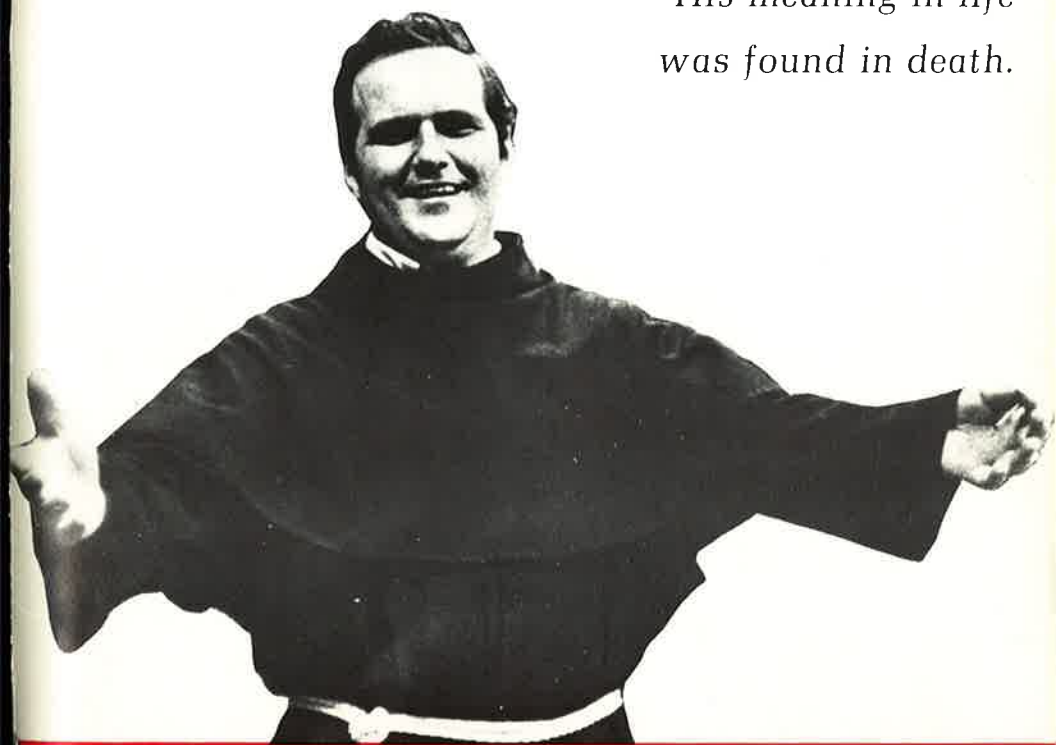


# MAN of PEACE

Casimir Michael Cypher, OFM Conv

*His meaning in life  
was found in death.*



By Fr. Anselm Romb, OFM Conv.

FRANCISCAN MARYTOWN PRESS

LIBERTYVILLE, ILLINOIS

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## CHAPTER ONE

# Preview

“Be the Sun you were created, you can then, like the Sun, touch the whole world without census or receipt only because you are living your life . . . The difference between you and the Sun is that, after your Life here is ended, you will be watching Life.”

So Fr. Casimir Cypher wrote as a missionary in Honduras, Central America, in February, 1974. This might have been an appropriate obituary or inscription on his tombstone. He was the first U.S. citizen to die by violence for the Catholic faith in Latin America during our century.

He was my Franciscan brother, my friend. His story needs to be told — because an inner urgency drives me to interpret his life before it is given meanings and dimensions foreign to his thinking.

Was he a hero? Of course — but nothing could have been farther from his mind. Was he a saint? Only God makes such judgments. But in the human order of things and according to earth-bound speculation we can identify even heroic virtue, a sanctified humanity, a non-judgmental charity.

The purpose of this brief biography is to remember . . . to wonder . . . to take inspiration . . . to praise God for his wonderful works, especially the wonderful work of Casimir's pure soul. His great heart (in a small body) was single, his theology simple, his personal philosophy of life uncluttered, his honesty disarming. I never heard him speak a critical or unkind word for the many years I knew him; perhaps that says it all.

This is a story, not very complex — in fact, rather pedestrian — of a man, a man of God as well as a man of the people. No one was not his brother or sister. His Francis-kind canticles made him brother also of the skies, the forests, the animals, even the insects that tormented him as he rode through the highland jungles of Central America. (He gently complained to me once about these tiny brothers and sisters.)

If grace builds on nature, then Casimir had a head start on most of us. I find that the most acceptable sign, the most profound indication of holiness is *joyfulness*. Joy is found in humor, in placid camaraderie, in sports, in nature. It was a pleasure to sit with him at dinner and at parties.

You might have considered him just a plain-feathered sparrow, until his writings revealed the lark. You might not have been impressed by his preaching, until you heard him in the confessional. You might have dismissed him as a “nice lamb,” unaffected but not particularly dynamic, until you heard about his martyrdom, which demonstrated the heart of a lion.

His story would have been more interesting and this biography more absorbing, if he had some dramatic tension in his life, some great “lost love,” some well-publicized achievements, even some flair as a missionary. (After almost two years’ residence in Honduras, he still spoke Spanish indifferently well. He spoke the sign language of charity, of compassion, of incredible simplicity, of his ready availability.)

His self-portrait, unwittingly painted yet self-revealing, can be seen in the prose poem entitled “The Sun,” an excerpt of which opened this chapter . . .

Casimir wrote this — characteristically — for a depressed lay missionary woman in Gualaco, as she was leaving the mission. He also carved a small wooden plaque of the *sun*.

The Sun is made of just a few elements. It possesses none of the forms of Life. It is just a sphere of chemicals that is burning itself up from all sides. But it gives Life to plants and animals and man. It is the source of Light without which we could not see what is good and beautiful. It gives us the warmth that is necessary for all of Life and even for the formation of all those mineral wonders that wait around to be discovered.

The Sun according to its makeup is one of the lowliest parts of creation and at the same time one of the most important and necessary. This is because the Sun gives what it has to Life, sort of becomes Life because it affects Life, and it does this regularly, day by day, hour by hour. The Sun receives help from no other part of creation; it is simply being and doing what it was made for.

In time the Sun shall die but by that time the development of Life will be great enough to survive without it. In the time that has passed and will pass, as the Sun burns itself out, it will have affected and caused Life on the chemical, physical, biological, psychological, philosophical, theological, and spiritual levels by way of inspiration or by chemical or physical contact actually lifting Life out of the Earth.

If a bunch of chemicals 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 has done and is doing. You will find other 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.

## CHAPTER TWO

# The Beginning

When you drive on Wisconsin Highway 13 or 64 into Medford, Wisconsin, you are often crowded out by eighteen-wheelers of the Tombstone Pizza Company, the largest employer of Medford citizens. You wonder why the company placed its enormous plant in this out-of-the-way village.

And you wonder why Medford—which I never heard of before I met the Cypher family—was the place of Casimir's birth. "What good can come out of Nazareth?" the Judean city-slickers also asked. "But you, O Bethlehem, are not the least of the princes of Judah!" It's an ancient hostility between Sinai and Canaan, cattleman and farmer, city dweller and country bumpkin. We used to kid Casimir about his origin: "The only culture you've got is agriculture!" No one ever took a ribbing with greater equanimity.

Medford is a mighty fine place to raise a family, especially if you are partial to hunting and fishing and unpolluted air to breathe. The nearest large city is—well, there isn't any! But there is Wausau to the east, Eau Claire to the west, Ironwood to the north, and nothing much to the south until you reach Madison. Medford is the perfect place to grow up with old-fashioned values and ways. The soil may not be very fertile, nor the restaurants memorable, nor the summer too long, but who cares if the people are neighborly, understated, and concerned to make you feel "to home."

The Cypher homestead is a little outside town off the main road. The original farmhouse is long gone, replaced by a modern structure



occupied by Casimir's brother, Eugene. He is always ready to talk about Casimir, whom he calls "Mike," the name he received in baptism. "Ma always said that Mike, even though he was the runt, was the pick of the litter!" This was his bottom-line evaluation of Casimir.

It helps to know the family in understanding Casimir. The keystone of the arch was Mrs. Elizabeth Cypher, the matriarch, whose memories and memorabilia linger about the house—her rocking chair, her favorite icons, her lifetime mementos and photographs. She slowed up towards the end with a debilitating heart condition, but she presided alert to the end.

In an interview with Roberto Brauning which was printed in *Our Sunday Visitor*\* on August 10, 1975, just three months after Casimir's assassination in Honduras at the age of thirty-five, she responded, "I think I am doing fine now. I am trying to accept it. . . . He wasn't the kind of man who would cause trouble. He would never even participate in a demonstration. I thank the Lord that the Honduran bishops said he was a man of peace. That is the truth.

"He never had a chance. He was always slightly built and probably never defended himself. . . . Michael (Casimir) always was very special for me. I cared for all of my sons and daughters"—nine sons and three daughters—"but maybe because he was a priest he was something special. I was lucky enough to have a priest in my family."

Mrs. Cypher did not lose sight of her religious values even then. "I have tried to be reconciled. I got to get it through my head that he is gone. It is the Lord's will, and he knows what He does. . . . I just hope that he didn't die in vain. . . . He must be home with the Lord now.

"I just pray that I get reconciled to the fact that he is gone, as I should be."

From such a woman was Casimir born. He maintained the integrity which he learned in his home.

I pulled the personal file of Casimir Cypher to trace his meager history—a thin file to record the passage of a special person.

Michael Jerome Cypher was born in Medford on January 12, 1941, and was baptized in the Church of Our Lady of the Rosary seven days later by Fr. Gregory J. Reuter. The same pastor filled out his baptismal form

\**Our Sunday Visitor*, August 10, 1975. Huntington, IN. Vol. 64, no. 3, 290. Page 1.

on June 8, 1959, when young Michael was applying to the Conventual Franciscan Order's high-school seminary. He had received his First Holy Communion on May 30, 1948, and confirmation on June 28, 1954, both in the same parish church.

How ordinary, how prosaic, how often repeated are such statistics in the lives of thousands of Catholic boys and girls everywhere. No one can predict how the ordinary can grow into the extraordinary, how the pedestrian becomes a high-flier. Was there any indicator early on? It seems not. Perhaps Casimir's life was a reinforcement of the canard that grace builds on nature—slowly, perhaps, but with a result that belied the humble origin of its subject. Or perhaps it pleased God to fashion a vessel of clay into a beautiful repository of His gifts, so it would be certain to all Who was the artist.

Even as a child Casimir loved the outdoors and physical activities. His poetry and meditations and fables are typically nature-oriented. Early in his priesthood he penned this "Meditation on Nature":

I like the sun because it's bright and warm and gives light and life to all the world and always makes itself beautiful when it gets up or goes to sleep.

I like oceans because they are powerful and lazy and make a home for all kinds of scary and beautiful fish.

I like rivers because they gurgle and splash and are not afraid to dive down mountains and because they carve out rocks and help land dry up and fill up the oceans.

I like rain and clouds because they bring water everywhere, and because they are delicate and dangerous, inspiring and frightening.

I like all kinds of water because it's refreshing and I'm always thirsty and like to swim.

I like mountains because they are big and high and strong and help a person see a long way and because they give us more land to live on.

I like trees because they are green and smell good and talk

funny when the winds blow and because they let birds and animals live in them, and I like birds and animals because they are different in so many ways.

I like stars because they twinkle and give direction to smart people.

I like creation because it's everything of every kind and especially the living things because they make every other thing useful.

I like God because He made it all and I like *you* because you believe me and then I . . .like . . .better.

## CHAPTER THREE

# Michael Becomes Casimir

St. Bonaventure Province, now headquartered in Chicago, Illinois, was still operating a high-school seminary in the fifties. The school was still producing fine candidates for the priesthood and brotherhood in those days, although the “mortality rate”—those who left the seminary—was typically high.

Casimir followed his older brother into St. Mary’s Minor Seminary and right into the priesthood itself (although his older brother subsequently left). Fr. Philip Wozniak wrote a testimonial to Casimir’s life; he is an articulate eyewitness to Casimir’s high school and latter seminary career. This extract was published in a mission newsletter, *Mishon*, in the summer of 1977, two years after Casimir’s death. . . .

“In 1958, I was newly-ordained and appointed Vice-Prefect at St. Mary’s in Crystal Lake. ‘Michael’ was a very likable young man and certainly no model student. While his mischief was punishable by existing seminary rules, his character was totally wholesome. After he entered the Order, he grew in sensitivity and was ever more impressive spiritually. Fr. Casimir and I never lived together in the community, but I saw him often. Before going to Honduras and on his trips back to the U.S., he spent some time with us at the Franciscan House of Studies in Chicago, where I was Rector at the time.

“Fr. Casimir was a carefree young man who worried little about convention or, for that matter, money. He lost everything of importance, e.g., key to the house, key to the car. He frequently violated

community order by innocently forgetting to inform his superiors when and where he was going. He never had his own cigarettes. It would do no good to give him a whole package. He would have left them somewhere and ask for more. He made too many appointments for the same hour and the same day, and he frequently would not be at home when all these people arrived.

“But all of that is nonsense. I only mention it to show that he was human. Since I have always been preoccupied with most of the formalities and conventions of civilized society, I would find myself getting annoyed with some of his ‘carelessness.’ And, I suppose, I will always remember with pain that, on his last visit to the House of Studies, he must have sensed my annoyance at one point. I don’t remember his exact words, but it sounded pretty much like this: ‘Look, Father, if I do things that sometimes bug you, I want you to know that I don’t mean them because you are tops in my book, and I don’t ever want to offend you.’ And, at the first of the many memorial Masses for his soul, which was celebrated at our Provincial Chapter, at the greeting of peace, one of Fr. Casimir’s former superiors said to me, ‘I know that you had a great influence on Fr. Casimir because he often spoke of it.’ In the light of what Fr. Casimir really was deep in his soul and in the eyes of God, these incidents are both incredibly flattering and painfully haunting.”

The rector of St. Mary’s, David Janowiak, wrote a summary report to the Minister provincial, Fr. Ladislaus Surak, on June 29, 1959, upon Casimir’s graduation. Whereas the vote to propose him for the novitiate was not quite unanimous, the report identified him as refreshingly “normal” in every way, particularly his piety (although one wonders how a rector can reach that conclusion!). “He has shown ample charitableness among his fellow students.”

“Michael” was always near the head of the class during his four seminary years. At graduation he was second out of a class of seven, but in a high-school seminary, after the winnowing of “lesser lights” for four years, such an achievement is not unusual. His best subject was mathematics.

“Michael’s worst year scholastically has been his Senior Year. This may be owing in part to a football injury incurred at the outset of the scholastic year; the injury prohibited Michael from using his right arm for a period of two months.” The next entry goes on to say, “In spite of his small

size, Michael has been an outstanding athlete at the seminary. He has participated in practically every sport offered. Upon being graduated, Michael received the silver medal athletic award."

Under *Social Qualifications* the rector wrote, "Michael's social qualities recommend him highly. He has always exhibited an ease in getting along with all students, both vocational and non-vocational; he has been a member of many of the clubs; he has been a participant in every activity."

No doubt young Michael was a "joiner"—certainly he was gregarious and fun-loving. About his vocation the rector finally interjected, "Michael seems always to have desired to enter the novitiate; he seems never to have wavered regarding his vocation to the priesthood and the Franciscan life." No doubt this was a significant insight into the young man's life, because the rector left the priesthood and religious life several years later.

In 1958 St. Bonaventure Province maintained its novitiate at "Havenwood," the former Edward Laird Ryerson estate in Lake Forest, Illinois. This magnificent thirty-two acre estate in the high-rent district, with its mall, meadow, and formal gardens, was hardly an appropriate environment for future friars who were to be espoused to Lady Poverty. The province had purchased it years earlier because they could not afford a brand new building. Nevertheless its ambience scarcely prepared the young for a realistic experience of friary life, even apart from the fact that seminary life is typically artificial and unreal in the first place!

Michael received the religious name of "Casimir" when he was invested with the black Franciscan habit on August 14, 1959. He seemed to delight in having an alliterative name, "Casimir Cypher," even though he had not a drop of Polish blood in his veins and nothing in common with the sentimental representations of the Polish prince commonly seen in stained-glass windows. At the end of the novitiate his novice-master delineated Friar Casimir's character according a time-honored scheme:

Piety: average  
Humility: good  
Obedience: good  
Temperament: phlegmatic  
Vocation: true  
Sociability: good

Health: normal  
Industry: slow  
Manners: good  
Intelligence: average...accepted by Loyola.

I suspected Casimir was above average in intelligence, but his non-aggressive, soft-spoken, and tentatively-stated opinions may have left some with the impression that his was a dull mind. Yet it is no exaggeration to claim that his mind was constantly at work, not favoring logic so much as metaphor. It was not a value to him to win an argument or show off his talents. I further suspect that he did not care to disclose his artistic abilities, insofar as they might have seemed inappropriate to the rugged and rough-edged man he was. The unexpected and incongruous emerged in his speech. A clumsy or inept person he would describe as "crumple-foot." In the middle of a "religious" conversation he might drop a "barnyard" phrase that gave the listener pause, but it was never to shock or titillate, and meant no more than the punctuation at the end of this sentence!

The novice-master added some final comments on Friar Casimir. He makes "mistakes in table prayers, (is) frequently lost when antiphonarian, doesn't follow (the) text for nocturns, morning-evening prayers," which suggests "a case of day-dreaming. His room displays lack of tidiness." His strongest virtue is thus analyzed: "Likes to be occupied at some activity, and is capable, though slow." And this is his imperfection: "Keeps to himself on occasions, rather than be with the group," His handicap: "reads Latin poorly."

In general, the cataleptic chronicle takes note: "Very well-behaved—quiet in manner—prefers to do things, rather than talk. In his personal habits there is room for improvement (not very neat and tidy). In general, very observant of rules. Highly recommended." It is a relief finally to read the last phrase: "Highly recommended."

During the four years Friar Casimir spent at Loyola University, he scraped through without distinction—a solid C student. He was graduated with a B.S. as a Psychology Major on June 9, 1964.

The cleric-master at the Sacred Heart House of Studies near Loyola was the choleric but insightful ex-provincial, Fr. Cyril Kita. His eyewitness

evaluation of Casimir gives much additional light to the latter's growth. He wrote to the minister provincial on July 2, 1961:

Character: lively, obedient, willing and obliging.

Vocation: sincere—though shaken.

Piety: normal.

Sociability: very good.

Talents: mediocre, but good in Math. His drawback is Latin and English. For the past year his average is 2.24 out of a possible 4.00.

He failed in Latin this second semester.

Application: very good.

Remarks: with help in his Latin (also English) he would make a good student. If obedience is any indication of a vocation—this boy has it. Any and every effort to save the lad from disappointment and frustration is well worth it and will pay off dividends. A beautiful soul—even if he naps during meditation.

(Thanks, Fr. Cyril!)

Simplicity and generosity are at the core of the personality and spirituality of Casimir. Not too often do grace and nature join hands so completely in one life. His willingness to share what he had and what he knew in a simple, transparent gesture of love is the comment of all who knew him then and later. His life and death is an indictment of those vocation directors and formation personnel who require sophistication and worldly wisdom in candidates. The brilliant and well-socialized often defect—perhaps because they try to be the authors of their own salvation and the architects of spiritual life. These misguided directors are cloning themselves and do not always allow the simple to be themselves. This “new conformism,” much more rigid and self-serving than the frequently-criticized past norms of formation and education, would never have “passed” Casimir. He was simply too simple and naive, too poor as a student and unsophisticated, to have been found “acceptable.”

The charming story of “Zeke the Streak,” a *turtle* that was a compulsive achiever, reveals much about Casimir's values—particularly the true goals of education in contrast with what frequently eventuates from “book learning.”

#### ZEKE THE STREAK

This is the life story of Zeke, the fastest turtle in the whole



world. Although turtles are famous for their slowness, there are fast ones and slow ones, as turtles go. As turtles go the fastest, there was Zeke, called the 'streak' by his companions.

Zeke was not only the fastest, but also the most determined of the turtle population. After he had proven himself that he was the fastest swimmer and the most rapid walker, he taught himself how to run and was the marvelous champion of all Turtle-land.

Rather than bask in the glory of his accomplishments Zeke always strove to be more. He was never satisfied with being the best in everything turtles did, but wanted to be able to swim faster and more gracefully than the fastest and most graceful fish. He wanted to walk and run faster than the swiftest antelope and more gracefully than the gazelle. He wanted to climb better than a squirrel and fly more effortlessly than the swallow and to dig more rapidly than the champion mole.

Zeke decided that he would not rest or be happy until he was the best of everything. His ability to concentrate was probably the greatest known in history. By sheer concentration and determination he caused himself to grow longer and wider feet and to streamline his shell, so that in several years he was able to swim twice as fast as before. His limbs grew stronger and more agile so that he could run faster than before. He developed strong claws that were very sharp, so that he could climb trees and burrow into the ground. As the years passed, he developed a layer of thick skin that could be stretched to enable him to glide from the trees to the ground.

Zeke spent all his time practicing and concentrating on being better at one thing or another. In all of his life he became a little more efficient at the innumerable undertakings with which he was forever concerned. He didn't associate with the other turtles, who were very proud of him and who had the greatest respect for him. He didn't associate because he considered them dull and inferior. He didn't associate with the other animals or fish or birds, who also considered him a very special creature and were very inspired by his continual accomplishments. He didn't associate because he was jealous of them and angry at them

for being able to swim faster or run or dig or fly better than he.

For Zeke every accomplishment became a frustration; every new achievement became a cause for more profound despair; every talent developed was a cause for shame and a feeling of helpless inadequacy. Zeke was either sad or angry or both. He was sad. It was sad to see him. He made everyone sad, because no one could help him.

Zeke knew more about the principles of running, digging, walking, flying, jumping, swimming than everyone. He knew how to concentrate to effect growth and use every last tiny part of muscle, sinew, or cell to accomplish what was possible. He knew all the principles of health from eating to exercise and proper balance of all the things necessary for life.

But Zeke never shared with anyone, never helped anyone with anything and never let anyone help him. So his life story that began so well and proved so much ends up being a sad fable.

## CHAPTER FOUR

# To The Minnesota Swamp

The urban megaversity of Loyola of Chicago was a far cry from the traditional Assumption Seminary in Chaska, Minnesota, which lay about 30 miles from the Twin Cities. The building itself was the abandoned “Mud-Cura” Sanitarium where rheumatic and alcoholic patients came to try the curative powers of the mud taken from the surrounding swamps. It took years to update and refurbish the old place. The swamps and hills and woods provided giant mosquitoes, delicious watercress, and hours of hunting, fishing, and tramping to those addicted to outdoor pursuits.

Nevertheless, in this seminary operated by the Our Lady of Consolation Province—with whom St. Bonaventure Province had this happy symbiosis for years—“community” was central. For Casimir and for those of us who “did” theology there, the warmth and fraternity of the common life was the significant heritage handed down to us. It was—indoors and in the woods—the natural habitat of Casimir. At Assumption Seminary was found at least the supportive ambience of all the natural virtues in those who had not yet achieved the supernatural.

Fr. Jim Van Dorn, OFMConv., wrote a brief reminiscence about Casimir in his province’s publication under the title, “Simplicity and Gift”:

This was best indicated to me when I worked with him one year in the seminary on a decorating committee. Casimir always wanted to help and I told him I needed five-foot drawings of the major prophets, which he did very professionally within 3-4 hours! I could hardly believe that one could draw so quickly

so well! I asked him how he was able to do that. He said that it was just something that he could do. But that was the way he was. Casimir was there simply saying what he could do and to offer his talent.

I always felt at home with Casimir. And we enjoyed each other's company. We were not real close friends. But he always felt that he could stop by and just talk. And his simplicity was just that. He would be himself with a person. Shortly after my ordination he came to me and asked to go to confession. In a very simple but beautiful way he presented himself for the Lord's forgiveness.

Simplicity is a Franciscan trait. It was not surprising to know that Casimir chose to go to Honduras. He was the type of person who wanted to live simply and with God's poor. I believe that it is true to say that a real artist requires the gift of simplicity which cuts through the complexities of life and sees things as they really are. And that is how I will always remember Casimir. A man who was simply himself. And one who sought opportunities to use his God given gifts.

Casimir's academic history showed no substantial change from his past performance. He penned his own self-portrait and summary of his past life in the application he made, while he was in his fourth and last year of theological studies at Chaska-in-the-Swamp. He outlines his own development in applying for a CPE Program (Counseling Pastoral Education).

I was born and raised on a small farm near Medford, Wisc. I was the 10th of 12 children, was baptized as a baby, Michael Cypher, in the Roman Catholic Church of Holy Rosary in Medford. It was during my years in the parish school that I first had and expressed a desire to become a priest. My older brother, Vernard, now Fr. Cyprian, was attending St. Mary's Minor Seminary High School in Crystal Lake, Ill., when I graduated from grade school. This influenced my attending the same seminary for my high school and seminary training.

At St. Mary's I received my first influence from the Franciscan Fathers (OFMConv. = Order of Friars Minor Conventual). Their

way of life appealed to me and so I entered their Novitiate (year of religious training and Franciscan spirituality) in Lake Forest, Ill. My first real encounter with religious life, its principles and practice, was at this Novitiate. It was during this year that I really looked over my own particular religious life and made my first adult religious commitment. The Novitiate was probably the biggest influence upon my whole religious development.

After Novitiate I entered Loyola University in Chicago, Ill. I majored in psychology with a minor in Math and Philosophy. College had a little effect upon my personal development since we were pretty strictly regimented in those years. In the past four years (theological studies) I have rethought almost all of my ideas about God and religious life and have progressed.

My only professional goal at this point is to be a really good and effective priest, a real servant of God and of His People.

In general, I have always enjoyed good health. I smoke too much at times.

From my observations and the small amount of experience I've had, I am very much impressed with CPE. It seems greatly to facilitate one's working with and just understanding people. That is about what I expect to get out of this program: an ability to work more exactly and freely with people.

Besides the reading assignments of my course in *Pastoral Psychology* given by Fr. Roch Stack, OFMConv., I have read the following books: *Psychology of Pastoral Care* by Paul E. Johnson; *Reality Therapy* by Wm. Glasser; *The New Group Therapy* by O. Hobart Mowrer."

The Dean of Men, (Fr.) Roch Stack, added his assessment to Casimir's application:

I recommend Casimir Cypher for 1st quarter CPE. He qualifies on all basic counts: intelligence, interest, dedication, basic sincerity and openness.

Casimir has some observable personality difficulties which I also feel CPE will help him very much to deal with more

realistically and eliminate. He has a very simplistic approach to life, quite childlike which I feel is inadequate in facing some kinds of situations in these days of change, confusion, adjustment.

I feel that Casimir has certain fairly well-defined feelings of inferiority which make him shy away from any form of objective criticism of others (he is considered one of the most charitable men in the seminary), hesitancy in speaking to people about himself or themselves (he can really get tied all up here), and a tendency to behave in a somewhat childish way in a relaxed, party atmosphere among adults.

Casimir is aware of these characteristics and that they would tend to limit his effectiveness in ministering to people. He is eager to work with them, exhibiting quite a lot of courage and determination, sometimes overly so, which tends to accentuate the inhibitions and behavioral responses mentioned above.

We see here that a person's strength is quite the same as his weaknesses—or at least obverse and reverse of the same coin. He is described as "simplistic," yet "childlike"; shying away from any form of objective criticism of others," yet "one of the most charitable men in the seminary." (I am grateful that even the much praised CPE Program was unable to change Casimir's personality, while I regret that the insightful dean left the priesthood.)

Casimir wrote a poem he tried to rhyme and vaguely measure. Its title is "On the Virtue of Loneliness." It does not have the sweep and simple grandeur of his later writings, but it does express some key ideas of his life and ministry. It is not immortal nor destined for some anthology, but it does express some of his private anguish and thoughts that came from being misunderstood as too childish, too simplistic, too unable to deal with the "real" world.

No doubt this poem reflects his deep introspection, for which he was criticized, but he at least knew himself—which is the only valid leaping-off point to know the world and perhaps to discover God. Better than most he lived with God while he was "at home" with man.

When a soul is lonely—  
By itself all alone—

It is then and only then  
That real life is shown.

In the soul of every man  
There is a need to grow.  
It grows first by being loved,  
And then, by loving, grows.

So many times we must confuse  
What we need—and need to be—  
That we do not hear those who need love,  
The love of others we do not see.

When a soul is all alone  
And itself can only see,  
The need to be loved is only surpassed  
By the need for a love that is free.

Then the life in a blade of grass  
Can be seen quite vividly,  
And one can care more for that piece of life  
Than life without its company.

If a soul would just take the time  
To become truly lonely,  
All of the foolish and great things  
Of its life would purely see

No one has ever loved  
Until the greatness of life is seen  
And no one will know this greatness  
Before knowing what lonely means.

To be worried about what others fear in me,  
To never be afraid to let them see:  
If this honest I could only be,  
Then I could love; then I could be free.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

# The Parish Priest

St. Mary's in Medford must have been buzzing with activity for the homecoming of the second Cypher boy to celebrate a First Solemn High Mass for family, friends, neighbors, and parishoners. I could find few records beyond some "stock" pictures.

But I, too, once lay prostrate in the same sanctuary of St. Paul Cathedral. I, too, felt dwarfed by the massive columns that raised the dome and cupola on high. This mighty church is one of those magnificent, traditional buildings that puts the worshipers in mind of God's grandeur, that lifts the eyes and heart heavenward, that encloses a great, sacred space within which commitments are more easily solemnized and promises to God are rendered somehow more effective. Contemporary churches with bare walls and unadorned altars carry their own message of simplicity and technological funtionalism that force the congregation to elicit enthusiasm and joy from its inner resources rather than the external display of the building.

In catacomb or cathedral, an ordination is the peak experience of a man, the time when his eye is clearest and his heart single. All who remember young Fr. Casimir recall he stayed on "cloud nine" for the rest of his priestly life. He did not play to the world nor preach for the ages.

His first assignment was to St. Anthony Parish in Rockford, Illinois, where he was to remain between the summer of 1968—after ordination—to 1972. The mostly Italian parishoners remember him as friendly and unobtrusive, with a ready smile and very good with the school children.



His deeply sunk eyes gave the impression he was always squinting at you—as if to get a better look; his heavy upper lid drew the corners of his eyes together, as if he was always about to break into a smile—which characteristically he did.

A fellow Associate Pastor at St. Anthony's, Fr. John Calgaro (presently a missionary in Xochistlahuaca, Guerrero, Mexico), is quoted as saying that Casimir had few possessions and had to be pressed regularly by his superiors to get new shoes or clean and press his suit, but he did not consider these important. "If he had something and someone liked it, he would give it to them," Fr. John recalled.

This was the time of turning around altars and launching into the vernacular—which must have been a relief for Casimir. But the microphones at the tabernacle on the former altar of sacrifice were not yet disengaged. One busy Sunday Casimir had been helping distribute Holy Communion. When he returned to the tabernacle to replace the ciborium, he accidentally knocked over the sacred vessel and spilled the consecrated hosts on the floor! "Oh—(expletive deleted)!" he muttered. But the still operative microphones carried the exclamation clearly throughout the church, to the chagrin of the devout and the despair of the pastor, whose commentary has gone unrecorded!

Among the chores of the new priest was occasionally to preach to the Poor Clares in the nearby monastery by the Rock River in the city. The text of his three sermons are the only samples of his never-glorious preaching, other than a few notes in rudimentary Spanish and a garbled, tape-recorded talk he gave in California on a trip back from Honduras. The three sermons, however, are gloriously simple. I know the delivery must have been halting, because few priests are comfortable in preaching to cloistered contemplative women with whom one shares so little in lifestyle. After all, these devoted Franciscan "Poor Ladies" have heard and read everything. Their intense prayer life shames even dedicated priests who seldom "get" the time nor "take" the time to pray enough.

On August 9, 1970, he preached, "This Gospel talks about what God gives us and what God expects of what He gives us. . . . That was what was important—giving. Because giving meant growing, giving meant being alive, being watchful—noticing how you could give. . . . Some (things) are so simple that even in first trying to live a religious life, we give things

to people and we don't know it. That is what St. Francis saw. . . ."

I can imagine Casimir leaning forward on the pulpit—they were always too high for his stature—and speaking not eloquently, but persuasively, not with striking figures, but with deep conviction. Every preacher tends to preach something of himself, at least revealing his own spiritual growth, even when he is determined to preach only "Christ and Him Crucified." Casimir's words, even when only read, glow with intimations of his interior life.

"You give what you can give, every moment as you can. . . . It makes life beautiful to be able to give, not for some kind of show, but just because you are concerned. . . . If you really look at life, at even just a lawn—after a while you see the little blades of grass spread out—oh, of course you can say it's crowded, and they have to reach up and reach out in order to have room. You can say it is a necessity. But part of it is that life grows by sharing, but also by a certain individuality. . . ."

"I think this is true especially in this form of life of yours. You spend a long time trying to learn to pray well, to make everything a prayer. That is a beautiful, symbolic form of life. But any life depends on being able to give, to be able to be like a shade tree, like a little plant that gives so that plants around it can grow. Trees grow thinner when they are close together—that is the way they adjust to each other. . . ."

The next week, August 16, 1970, Casimir was back at the Poor Clare Monastery, to preach about "not the overpowering greatness of Christianity, but the simplicity of it." Our Lord is our Friend, he said, in a real, physical way. We have to get to know Him as any other persons. Often we take Him for granted.

Jesus promised Himself as the Bread of Heaven; He was talking about nourishment, Casimir goes on. From even the right kind of bread you may not get the necessary nourishment. Something may be wrong with your system or you may lack the right metabolism. So we can receive our Lord and not get the nourishment from Him either. It is a matter of being able to use this beautiful gift of God.

"I am a priest, and because I am ordained, He comes to the altar when I more or less let Him. We religious have Him in our houses all day. He is the greatest source of patience, the greatest source of really

proving that there is really only one important thing, and that is to have ourselves grow in His image, to have ourselves grow in the ability to really give ourselves to everyone. To grow in our ability to take a little abuse, (to have) a little understanding, a little hardship. To have ourselves grow to appreciate even the failings of people, because it gives us a chance to love them better.

I count at least nine sermon topics in this Sunday homily. They are unfocused, diffuse and overlapping, without integration. But some of the Clares still remember his quiet, unassuming way of delivering the message that he had just lived.

I present the third extant sermon in its brief entirety. It was preached a good year later than the two above, on September 26, 1971. It is a profound commentary on Lazarus, the pauper, and Dives, the wealthy man. It is equally a commentary on and self-portrait of Casimir himself, the little poor man of God!

In today's Gospel our Lord talks about someone being comfortable during his life, and someone who was not so comfortable, someone who was having it very hard. And it seems that the rich man went to hell, and the poor man went to heaven.

What really happens there was that the man who was rich had much to give, had many things he could do—and he didn't, while the man who was poor, though he had nothing (he was very poor), he even had to let dogs take care of him, for people did not. And he put up with it. He did not despair. That was the only thing Lazarus could do: was not to be bitter. There was nothing else he could do: he had nothing he could give anyone. He could not even help them. He had only good will. And so his good will could be—just good will.

Some of us sometimes consider our talents and feel ashamed. We think maybe we should have more talents. We should be able to understand others; we should be able to pray well; we should be able to exert a sort of good influence on others, to be able to get into other people's lives and help them; that we should be patient—and so forth. There are all kinds of richness, all kinds of ways we are able to help others. The talent is not so important

as how we use talent. And if we worry about achieving a talent, perhaps we shall neglect the very one we have.

Heaven and hell start right here on earth. We must choose. And the person who uses the talent that he has is the person who wants to grow.

What the rich man wanted to do was to help his brothers, but Abraham told him: You can't. If they won't listen to Moses and the prophets, to the people living with them, to the people around them, they won't listen even if they see someone come back from the dead. Christ proved that. He was talking to the Pharisees. He worked miracles to prove He was the Son of God, and they would not believe Him.

What is important is not that we wait for a revelation in some book or from some saint, but take the revelation we have in our everyday life. And the revelation in our everyday life is to use the talents God gave us. Lazarus had no "talents"—but what he was, he was. And that was all.

There is a beauty in life if we only worry about living completely and just being truly what God meant us to be. We miss it when we worry about not being really great, about accomplishing things we cannot accomplish. When we want God to make us greater than we are, we become smaller, because we neglect what we have and what we are already.

Remember this Gospel. It is a sort of warning saying: Don't look too far into the future. When you look into eternity, don't look on forever: you will stumble over your own life. Look for eternity in those who are near you right now. For your eternity begins today; it begins this moment. It begins right NOW!"

Casimir asked several times to be allowed to go to the foreign missions, so he might share the lot of the poor and simplify his life—and maybe not stand out so much as a haphazard soul and a sloppy dresser and a sometime embarrassment to his superiors. As a sort of compromise he was sent to Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish in Hermosa Beach, California.

For many years this originally all-Mexican parish was a mission

extension of the nearby St. James Parish in Redondo Beach. Not long after the Conventual Franciscans came to staff Bishop Montgomery High School in nearby Torrance and used the mission parish as their temporary faculty house, the comfortable, warm little church was replaced by a large, bright Mediterranean-style California-type building that won no prizes for beauty or originality.

But the people, the Mexican people especially—they were the living building of worship, fiercely loyal, traditionally Catholic, supportive, and proud of their rich heritage—*la Morenita*, the “Little Dark One,” the mestiza, “mixed-blood” woman, the Virgin Mother of God. A copy of her image, miraculously imprinted on the tilma of the humble Indian, Juan Diego, hangs over the high altar in Hermosa Beach. The generous Mexican-American parishioners, always indulgent to their priests if the latter are kind and understanding of their culture and traditions, found in Padre Casimiro their local Juan Diego.

Casimir spent only some months in California, supposedly learning to speak Spanish, an idiom he never quite mastered, even after a year and a half in Latin America. Many stories that circulated in the Southern California parish touched on his disdain for “appropriate” and “expected” behavior. He was a “maverick” with every connotation of that word. But equally well remembered are the stories of how he emptied out the rectory refrigerator for the indigent and how he dumped the contents of his wallet into the hands of the poor. He realized how what you cannot give away possesses you, so he held loosely in his hand whatever was not—for him—of eternal value!

Not only the Mexicans, of course, cherished his presence. Most of the parish grew to love him, perhaps cautiously at first, but finally with full hearts.

Leonard Wibberley, a novelist best remembered for his book and movie, *The Mouse That Roared*, was living during Casimir’s time in Hermosa Beach as a parishoner. He began his relationship with the priest with no great respect or admiration.

In an article on the Feature page of the Los Angeles Times, Monday, July 28, 1975 (one month after Casimir’s death), Wibberley wrote “I thought him stupid; that is, dull in his wits and incapable of adequate

self-expression. It was I who was stupid, however, and I now realize that I was making Father Casimir suffer for changes within the Catholic Church which I didn't like and with which he went along whether he liked them or not. But his face lacked expression, or, if it had a natural expression at all, seemed to me one of truculence."

Mr. Wibberley altered his judgment (it is to his credit—one would not expect less of so insightful an author!) after the parish school Christmas play. "When I held out my hand and wished him a Merry Christmas, he was charitable enough to take it—though I deserved to have him ignore me, for I had been a pompous ass in the way I treated him. . . .

"Thereafter I came to have more regard for him. He was short and strong and looked as though he should have been a blacksmith rather than a clergyman. He had a direct and uncomplicated mind, and was not bedeviled by the frustrations and indecisions of lesser mentalities. He thought deeply, I am told, but didn't say much, and this habit of deep thought got him into constant trouble.

"He could be guaranteed, for instance, to lose any car in a parking lot because he was involved with some question of ethical worth. . . . He knew there were a lot of poor to be helped, and somehow or other he got himself transferred from comfortable Hermosa Beach to not-so-comfortable Honduras. When he came back the first time, it was hard to recognize him. He wasn't a stocky, strong blacksmith kind of man any longer. He had lost so much weight that he looked like a rather skinny boy. . . .

"I have only one thought further, and it concerns the people who killed Father Casimir. I wonder if they have ever read Graham Greene's 'The Power and the Glory'? If so they must know that a replacement for Father Casimir will almost certainly show up in Juticalpa soon—may indeed be there already. And then another, and another. . . .

"The soldiers and the landlords—that old, old combination—are doomed to lose, usually to someone whom people think somewhat stupid and vaguely truculent. Perhaps Father Casimir is a saint now, and if this is so, perhaps he will one day make a real Christian out of me.

"If that should happen, I will still wonder what brought the change—his death on behalf of the poor, or his handshake of a snob."

Of all the narratives I have read about Casimir, for me none of them have caught the “essential Caz” as succinctly and profoundly as Leonard Wibberley’s article from which the paragraphs above are an excerpt.

Yes, it is true. Casimir’s mind and heart were often away on tangents. He was composing aphorisms and prose poems and conundrums and philosophical reflections, rather than attending to baptismal records, wedding practices, and the Sunday collection. Nevertheless, his sacramental ministry, sometimes admittedly casual, was never in default.

Much of his biography derives either from eyewitness accounts and recorded documents or Casimir’s self-analysis subtly revealed in his small collection of writings. Found in a spiral notebook he kept are the following snippets and jottings, no doubt made “on the run” and without a thought for immortality. I include below these: “On the Search for Truth,” “The Great Simple Truth,” and “Aphorisms from the ‘Hermit of the Shrub’.” (Casimir sketched an amusing troll or dwarf, scratching his head in confusion or wonder, and seated under a shrub, like Jonah on the hillside overlooking Ninive.)

#### ON THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH

In the regular process of the search many times the parts take precedence over the complete view, giving rise to an undesirable product which can be classified simply as CONFUSION. With its advent man begins to find a need for intellectual filters, and this caused the first crude beginnings of logic or correct use of language.

Because of the “why’s” of man, many doubts arose about man’s ability to know and about the sanity of trying to know—and this eventually led to the study of man himself and the first wobbly definitions of human nature. Also the definition of God or the divine name was developed in order to assist (the definition) made about man, since man seems to be either looking for, fighting against, or serving some concept of deity whenever he tried to define what he himself was.

The one obvious thing about the entire search is that every tool that man has ever developed for the search has been used for and against the search, and none of these tools has ever been

discarded, (perhaps) sometimes remodeled, (but) never discarded.

In the same way that every human being begins as one cell and develops for nine months in the womb and in so doing passes through the evolution of all of life, the search that is the essential part of human life and characteristic of it also passes through the stages through which the search evolved.

#### THE GREAT SIMPLE TRUTH

*The greatest obstacle to the Gospel*, those simple words about the greatness of Life, has to do with (the) lack of good will.

It is not the ‘‘super’’ mysteries that slip a multitude of dimensions beyond the grasp of human logic. It’s not (the) over-fortified differences of people or their petty prejudices. It’s not the demands of archaic laws which seem no longer to apply.

*It is simply that people are given the answer to Life without finding it for themselves.* The ignorant make a hasty outline to explain (Life) and then honor the outline and disregard the answer, thus making themselves prophets to themselves. The arrogant spend their existence pursuing better ways to embellish and decorate and make reasonable this answer. They make this the task of their life and an object of honor, thus covering the answer so that it becomes unrecognizable, unreadable, and after a while meaningless.

The wise man is simply thankful for the answer and uses it in his life to make Life greater—to grow and find more answers.

#### APHORISMS FROM THE ‘‘HERMIT OF THE SHRUB’’

Truth is the most important commodity. A kind work does more. When combined, miracles happen.

Two of the greatest pleasures in life are making sounds and destroying noise makers.

It is very uncharitable to speak truthfully to people who don’t respect it.

Be thankful for problems: without them we might never realize that we run the world or that we’re alive or how great life can be.



There is some grass that is higher than the tallest tree that is higher than the highest mountain that the sun comes out of every morning—that is, of course, until you stand up and walk to the top of the mountain.

If you really want to feel small, sit for one day under a mulberry tree full of starlings; if you want to feel mean, join the birds.

Seeds—planting time is for enduring hope;  
    sprouting is the fulfillment of faith;  
    and fruit is the abundance of charity;  
    and life lived is the greatest book of theology.

Somewhere a seed is sprouting, a tree is bearing fruit, little birds are singing, a child is being born, people are loving, and God is creating. Would you like to join them?

(In Honduras) I have noticed that army ants are the most orderly creatures in the whole world and that they also have the worst manners.

The liar never does anything wrong—and the person who never does anything wrong is a liar. Actually, they do make one disastrous mistake: they believe themselves.

The most valuable commodity in the entire world. . . . the most beautiful, most precious, most useful, most satisfying, and the most wanted of all the “desirables” of life only need recognition to grow on, and after it is strong, needs nothing to grow more and faster (than) only chances to give. It is called Love and is much too rare.

Life is always happening; the problem is being a part of it. The great thing is living it; the worst thing is misunderstanding it. The happy act is acknowledging it; the sad act is being crushed by it. The dumbest act is missing it tomorrow because we intend to spend the day being sorry for missing it today. The smartest act is finally giving up everything else and just enjoying it.

God makes all these different things so we could experience the exhilaration of confronting confusion, know the joy of solving

it, and find the greatness in the mystery of creation and ourselves.

If you want to be wise, don't lie to anyone.

If you want to be happy, respect all existing things or beings.

If you want to be rich, learn the value of all things.

If you want to be famous, affect the value of all things.

If you want to be holy, make your life a prayer.

If you want to live forever, you can.

If you want to be an artist, say things differently.

If you want to raise anything, love it.

If you want to control anything or person, train them.

If you want to see, wash your eyes.

If you want to hear, clean your ears.

If you want to feel well, exercise your fingers.

If you want to be, you are—completely.

People are confusing—and anyone who isn't, is impossible to understand.

Joy is all of those countless things that make reality perceptible.

The differences between any two people is the greatness that binds them together or the prejudice that allows them to starve separately.

Concern over making oneself beautiful is not vanity if it works. It becomes vanity when we notice the efforts and not the beauty.

A day is one day long and, like an hour or a year, is time sufficient for being alive.

## CHAPTER SIX

# The Missionary

Casimir finally arrived in Honduras. He was to live there a mere eighteen months, minus his medical leave to the United States to check out his physical health and test for tropical diseases and parasites—around Christmas of 1974.

Mrs. Elizabeth Cypher recalls her son's words during that visit (*Our Sunday Visitor* article of August 10, 1975): "He had an awful time the first few months in his parish. He had to go around several small villages away from his own parish. The trips took several days and were mostly on horseback. He had a hard time riding a horse, so he tried walking once . . . that was even worse.

"All I have read about Honduras says the same. There is the military and that five percent of the people that owns most of the land. Michael (Casimir) was working with the poor people. They all want a little more. . . . But he was only teaching religion and working as a priest among the poor. He didn't do anything against the country. I don't have any resentment against the Honduran people. Those he was working with didn't kill him."

Honduras is not very large, only the size of West Virginia or Tennessee or Pennsylvania—and just as mountainous, except where humid and lush plains flank the seacoast. The population is meager, less than three million. Dale Francis, a well-known Catholic journalist and religious writer, wrote an article in *Our Sunday Visitor* (August 31, 1975) as a follow-up to the interview with Casimir's mother.

“The term ‘banana republic’ was first used for Honduras where United States fruit companies came more than 80 years ago and set up banana plantations. Bananas account for about 50 percent of the nation’s exports and the fruit companies have a dominating influence in the nation’s economy.

“The poor are very poor. In Olancho Province, where Father Casimir Cypher died, only about half the infants born live to the age of five. . . .

“Bishop Nicholas D’Antonio, a native of Baltimore, has brought about a social consciousness in his diocese. At Centro Santa Clara, the Catholic Institute in Juticalpa, the campesinos have come from the villages in the hills of Azaculpa and Del Ocote to learn the elementary lessons of their importance as individuals created by God. They have organized into the Farmer’s National Union and Centro Santa Clara is now the Institute for Campesino Education.

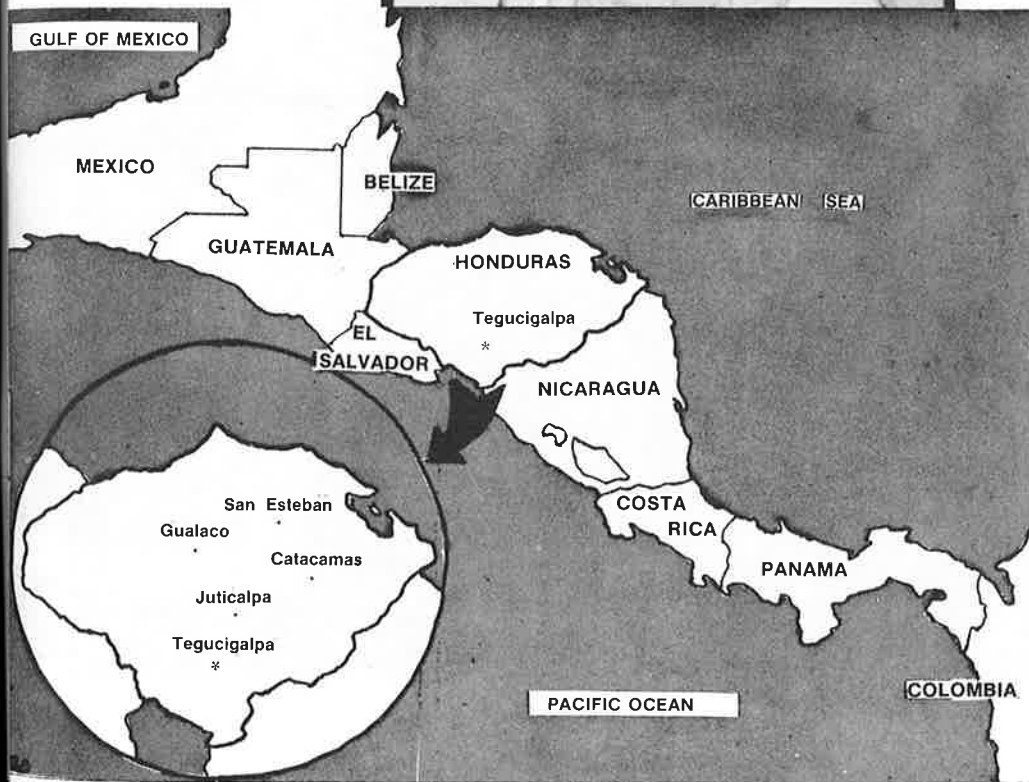
“The landholders, the police and the military are enraged by the rise of people who once meekly accepted subjugation. The military of the once docile campesinos challenges a system of injustice which has provided wealth for a few and poverty for many.”

Dale Francis quotes Mike Gable, presently with the Maryknoll Peace and Justice Office and residing in Ossining, New York. Mike was Casimir’s room-mate for a time in Honduras. “He was most of all like Saint Francis. When you first met him you thought what a simple man he was. Then you came to understand his intelligence, his deep spirituality, the way he loved all things, the way he wanted most of all to serve God and to help the people, and you understood that this was a most unusual man.”

Casimir and Fr. Emil Cook, another Conventual Franciscan priest, shared the pastoring and evangelization of about five hundred square miles of mountains and valleys, watered by streams and densely wooded, with about sixty villages.

“What you have to understand,” Mike Gable continues, “is that he was never involved in any way in politics or the cause of the campesinos. He was concerned only about being a priest for the people. He used to write poetry and stories, and they were beautiful. He painted and he struggled with Spanish.

Fr. Casimir Cypher in his gray habit, worn by missionaries in tropical countries. BELOW: The Central American country of Honduras where he was martyred.



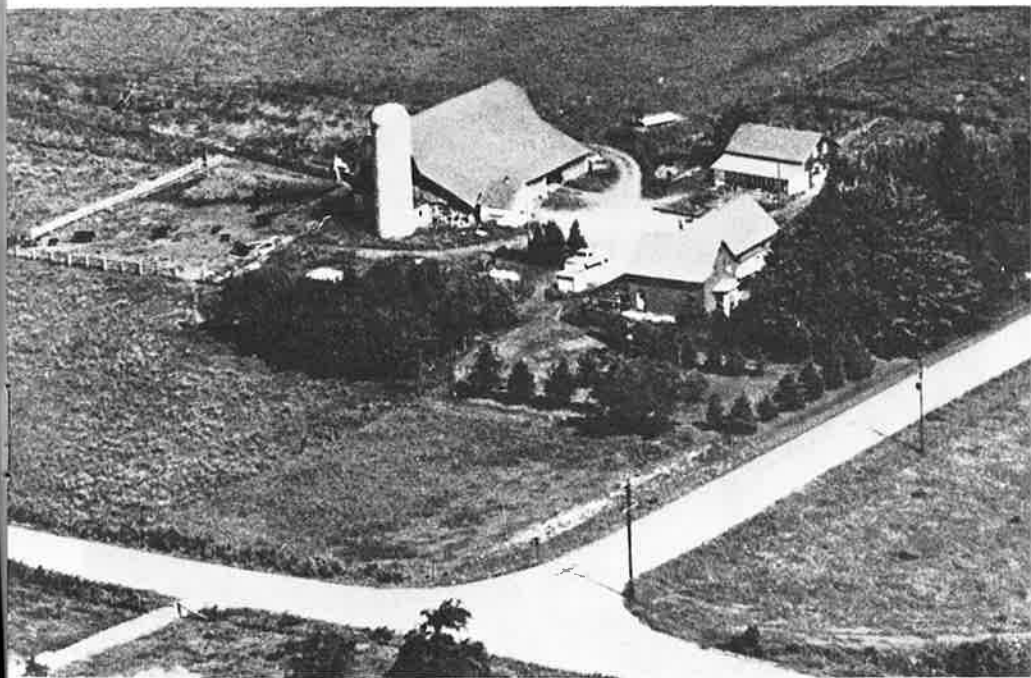


LEFT: Fr. Casimir's paternal grandparents, Josephine (Baker) and Joseph Cypher. BELOW: Center standing: Fr. Casimir's parents, Elizabeth and Lawrence Cypher, flanked by George Cypher (l) and Ambrose Retterath (r). Seated: Marie Retterath (l) and Clara Cypher (r).



**RIGHT:** The Medford parish church of Our Lady of the Rosary, where Fr. Casimir received the first Sacraments of the Church and attended eight years of elementary school.

**BELOW:** The family farm of Elizabeth and Lawrence Cypher, where Fr. Casimir grew up with many brothers and sisters.





**ABOVE LEFT:** Fr. Casimir in a grade school portrait. **RIGHT:** As a senior at St. Mary Preparatory Seminary, Michael (Casimir) suffered a football injury. **BELOW:** Fr. Matthias Biedrzycki, Minister Provincial, receives Father Casimir's profession of vows.







ABOVE: Photo of Friar Casimir's classmates at St. Bonaventure Novitiate, Lake Forest, Illinois. (l to r): George Muldovan, Casimir Cypher, Dennis Janicki, Joseph Kruszynski, and Richard Otto (Christmas, 1959). BELOW LEFT: Mrs. Elizabeth Cypher, beloved mother of Fr. Casimir. BELOW RIGHT: Photo of Fr. Casimir's First Solemn Mass in Medford, Wisconsin. Little bride and groom: Dawn Cypher and Jerry Cypher. Adults (l to r): Berdine Cypher, Fr. Casimir, Elizabeth Cypher.





**LEFT:** Frs. Casimir Cypher and Vance Sullivan clown as “cookie-jar” friars in Hermosa Beach, California. **BELOW:** Fr. Casimir administers Baptism to a new parishioner of St. Anthony Parish, Rockford, Illinois.





**UPPER LEFT:** Fr. Casimir preaches during his departure ceremony in the provincialate, Lake Forest, Illinois. **RIGHT:** Fr. Casimir in his "traveling clothes" near Olancho, Honduras. **LOWER:** In Honduras, Fr. Casimir at his "chicken farm" and truck garden, a return to the chores of his youth.





**UPPER LEFT AND RIGHT: Photos of Fr. Casimir after his return from Honduras on sick leave in Southern California. LOWER PHOTOS: Funeral procession of Fr. Casimir in Gualaco, Olancho, Honduras. Candlelight memorial service, June 26, 1979. Casimir's grave in the church sanctuary in Gualaco.**



Moises Sandoval of Maryknoll, writing in the December, 1975, issue of *Maryknoll* magazine, page 17, points out that only three-fourths of the people of Honduras own merely 12 percent of the land, whereas about 667 families—three-tenths of one percent of the population—own 27.4 percent of the arable land. A former military president, General Oswaldo Lopez Arellano, had been deposed from office under the accusation that he had accepted over a million-dollars bribe from United Brands, the multi-national corporation that exports most of the Honduran bananas.

Nevertheless, Arellano, according to an article in the *Washington Post* by Joseph Novitski, had actually begun redistributing land on a large scale under the terms of a decree limited to two years. But the move was not seen to its logical conclusion. The writer attributed the following statement to Msgr. Hector E. Santos, Archbishop of Tegucigalpa: "We were trying to speak for the rights of the peasants, according to the gospel and church social doctrine. The Christian Democratic leaders, behind the scenes, were manipulating them for political ends."

Many of the prelates of the Church itself, in an attempt to depoliticize themselves, had divorced the Church's social programs from the campesino efforts to empower the poor and disenfranchised. Although originally the great support of this empowerment, the Church during Casimir's presence in Honduras had tacitly allowed the lay movements to operate without its moral direction and hence its powerful influence. Bishop D'Antonio, now excluded from Honduras, was a notable exception.

Nevertheless, individual prelates and pastors continued their ministries, it should be noted. Hundreds of "delegates of the Word," as surrogate pastors and catechists, have been educated to serve in rural priestless villages in remote areas, especially on Sundays, when they conduct classes, read the Scriptures, and give simple instructions, which they probably have learned by rote themselves. They come to parish centers for mini-retreats and refresher courses and instruction in singing and simple audio-visual aids. By the use of battery-operated tape recorders—there is no electricity in many mountain regions—they remember what they have learned and transmit the doctrines and Gospel messages, often filtered through a dialect or Indian language. As a "side-line" they may learn a little about conducting meetings and elections, setting up credit

unions, and hygiene. This is not meant to pass on the Word to one elite group or the moneyed class—obviously—but to reach all the people. Naturally they will be at odds with the moneyed class or landowners, who fear organized masses of the poor. The parish priest may reach the boondocks of his territory only a few times a year. “Delegates of the Word” thus go beyond the liturgy to change the self-perception of the people at the grass-roots level. Privilege and power, money and clout will sometime in the future lose their coercive influence to exploit the disenfranchised. If the Church is not at the head of the march, it will be left in the dust of those who have gone beyond its sometimes-weak leadership. What Americans take for granted and their government sometimes conveniently “forgets,” is that freedom is not always given. Sometimes it must be taken. The Church, of course, should be a tempering influence, a mover of dialogue, a reconciler of disparate opinions. But the Church is compelled both by its Founder and its history to speak out about the moral dimensions of politics and social reforms. At one time in the U.S. the bishops, fortified by papal documents, especially the social encyclicals, were greatly criticized for supporting labor unions and social security and other programs we now view as American “rights.”

In Honduras just ten years ago, less than 40 of the 275 priests were natives, with a similar ratio for the sisters. Thus, even though many, if not most of the bishops are natives these days, the Church has a foreign flavor. Wary of antagonizing the nations of which the foreign clergy and religious were citizens, nevertheless the Honduran government would not permit its power base to erode. “Money talks!”

The most lucid and graphic exploitation of the conditions in Latin America—specifically here, in Honduras—is *Cry of the People*, written by Penney Lernoux (Doubleday, 1980). The work is subtitled “United States Involvement in the Rise of Fascism, Torture, and Murder and the Persecution of the Catholic Church in Latin America.” Pages 107 to 119 provide the background to Casimir’s death. The book is worthy of being read in its entirety.

In the chapter entitled “Return to the Catacombs” she writes: “A rich agricultural area of sugar plantations, cattle ranches, and oak and pine forests, Olancho has traditionally been ruled by the law of the gun, even though the provincial seat at Juticalpa is but 109 miles from the capital,

Tegucigalpa. Few of the large landowners who run Olancho have legal title to their plantations or farms, but that hardly matters, since they have the money and arms. They also control the military government."

On his trip back home in 1974 Casimir described the "law of the gun." He said he was reminded of an old Hollywood Western when he walked the streets of even small villages. Many men carried sidearms and were arrogant and demanding of the unarmed, although they were generally respectful of the priests. Shoot-outs and duels were common, and drunken brawls were the frequent weekend nightmare. Even the campesinos without firearms were never without a fearsome machete strapped to a belt slung over the shoulders. It is their plow and hoe to "slash and burn" the vegetation and plant. The machete is a cutting edge to pull down useless growth and non-productive banana trees and palms. It is a weapon against snakes and animals and marauders. And it is a personal defensive weapon. When a campesino is high on *aguardiente* his machete keeps the world at bay!

Lernoux continues the documentation. "Over the years, conditions on United Fruit's Atlantic Coast banana plantations became so bad that they eventually produced a militant labor movement. The company then employed armed bands to intimidate striking workers, and company planes flew kidnapped union leaders to neighboring El Salvador, where they were dumped. United Fruit thugs took their machetes to the small growers' banana shipments as they lay on railroad platforms. Conditions were not much better on the plantations of United Fruit's principal rival, Standard Fruit. Workers were paid an average seventy-five cents a day and had no right to vacations, medical care, or redress from arbitrary dismissal.

"That was until the historic strike of forty thousand workers in 1959, which lasted seventy days despite various deaths and massive arrests of union leaders. All through this terrible period, peasants in the surrounding countryside supported the banana workers, sharing their small portion of beans and bananas with laborers who otherwise would have starved. The banana workers never forgot this solidarity, and it was due to them that the peasants organized their first labor federations."

The issue of land reform was always at the heart of rebellions, strikes, and demonstrations. The peasant desires to own his own land and live

by its fruits, receive a just emolument and support his family. Is it different any place else in the world? Twenty thousand campesinos marched on the Honduran capital in 1972 and clashes with the armed guards of the landowners, often mercenaries hired from the national army, became an annual rite of social reform—with minimal effect. The people continued to subsist on bare necessities and work for large landowners. An ancillary problem is the frequent and violent turnover of the highest officials of the government with the subsequent postponement of reforms. It is significant to note that Casimir, unknown, we can be sure, to himself, was accused of being a communist, of leading a guerilla band, and of leading a revolution against the central government. This with the subsequent “justification” of his murder.

Meanwhile, Casimir was not fully aware of all these political events, certainly not of the history of violence. He spoke Spanish so poorly that his sermons brought stifled laughter to the mouths of his congregations. He communicated with the barest of vocabulary. Among his papers I discovered several sheets of “key words” in everyday Spanish he was attempting to master. It was arranged in alphabetical order, but he had arrived only at the letter “C.”

But Casimir kept his sense of humor and continued to write cheerful letters home. On October 16, 1974, he wrote to Fr. Clement Weidman, then minister provincial, that he had arrived just the day before into his Honduran assignment in Gualaco, San Jeronimo Parish: “Had to wait for my dumb luggage in Tegucigalpa. Somehow they were taken off the plane one stop too early. The fathers in Teguc. were very kind, so it was just another pleasant delay.

“Gualaco could be compared to a county seat. The parish consists of the entire county which has a few more than twenty villages stuck in different parts of the nearby mountains. The present procedure is to write a month ahead of time and find out if a village is able to receive you and then they come and provide the transportation—horses or mules or something that walks. There are some that have not yet been visited in the 3 years that the mission has existed. . . .I hope to be on the trail by the end of November. In the meantime I’ll be getting super good at Spanish and will be becoming an expert on the locale, geography, trails, etc. . . .Keep me in your prayers and say ‘Hi’ to that part of the world for me.”



Five months later he wrote again to the friars in the provincialate: "During Christmas the good Lord gave me a chance to experience the perfect joy that Francis defined once to somebody. I blew it and got crabby." (He does not go into any details.)

"I think that I've settled into the culture sufficiently to see myself clearly and accept the various idiosyncrasies of the people. What I'm trying to say is I understand the dumb things that people do here to prove their sanity or manhood or whatever they must prove. It's done in a very different way than back in the States, but it's done to cover up the same kinds of faults and shortcomings. It was much easier adjusting than I thought. I speak terrible Spanish fluently now and by the end of the year I expect to upgrade it a bit. . . .

"Oh—my social security no. is 473-64-0335. Just remembered Fr. Anastasius had asked for it.

"I've been to the hospital or, it's better and more accurate to say, I've been to a doctor several times for some kind of blood infection. Finally found out it was a type of bacteria that I probably picked up from bug bites. I was thinking of sending the bill to the insurance company, but the doctor didn't charge anything, and the medicine only costs about 60 *empiras* or about \$30, so it just didn't seem worth the trouble.

"I'm fine now, healthy as ever. I feel like I could wrestle a bear and eat it for supper, every day. It would probably taste good. I've lost about 40 pounds or more, and am eating a lot of beans and rice and corn, trying to gain some back—under doctor's orders, of course—so I'll be spending this lent off the fast.

"I am now an official hard-ass. I can ride a horse for hours now without getting blisters, and I'm not even exhausted after the trips anymore. . . .

"We're trying to help the kids get to high school and promote vocations to the priesthood and possibly religious life. Since people here are poor in all aspects of poverty, it's a little tough, and we're always short of funds. I would like to form mission clubs in our parishes—if possible—and would appreciate your ideas on what I have in mind before I write to our men in the pastorate. . . . The mentality here is high, but the attitude about bettering oneself or (the) community is sub-zero. The school is a good answer, because it gives us a chance to demonstrate what can be done

with guts and good will, and it gives us a chance to work on the kids to respect themselves and others. The spirituality is very profound, but cultish, and for many people the mystery is the only thing that's meaningful. The mass and the sacraments are looked upon with awe, but not used in the day-to-day life of the people. We need a lot of prayer and sacrifice. We need that probably more than the money. . . .

“Fr. Dominic was here and said you were fine and busy. I hope that you are at peace with your hectic job. It's a peaceful night here. A little candle for light. Some birds are discussing the slight rain that we've just had, and the rest of the atmosphere is still. Oh, damn!—did you ever hear a burro when he's lovesick? It's hard to tell whether he's calling his girlfriend or complaining about not being able to get to her. Whatever—except for the burro, it's beautifully peaceful here right now. I'll ask our Boss to send you some of the same.

“Pray for me. Send money if you can. Tell everyone that is interested in the mission to write me. And finally, drink your next Manhattan or martini a little more slowly and savor it for me; I'll help you enjoy it. Your brother in St. Francis, Casimir.”

This was a man totally down to earth, totally human, and totally realistic.

In his letter of May 2, 1974, Casimir makes an appeal to establish our own province mission in Honduras—“to make a lot of points with God.” His health has deteriorated again and he needed, the doctor advised, to develop antibodies in his own “corpus.”

He wrote again from Gualaco, Olancho, on August 13, 1974, to “Michael, young master of the art of living, Hi! and I hope that you're as alive and happy as you can bear to be. . . .

“There are so many things that are needed here, and so many things here are not being used, and so many wonderful possibilities, that I'm forever being frustrated by the simple smallness of my own humanity. But at the same time I'm getting very impressed with the power of God and the endurance of charity He had and has in starting and continuing with creation. Once I get enduring charity as a part of my own life, it's astounding to just imagine all the stuff God will get done with my life.

“I’ve been sort of sick for a while—physically—mentally—spiritually. All of it caused by change of environment, but mostly it was necessary to get the rules straight (do you know how to spell strait?). Anyway I am healthy once again and am even starting to get organized, which is usually as far as I get—so I guess I’m on top of it here right now.

“This is a gigantic collage of people and nature and things confusing one another and making war cries with patience to a multitude of unknown situations that will probably prove to be fantasy in the long run. I don’t know if I’m here to get the experience or to work on the confusion, but I’m sure of the confusion and its forever-obvious cause, and so I’ll start there and begin making propaganda cards for the reality of truth.

“Riding horses, and beans and rice can become regular very easily, and beautiful dawns and sunsets, and the pure scents of plants and trees and even the special if not pleasant aroma of the different types of manure can seem very regular and just something to be expected, but it’s the same old life that got started when those—lucky for us—folks enjoyed the comfort of one another’s lives, that keeps each day important and revealing and somehow absolutely worthwhile and necessary. That’s the secret and that’s what’s been kept a mystery in so many lives for so many reasons for so many years.

“I guess that friendship just reveals that, and that’s why it’s so neat and important and rare. It’s also why eternity is such a simple concept and such a necessary ingredient in explaining the real needs of humanity. As we accept it, we have it and use it and even become free enough to finally use well all of our faculties. The sainted group that knows this and have really accepted it are called the Eternal Club, and their mode of life, their liquor and food, their first order of business, their daily festival of peace, and they are all powerful. Want to join? Heck, you’ve probably been a member for a long time already.

“Anyway, if by chance you get this before you zoom to the old islands, could you please get me a couple of greeting cards from Ireland, as there are several wee ladies from the old sod that I’d like to delight with said cards.

“Bless you, Michael, and be always at peace.

“Sincerely, Casimir.”

Subsequently Casimir's health deteriorated again, and he returned home for treatment in October, 1974, and stayed past Christmas—a real treat for his mother and the rest of the family.

On Christmas Day Casimir wrote a long letter on a large piece of gift wrap in which someone had wrapped a gift. The letter is addressed to "Michael" also:

"Hope that you had a beautiful holiday and that you were properly treated by all of the various Santa Clauses and that you were a proper son of God and enjoyed it all completely. Thanks, friend, for the kind letter. I'm fine. All checked up and OKed. Also have been treated great by everyone, everywhere, so I'm high on life and happy.

"It's a nice Christmas and I'm just too small to appreciate it in its fullness, but it's great being overawed. Somehow I'm very big and rapidly growing without a great deal of concern for where it is leading me. I just know that it is a necessary and good thing and part of God's plan, and each thing that might happen is just more to live in and through and by.

"It's very great being a child of God, and I sincerely hope that you'll help me with your kind friendship. Whether I've thanked you correctly for your sincerity or not, I'm always helped by your real kind concern about my life, and I'm always glad to see you getting more and more into the stream of creation and its conflicting parts, but forever-intriguing reality. Aw, I'm getting wordy, but I'm just glad that you are one part of creation that I met and still know, and very proud because you are going to be a very great part in it all. There's a very big part in it for me, too, and I'm very aware of it, but my part is a subtle thing, something like an unlooked-for missing link. Let's take notes on what we are doing to creation and what it is doing to us, and our understanding will be that much more real and clear and, perhaps, we'll solve some mysteries or just find some new ones.

"Remember always, my little brother, that we are or at least can be stronger than any other created forces, and that we are brought down by things only when we don't use our strength to lift them up. It only sounds heavy. It's really the useful principle of applying the law of loving God and neighbor and the real reason for being able to be fully happy with all things from miracles to disaster. . . ."

So many phrases in the letter above proved prophetic of Casimir's own death and meaning to others. No doubt a perusal of his letters to other friends, co-workers, and family—if they are saved and extant—would offer similar insights into Casimir's thinking.

Casimir returned to visit California—he was then still on sick leave—and gave a lecture to the parishioners of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Hermosa Beach. He opened by saying with disarming simplicity, “I haven't been doing much for a year—just being *dumb*. I left here very strong, very sure of myself. . . . I could walk over mountains and fight tigers . . . . I should at least be able to understand these people—and I can't understand these people. . . . If I am to help these people, I have to be smaller than they are. If you're going to help something grow, you have to get down to their roots. . . . and I didn't want to get lower than those people!

“I didn't pray enough. . . . and I'd get sick and not show up in a village . . . . These were all temptations. . . . I didn't realize it for a long time. God let me find out how dumb I was, how really weak I was. . . . When I *did* pray, things got rougher—and I thought I really should get out of here. . . . But I don't think I'll ever lose my faith, because I'm very stubborn.

“I really got high on God. . . . wanted to be really like St. Francis. When I went to novitiate, I walked around a little higher—I was going to be a man of God. (I said) If you really want me to get through, you'll help me, (God). . . . I never had to worry and I had it real easy in that sense . . . . I had everything sure. . . . I took a long way to grow up.”

Before he left from O'Hare Airport in Chicago, Casimir spent his last evening in the U.S. at the home of my mother, Aurelia Romb. He confided his hopes and dreams to me when we were alone. He wanted to establish a series of model villages in the backwoods of his Honduran parish, where Catholic practice, family life, and local democracy might flourish. Only those committed to such values could pioneer such a model village; the parameters would be clear. Non-conformists would be excluded. Casimir hoped other villages would be motivated by seeing the peace and harmony in the model villages to copy the pattern and abide by similar restrictions. No gun-slingers would be allowed! He never got to concretize his vision. That same evening he confided another deep secret, but it cannot as yet be reported here, lest it cause pain to his

survivors. He had offered himself as a “victim soul”—he did not use that term exactly—of reparation, in order to win a grace desperately needed by another close to him. At this juncture we can safely say his wish, his prayer, his sacrifice was found pleasing to God and acceptable.

When Brother Joe Graff and I drove him to the airport that evening, we never suspected we would not see him alive again.

Back in Honduras he transferred to San Esteban Parish in the village of the same name, only a few miles from Gualaco. When he notified the provincial office of the change of address, he simply added, “Remember to pray for me when you run out of people who need it.”

On March 8, 1975, just before he moved, Casimir wrote to “David.” He began by writing he had just spent five minutes in pulling ticks off his body or clothes and was busy killing them. He put a couple dead ticks on the writing paper and circled them with his pen and wrote, “Grave No. 1,” and “Grave No. 2.” “How’s that for situational stationary?” he asked.

“Everything is moving and busy as the kids are back. Emil’s got a giant job, ‘cause there are a little over 200 kids in the school—about 220—and he’s teaching English besides his other classes. You should have seen it. All of the classes started in *Casa Cural* (the rectory)—one in the library or *sala* (hall)—one in the *comedor* (dining room)—one in the corner where the two hallways meet. *Collegio* in the morning, *Baquierato* in the afternoon. The place was like a beehive. Now there are a couple classes here and the rest are in one wing of the boys’ house, *Casa San Miguel*, which is almost finished. They just have to put in the windows and finish cementing the walls. It looks pretty good. . . .

“We haven’t received any word about the truck. Only from the States. Been waiting a long time and it looks like we’ll be waiting even longer.” (It was the repairs this truck needed that brought Casimir to town and to the confrontation that ended his life.)

“The flowers are blooming—the trees are blooming—the birds are singing—the bugs are multiplying—the boys are wearing down a path around the girls’ house and mooning—and moaning since the fence was put up—the clouds are becoming rarer: It’s *Verano* (summer) in Olancho....

“Pray for me sometime and remember me when you have your next hamburger.”

The last letter in the St. Bonaventure Province archives was written on March 31, 1975, less than three months before his death:

“I’m fine except for a cold so I’ve been eating oranges all day. Cheap medicine. Oranges here are like cucumbers on the farm; when you have a lot, you just give ’em to somebody because you’d feel bad if you sold a blessing. So I’ve been getting juiced up on nice sweet oranges for a smile. . . .

“There’s no house here—just a ‘has-been’ with very unstable mud walls. That’s one of the physical things that needs to be done. The church is about 4 years old, but needs a lot of repairs. It seems like nobody took care of it after it was built. The big job is some kind of social split—goes back to when the church was built. There were two sites for the church and instead of resolving the question, the richer people just built a church, and so there’s a church which nobody is really interested in going to, because of hard feelings. Feelings are very big here—usually take the place of wisdom. Then there’s the ‘I’m catholic’ problem, which ought to take about two generations or more to get to, much more to solve. Of course, there’s also the regular parish staff, which has to be started or picked up again and somehow made real. It’s a great big beautiful mess. I’m looking forward to all the fights and tantrums and peaceful good times that will have to come before the air gets cleared. . . .

“I hope your problems are growing smaller and that you’re still lucky at cards—as long as I’m not there. Hope that your golf will start off with low scores and your patience will always endure. I hope the sun shines tomorrow or right now as you are reading this. I especially hope that our good Lord blesses you with his peace.”

The occasion of this last letter to the province center, then in Lake Forest, Illinois, was Casimir’s discovery, upon moving to San Esteban, of the official questionnaire the minister provincial had asked all the friars a whole year earlier to fill out with personal details, including their “will” concerning the disposition of their bodies.

Casimir enclosed the personnel form with the prophetic remark, “I’m sending the little burial paper along so you can put it on file or whatever.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN:

# The Holy Innocent

A classmate of Casimir, Fr. Kent Biergans, OFMConv., wrote his reminiscences about him in an organ of the Province of Our Lady of Consolation, *Saint Anthony's Newsletter* (Vol. 20, no. 10, October, 1975). In the wake of the Second Vatican Council there was agitation throughout the Church, not least among seminarians.

In the changing times of the sixties, many of us seminarians were involved in promoting seminary renewal and were chomping at the bit for change. In many ways we were idealists, in many ways radicals, in many ways immature. Caz was not a part of the seminary turmoil. I don't remember him ever being a part of the discussion to push for change or to complain about the seminary administration. He was more apt to be in a friendly card game and drinking a beer than he was to be in a hot debate. He seemed to slide through such concerns on a different level. He seemed untouched by the turbulence around him. He lived his simple life in peace and shared it with those around him.

How great is the irony that he would be the one to be caught in the crossfire of social upheaval. He was simply a man of God doing his job and following God's call. Maybe that's the heart of what it is to be a martyr.

Recollections and reports of the fateful 25th and 26th of June, 1975, vary between the cautious reports of the U.S. Embassy, the hot denials and deliberate false trails of the Honduran government, the guarded and



“anonymous” remarks of fearful eyewitnesses, and the placatory statements issued by Church authorities.

In May, the month before, Catholic Relief Services in the U.S. had sent the missionaries in Gualaco a truck. The pot-holed streets, the rocky, clay-packed mountain roads, the irregular bottoms of the streams necessary to be crossed in every valley—all these contributed early on to the “sickness” of the new truck.

On the morning of June 25, Casimir decided to drive the truck to Juticalpa, the nearest “urban center,” where a mechanic might be located.

In her good-by to Casimir that morning Mrs. Theresa Corota, the parish secretary, said, “Father, you are very poorly dressed to be going to Juticalpa.”

Casimir was wearing a torn shirt and very worn shoes which didn’t cover the heels. Casimir answered, “I’m ready to go dressed like this even to Tegucigalpa,” the capital. So he left in the red Dodge truck that had struck a log while it was being driven across a deep ravine. (Letter from Fr. Michael Brown, OFMConv., pastor of the Gualaco Mission of San Jeronimo, June 2, 1981.)

Sister Maria Garcia, a School Sister of St. Francis, wrote a form letter about the events leading up to June 25th—of which Casimir was blissfully ignorant, due to his poor grasp of Spanish and isolation at San Esteban, where there actually were no farmers’ unions. Sister Maria’s letter was reprinted by her religious community in Milwaukee only a few days later.

She begins: “These are days of special grace and much tension. At present I am working full time in the pastoral office in Tegucigalpa. We are like the first Christians celebrating Mass in small groups and looking for the missing ones and thinking and praying for all those who are suffering. Keep us in your prayers. I will come to the U.S. soon as I think I have done what I should do here.”

She writes that for three years a great deal of humanitarian work had taken place in Honduras with the support and endorsement of the Church. “In Olancho especially, the Church has been identified with the poor.”

Repeated conflicts occurred each year in Olancho at planting time because the small farmers, the *compesinos*, have no land to cultivate. Further,

after hurricanes came the drought, forcing up the price of even life's necessities. It was hard for parents to watch their starving children.

Sister Maria Garcia wrote that the Farmers' National Union tried to pressure the central government to expedite the Agrarian Reform Law of 1974. Hence they called for a "Hunger March" on the capital from all points of Honduras. They demanded the release of imprisoned farmers (who had been arrested in the previous month's "land invasions," which were simply squatter attempts to apply the new law); an approved official status for the Farmers' Union; and immediate redistribution of land to the poor.

The "Hunger March" was called for on June 25th. About 5,000 were to begin the six-day march from Olancho. About 1,000 were going to leave just from Juticalpa. Meanwhile the landowners, who were always able to bribe local military leaders to turn against their fellow nationals, were not idle. Roadblocks were set up. A network of communications was quickly developed. Attacks on all religious establishments were coordinated. (Remember, the overwhelming majority of priests and religious in Honduras are foreigners.)

In my Chicago telephone conversation with Sister Maria, who was then residing and working in New Orleans, on November 11, 1983, she added many details about Casimir.

He first drove his truck to the sister's house. Seeing his tattered clothes, she insisted that he change and accept some articles that were stored for use of the poor who asked for handouts. Because the clothing was set aside for the poor, Casimir finally agreed. After he changed his shirt, he remarked to Sister, "This nice shirt will last me the rest of my life!" He was absolutely correct.

Leaving his truck and being curious about the fracas in the nearby plaza and hearing shots fired, Casimir went on foot toward the trouble spot and his destiny.

Striking already at dawn on June 25, the soldiers "sacked the residence of Bishop Nicholas D'Antonio, of Rochester, N.Y., who is the prelate of Olancho. The Bishop was in the U.S. gathering aid for his missions at the time.

“The soldiers and landowners also struck at the Center for Social Studies at Juticalpa, killing four persons. They also sacked the rectories at Juticalpa, Catacamas, and the Casa Apostolica, a house of formation for seminarians and lay apostles. The raiders also struck at Church centers in other parts of the country. (*Maryknoll Magazine*, “Tragedy in Honduras,” by Moises Sandoval, pp. 17 sqq., December, 1975.)

Casimir came upon a wounded man in the plaza and, instead of running for cover, like the Good Samaritan he always was, he stopped to help and take the man to the closest clinic.

Sister Maria wrote that she was the first to be arrested and was kept in jail for two days. In addition, another young woman was imprisoned and able to look out her cell window at how Casimir and the others were maltreated. We have also the written testimony of a woman who believes she must remain anonymous to protect her own life. She was the wife or girlfriend of one of the soldiers who followed the orders of his military superiors; their subsequent guilt led them to reveal the facts. The Conventual Franciscan Friars were able to fill in other details relating specifically to Casimir and which they garnered from several eyewitnesses and reported in letters back to us in the U.S. Some of this fact-gathering was perilous. As Sister Maria concludes her narration, “From the way things are developing, it seems like an open persecution against the Honduran Church for denouncing the injustices against the poor. Our telephones are being tapped and those of us from Olancho are being watched very closely. . . .our mail, too.” In other places the clergy spoke only in Latin to each other by telephone to escape detection of their words. Priests were beaten right during Mass in their own sanctuaries or in front of their churches in full view of the people, who were helpless against the hired guns of the landowners and military. The Church was called “subversive” and the foreign clergy and religious “communists” and “revolutionaries.” Obviously the army did not attract patriotic citizens, but shiftless and often criminal elements, men out of work, sadistic mercenaries, and the dregs of society. The friars in Honduras asked that a projected movie about Casimir not be made, because it might jeopardize their apostolate and very lives. Sister Maria Garcia, one of the most lucid and articulate witnesses about these events, concluded her letter to Mike Gable on August 25, 1975: “It is two months today (since) the tragedy of Olancho. So far, there are no sure signs of our return. Nick

(Bishop D'Antonio) is here in Tegucigalpa, but in no way may he return to Olancho at this time. We just can't believe nor understand how Casimiro got into all this, being the kind of man he was. Anyway, we have one more intercessor in heaven. Pray for those of us who still have to continue the fight.'"

When Casimir came upon the scene, a small plane was circling over the formerly Church-owned Centro Santa Clara, now the Institute for Compesino Education (or Social Studies). Many soldiers on foot and in vehicles surrounded the plaza and the Institute. They were joined by the Detective Bureau and some landowners. Several campesinos were killed or wounded, including the one Casimir tried to help. Inside the building both men and women were abused and beaten. Others were taken away to a place of detention.

Now began Casimir's Way of the Cross. Fr. Emil Cook, OFMConv., an American missionary-priest, wrote to the friars of Casimir's native province: (The explanations in parentheses are mine.) "It seems a mistake was made regarding Casimir. They thought he was another priest by the name of Michel Piton (a French priest in charge of the Compesino Institute). They must have searched Casimir's pockets and found his driver's license with the name 'Michael' on it. Casimir's name was 'Michael Jerome' (from his birth certificate and baptism—and this, of course, appeared also on his passport and residency visa); with this they wouldn't believe him when he told them that his name was Fr. Casimir." (Casimir, you were really a "Holy Innocent," in the wrong place at the wrong time, like those babes in Bethlehem two thousand years ago.)

Casimir was taken to the prison of Juticalpa along with others. He was thought to have concealed the keys to the Institute and really was the director. He was stripped to his underwear, insulted, and beaten. One eyewitness saw him, even in his naked and humiliated state, walking around to absolve the living and bless the bodies of the slain. When Sister Maria tried to find out what had happened to Casimir, she was put off. When she returned with food for Casimir and protested that Casimir was totally ignorant of the march and did not even live in Juticalpa, she was herself arrested.

Later the soldiers were to claim that the campesinos were the first to fire, but this was a lie, because no one in the Institute, particularly the

women and office workers, had any guns. Some peasants, teachers, and students had occupied the Institute and displayed Honduran flags in support of the march, but offered no resistance to the soldiers (newspaper article dated August 11, 1975). Meanwhile Sister Maria—a true heroine throughout this all—was paraded through the streets by armed soldiers and accused of instigating the Farmers' Union. Later she and others were flown to the capital to be deported.

Meanwhile another Colombian priest was apprehended after the local military commander, Major Jose Enrique Chinchilla, was paid twenty-five hundred dollars by a rich landowner who was behind the whole massacre. His name was Jose Manuel Zelaya; the priest was Fr. Ivan Betancur.

I continue with his story, taken from Penny Lernoux's *Cry of the People*, pages 110 sqq. "Meanwhile, in Tegucigalpa, Father Ivan Betancur was kissing his elderly mother, Felisa, good-by, promising to see her next day at the Juticalpa airport. The seven-hour drive to Olancho was too rough for a lady of seventy-two, but Betancur had decided to go by car to show his future sister-in-law, Maria Elena Bolivar, the countryside. He had invited a young Honduran university student, Ruth Garcia, to accompany them. Elsewhere their names are given as Maria Elena Vargas, a Colombian, and Cruz Garcia, a Honduran citizen, and both as 'volunteers.' They drove off, and that was the last time Mrs. Betancur saw them alive."

Sister Maria Garcia described the mother of Father Ivan as she sat on the steps of the cathedral the next day in Juticalpa, whither she had flown in on June 25th. She was tired, confused, and afraid after trying to locate her son. She could not understand why she couldn't accompany Sister Maria, but the latter was actually in the process of being detained and taken to jail. I am sure that this image of the empty-armed Pieta remains yet in the memory of Sister Maria. She had come from Colombia only to visit her son, Fr. Ivan, and had brought Maria Elena, who was a secretary of 31 years in age and betrothed to Bernardo, another Betancur son back home.

"He first came to Honduras in 1968 to work as a layman, and after his ordination in Colombia in 1970 returned to Olancho to serve under Bishop D'Antonio as the parish priest of Catacamas, a village near Juticalpa."

The three travelers were ignorant of their precarious situation because radio silence had been imposed. After he tried unsuccessfully to get gasoline for his Jeep at a ranch near Limones, the rancher phoned the army officers of their imminent arrival.

“Fifteen minutes later, as the car was approaching the valley of Lepaguare, Lieutenant Benjamin Plata and his men intercepted it and took Betancur and the women to join Father Cypher at Los Horcones.”

The two priests were summarily judged to be guilty without a trial or witnesses. They were stripped naked and whipped and insulted. It is an old Latin “custom” to torment prisoners—shades of the Inquisition—and try to get them to blaspheme God, deny their faith, confess great lies, or, especially, commit sins of impurity, then kill them in the supposed state of mortal sin!

They tried to coerce the two priests to violate the two women, to have sexual relations with them. Both refused; both were castrated. An eyewitness reported that throughout it all, Fr. Casimir’s lips were moving in silent prayer. He knew his task. He knew he had to forgive. He knew he had to prepare for death with the One who had gone before him.

Fr. Ivan asked for three hours to pray, as Jesus did on the cross. His eyes were put out, so the soldiers would not have to meet his gaze. His tongue was cut off so they would not have to hear him. Even his teeth and fingernails were pulled out, then his hands and feet slashed off. Casimir was simply shot and spared the dissection of his body.

Other tortures were going on outside the isolated farmhouse where they had been taken. Several campesinos had been baked alive in the large communal bread oven. The remains of all the dead and the two live girls were thrown into a pit or dry well, variously described to be from 30 to 150 feet deep. Dynamite was thrown down upon them, killing the two young women and caving in the hole. Successive charges and bull-doing the area was the method by which to conceal the night’s grisly events and bloody torture. It is not certain whether the massacre took place during the late night of June 25th or the early hours of June 26th. Major Chinchilla tried to cover his deeds by claiming the two priests had escaped to the mountains with six hundred armed men!

## CHAPTER EIGHT

# The Martyr

Fr. Ivan had understandably broken under the sadistic torture. Sister Maria Garcia wrote that he was "forced to make declarations to the effect that the Church is dedicated to subversive activities." Perhaps the torturers consoled or even congratulated themselves for having extracted the "truth."

From June 26th an outcry was heard throughout the land. A search was made for the bodies, especially by the parishoners of Father Betancur. Fr. Emil wrote, "On the 17th of July the bodies were discovered after several days of digging (at Los Horcones). On the 18th of July the bodies were sent to their families. An airforce plane arrived in Gualaco on the 18th about noon, with his body. We buried Casimir yesterday (July 20) in the church."

Casimir had filled out his personnel form and sent it to the minister less than three months before his murder. He cited his younger sister, Mary Ann Cypher Engel, of Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, as his next of kin; also his brother, Joseph, of Medford. Casimir assumed he would die before them.

At the bottom of the page there is a final question: Do you have a preference as to where your burial is to take place? He answered "Yes. Wherever I die. I intend to be working in a parish or at least living in a friary and it is my wish that I be buried in the same town in which I die. I want no more for my burial than a pauper. If you have to spend money, then have a pauper and thank God for my death."

His mother joined in that sentiment. "He told me that he wanted to be buried among the people he had worked with if something happened. The Order offered to bring him back, but that was out. I wouldn't do anything against his will."

With Casimir you never know whether to laugh or cry—both in life and in death. About thirty of us were assembled in chapter near Rockford, Illinois, when Fr. Clement Weidman was called to the telephone to take a call from the State Department. The statement was cautious and tentative; Casimir was only missing for the present. I "knew" that that snarky little priest would come strolling out of the jungle with an unlighted cigar stub between his teeth, a ripped tee shirt, and covered with insect bites. I "knew" he'd tell a tall tale of getting mixed up on the trails, or stopping to help deliver a baby—or something. (Casimir, where in hell *are* you? Don't keep us hanging fire! Get your butt to a phone. *Let us know!*)

But I was wrong. We all hoped against hope. Martyrs are great, but only if they belong to someone else's fraternity. But we were stuck with our own little guy. True to form, he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. But the martyr-type doesn't high-tail it for the hills. Martyrdom is simply the last act of doing what is right to do, because it's expected of you by God, and which you were doing all along, in a kind of preparation.

Michael L. Hancock sent a follow-up letter on September 22, 1975, from the Embassy in Tegucigalpa. He was the American Consul and reports to Fr. Clement that "twelve men, including the local military commander, have been arrested and charged with involvement in his murder."

The High Level Military Commission concluded "that two military officers, Major Chinchilla and Lt. Benjamin Plata, and two local landowners, Manuel 'Mel' Zelaya and Carlos Bart, were the persons directly responsible."

"The Honduran Government has officially expressed to the Ambassador its repudiation and condemnation of this horrible crime, emphasizing that the action taken by Major Chinchilla was entirely on his own initiative, apparently in complicity with certain local landowners, and was entirely without the knowledge and much less the authorization of the Government



or higher military authorities. The Foreign Minister has also expressed to the Ambassador on behalf of the Honduran Government 'sincere condolences for the death of the Reverend Father Michael Jerome Cypher, who was assigned to this country as a priest, during which time he won the affection and regard of the members of the church.' "

We return to Penny Lernoux's *Cry of the People* for her authoritative comments (pages 113-114):

"The military regime's investigation and a private one undertaken by the Betancur family showed that Zelaya and Chinchilla had not acted impetuously or on their own; the campaign against the Olancho Church had been planned two months in advance by all the cattle ranchers in the region and had the financial and political support of both the National Federation of Cattlemen and Farmers, and the business community. Disclaimers to the contrary, the regime itself, headed by General Juan Alberto Melgar, was also involved in the gruesome affair. Church sources asserted that some of the top command must have been accomplices in the plot, because a number of priests, nuns, and lay volunteers who had no connection with Olancho were arrested at the same time in other parts of the country. Those arrested in Olancho were interrogated and expelled by the central government, and the Tegucigalpa authorities forbade any autopsy of the corpses dug up at the ranch. Pedro Martin Bolivar, Maria Elena's brother, who was sent by the two families to Honduras to bring back Mrs. Betancur and the bodies, said that the Honduran customs authorities told him: Take the bodies and get out! (Autopsies were eventually performed in Colombia.) The Betancur family lawyer, who went to Honduras to obtain legal representation for the family, reported that no one in the College of Honduran Lawyers dared touch the case for fear of meeting the same end as the Olancho baker."

Lernoux goes on to underscore the "severity" of Manuel Zelaya's punishment at the Central Penitentiary in Tegucigalpa. He was permitted—no doubt with the standard payoffs—to build his own house with kitchen appliances, his own telephone and television. His wife joined his "imprisonment," but they came and went as they pleased, accompanied by guards for their own protection. Of course, it was "all in the family"; his son had married President Melgar's daughter. Major Chinchilla and Sargent Plata were expendable and perhaps not rich enough; they

were given ten years' imprisonment. But Zelaya and his henchmen were released.

Philip Kelly, OFMConv., editor of the Canadian *Companion* in Toronto, Ontario, interested himself in Casimir's cause. Speaking Spanish fluently—he had been a missionary in Costa Rica before—Phil went to Honduras in 1984 to gather pictures and information to prepare a presentation and seminar in Los Angeles for the Inter-Province Conference of the Conventual Franciscans.

Memories of Casimir remained fresh after nine years. Naturally the persons he interviewed preferred anonymity, fearing reprisals even at that late date. Phil Kelly shared with me the transcripts of the taped interviews he made down there. The persons interviewed retold the story of Casimir's abduction.

They reminded us that only the secretarial staff was at the former Santa Clara Center on the morning of June 25th, on the second floor. "There are eyewitnesses who saw (the soldiers) bring Father Casimiro, grabbing him, as he was captured. They were shoving him, pushing him violently, and when they got to the middle of the courtyard, they took off his clothes—they say it's a routine of army captures, taking off your belt, your shoes, anything that might be used to commit suicide. Anyway, they left him in his underwear. And then the major was hitting him on the face, saying, "Look at this blood, these corpses. That is what you people have come to preach to Honduras!" And the Father was not saying anything.

"Then they also took some of the people they had prisoners there, leaders of the Peasant League, and they put them in a pickup truck. And they took them to jail. There were in total fifteen people. They kept them in jail from about noon to the evening. Around midnight they took them out. . . . I remember only the name of one of them, who had been a primary school teacher; his name was Roque Ambrade." (His name is given as *Andrade* in the *El Cronista Dominical*, a Tegucigalpa newspaper, in an article "En el tercer aniversario de horrendo asesinato," by Blesina Marquez de Rivas, June 25, 1978. This article supplies some other details and political commentary.)

"There was also Lincoln Coleman, who, although he had an English name, was Honduran. He was also a leader in the co-operatives, an

animator in the peasant movement. . . .

“The next day, when we found out that the priests and the peasant leaders had been killed, then we took the cars belonging to Caritas, which have four-wheel traction, because the roads were in such bad shape, and we drove around practically the whole department—which is a big area; it’s 23,000 square kilometers. But before I set out I got a safe-conduct document from Major Chinchilla, because a sixth sense told me we could also find problems on the road. . . .”

To the question, “How did you get involved in the case of Fr. Casimiro?” a priest answered (in the interview):

“The year that Father Casimiro died, I was the pastoral co-ordinator for the Archdiocese of Tegucigalpa. This was in 1975. At that time I was called by the archbishop, together with the council of the archdiocese and the organization for pastoral work in the diocese, to inform us that many priests and religious brothers and sisters had been thrown out of the diocese of Olancho by the military. And they were either in jails or in the offices of the security forces. Some had already been released, and for others proceedings were underway to get them released. Immediately committees were formed to gather the facts, and this is how, on the next day, together with Father Antonio Urrutia, a Spanish Franciscan, and the engineer, Alonso Valenzuela, a Honduran, I went in a small rented airplane to Juticalpa, Olancho. We found the people there very afraid . . . .About Father Casimiro I never heard anything about him being involved in any movement against the landowners, or the cattle farmers, or even Major Chinchilla himself. What I did hear were statements against the foreign priests, saying that they had come to Honduras to corrupt the mind of the people, to preach hatred, and so on, but these were just commonplace cliches. They were said in general, not in specific reference to anybody; they were just slanders against the Church, accusations of communism.”

In response to the question, “What was the result of this investigation?” the same priest made these remarks:

“Major Chinchilla was put in jail and demoted in the army, as were Lieutenant Altamirano and Lieutenant Plata, who had obeyed his orders to take over the Santa Clara training center, and also the sergeant in

charge of the jail in Juticalpa. They passed some time in jail. The events took place in 1975; they spent about five or six years in jail. And when the constitutional government came in, then they were let out in amnesty. But they are no longer here. Lieutenant Plata was shot dead; so was the sergeant in charge of the jail—shot dead as he entered his house. And a Mr. Galvez, who had helped in the capture of the religious brothers, was also killed in Choluteca. Chinchilla is still alive, I believe, but he is not here in Honduras, or if he is, he is in hiding. But there have been four or five deaths—almost everyone who participated in this is now dead.”

The final point made during the interview is the culpability of all the assailants:

“What we found out about the murder we discovered later, through confessions, after the government took over the investigation. Through the declarations given by Major Chinchilla and by a landowner from Olancho called Manuel Zelaya, and of another called Carlos Bart, who worked as an administrator in a lumber mill in Olancho, it then came out that, once they killed the peasant leaders, in the Los Horcones farm, then Major Chinchilla said, ‘And now for the good stuff!’ And he threw a handgun over to Lieutenant Plata, so that he could shoot the Father in the head. But the lieutenant didn’t want to do it. And then the Major took the pistol and shot (Casimiro) in the head, and also Father Ivan in the same way. I believe that they found a Magnum gun which, it was assumed, was used to kill them. The gun was not army issued; it belonged to the landowner, Manuel Zelaya. That’s all we know, and we couldn’t find out any more. The nine people that were taken prisoner by the army all participated in the events. We believe that each of the nine was forced to kill someone, so that nobody would later be in a position to accuse the others. But when the army took over the affair and interrogated people, evidently they have ways and means to find out the truth. So that’s what they found out, and the declarations were made public in the four Tegucigalpa newspapers.”

A Honduran communique said the bodies recovered from the pit were in the complete state of decomposition and were—obviously, from the dynamite—greatly disfigured. Part of the remains permitted identification of five of the persons killed. Some persons deny that we can even

be sure it is Casimir's remains buried in the church.

Dr. Francis J. Brinker of Portland, Oregon, sent me copies of his small note book diary, telephoned, and even wrote an account of the return and burial of Casimir's remains.

"Shortly after my arrival, less than a week before his death, I encountered 'Padre Casimiro' wading through the river near Gualaco where we were bathing. We sat and talked on the shore, discussing his mission and work there. My tranquillity that day was disturbed by the discovery of blood in my stool. Father Casimir, not too busy to feel compassion for a tender-foot traveler like myself, promised to get some medicine for my condition on his next trip to Juticalpa. The possibility of impending violence seemed quite distant.

"Then the rumors began. He had been jailed. He escaped and was in the mountains. He had been killed." It was even said he was organizing guerillas in the mountains.

"Nothing seemed certain until a plane bearing the casket containing his corpse landed at the Gualaco airport." They had heard that the bodies had been exhumed. People seemed surprised, that is, there was no talk about his body prior to the sound of the plane. (Dr. Brinker was eating lunch at the time.)

It is ironic that the same army which killed him had delivered his body by airplane. "The arrival of his body at the church (in Gualaco) initiated emotional outbursts bordering on hysteria. Constant vigil was kept as the heart of the people poured out." From his diary: "The church full of gawking rubbernecks, eventually cleared and folks just sat with the body. Soon flowers and candles. I was struck by the significance, the appropriateness of it all and the remarkable resemblance of that event 2,000 years ago. Political machine. . . .religious life: these words and their pictures passed and passed through my mind while I gazed on. I was and am amazed and overwhelmed. Staying here for the funeral now. Truth through martyrdom. Dignity through death. Ignominy through murder. Power is the liar."

On July 20 Dr. Brinker went on the pickup truck to the mission parish of San Esteban, where Casimir's rectory was half completed. The casket was never opened. The body had been "examined" by a doctor at the

exhumation. There was a powerfully fragrant, sweet odor from the casket—an overwhelming sense experience during the ride in the truck. (The same experience was reported by Fr. Michael Brown, OFMConv., at Casimir's re-interment ten years later!) Was it merely "bacterial proliferation," embalming (if it was even done), or the odor of sanctity sometimes reported of holy souls? "My experience only speaks of its uniqueness," said Dr. Brinker.

(From his diary:) "In San Esteban there was some considerable arguments between Father Emil and the parishioners as to who should take Casimir's personal possessions. I believe Emil got them all (not much, but particularly chalice and ciborium) except for Casimir's cowboy hat that one man demanded. Paul (Vogelsburg) has some photos of the funeral procession and burial."

The people of San Esteban did not want to part with the remains of their *santito*. On the way to their village "all eyes from the countryside followed the course of the 'hearse' . . . After the service, the parishioners of San Esteban ceremoniously expressed their reverence with a slow, sorrowful procession to the edge of their village, mourning the loss of their priest whom they loved.

"On returning to Gualaco, funeral preparations were made; the village was packed with pilgrims from the area. The solemn Mass ended with a long procession around the city square, followed by the lowering of the casket into the grave in the church sacristy, culminating with eulogies and heated political speeches from the steps of the church.

"My short contact with Father Casimir had taken me from the peace of a quiet stream to the embattled cries of revolution. His way seems to have been between and above these two extremes, though he was necessarily involved in both. Not having known the man long, I felt I truly understood his spirit by witnessing the work for which he gave his life—serving Christ in the poor and suffering."

The Conventual Franciscans then residing in the province's mission house in Hartland, Wisconsin, wrote a letter of "vehement protest" to the Embassy of Honduras in Washington, D.C. Dr. Roberto Lazarus, the Ambassador, replied on August 7, 1975:

". . . Our Lord Jesus Christ was also fighting and struggling for social

justice 2,000 years ago and was crucified for it. The Lord did not talk then of vengeance, but of love, when He said: 'Forgive them for they do not know what they do.' You would do better following His teachings and steps. Give Love and understanding rather than hatred and vengeance.'

Fr. Emil Cook, OFMConv., wrote to the provincial on August 12, 1975, and listed the belongings of Casimir, the servant of the poor: "4 boxes of books, a small portable stove (broken), 2 saddle bags, 2 chalices, album and personal pictures (I am sending them to his family), personal letters and notes, foot locker—personal clothes, Mass vestments, art supplies, 2 habits, and 4 suitcases." His passport and a certificate of death were sent to the American Consul in the capital upon his request.

Mrs. Elizabeth Cypher, his mother, wrote a touching letter to Fr. Clement Weidman, the provincial, on September 18, 1975. She didn't want an unmarked grave for her son. She offered \$150.00—naturally, it was refused—to have a stone marker made with a cross on it for Gualaco.

Actually a photo of Casimir was placed on the wall next to his grave in the floor. A metal plaque flanks it with his name and dates of his birth and death. The people continue to visit the grave and pray for (and apparently to) him. Fresh flowers and lit candles are always laid upon it—without the encouragement of the friars. Fr. Michael Brown said he senses the presence of Casimir all over the parish, where frequently a picture of Casimir is placed with honor in homes and churches. He is like an "assistant pastor," always at hand to help!

Actually Casimir was buried not in the sacristy, but the sanctuary floor of the ancient church in Gualaco. There was a wooden frame embedded around the concrete slab over the grave with an inscription about Casimir's death. He had carved a small wooden plaque with the Franciscan coat of arms (the crossed, stigmatized hands of Christ and Francis) with the characteristic Franciscan greeting, *Pax et Bonum*, "Peace and Good." Fr. Michael Brown sensitively and touchingly embedded the shield over the head of the body into the concrete slab.

In the St. Bonaventure Province Newsletter early in 1985, another account submitted by Fr. Michael appears. He had been asked by Bishop Mauro to exhume Casimir's body. It was placed in plastic and had *no odor* at all and was reburied in the wall of the church.

Casimir's friend, Juanita, published a poem in memory of Casimir. It is obvious she was one of many who loved him. This is now the poem ends:

Even now I can see him,  
this slightly balding man  
with a bit of a paunch and baggy pants,  
dirty, dull-green t-shirt,  
three-days growth of beard on his face,  
the stub of a cigar hanging from your mouth.

He still whittles  
and when he finishes,  
he goes to the Lord of life.  
"Here, I made this for you."

We used to kid Casimir when, during long winters of inactivity, he began to develop a small "gut." We'd laugh and joke and tell him he was like a cuddly, chubby, little bear. Maybe that's why he wrote this bittersweet tale of the cub which was killed and yet lived on in memory by its gentle smile:

### LITTLE DUSTY THE BEAR

(A story for children of all ages)

In a little woods by a big rushing river, near the foothills of a great purple mountain, which was inhabited by bugs, bees, and butterflies, by buffaloes and birds, and also a billion other living beings that are called wild, a bitty baby bear was born.

He was the second of twins and the fourteenth son of a family of twenty-six. His family were black bears, but his hair was gray like his mother's, who was gray because of many years of providing for her cubs. She was like a queen since most of the black bears of that woods were her descendants. But she was also and for much better reasons a queen because of her gentle and wise disposition.

Little Dusty—for that was what he was called, if you accept a free translation of the current bear language—was among the children of his mother a true prince. He never whined or pouted, was kind and gentle to everyone, ate everything that was given



him, except for some of the little animals that he was taught to catch and show to his proud mom.

Dusty grew quickly and was extremely agile and strong for his age. He loved to play and make others happy and, much to the disgust of the other bears, he tried to be friends with every living thing that he encountered. Because he was a bear, no one trusted him. Because he never lost his temper and always spoke kindly, the other bears, in fact, the whole population of the woods, made fun of him. He became the common sport of the woods.

Even the insects harassed and laughed at him. But Dusty was happy because he knew that most of the forest creatures were not afraid of him and in time would be his friends. The other bears thought he was foolish and were really ashamed of him—that is, all the bears except his mother, who was concerned for him, but very glad that she had such a different and strangely kind son.

Dusty had a habit of standing on his hind feet and clumsily clapping, and then bounding up to any new creature that he saw. He would stop and stand up again and say “hello” in his best grammar and in a bear’s gentlest manner. It was this habit that made him the laughing stock, the least feared, and the best known bear in the woods.

One day Dusty encountered a young man dressed in red and carrying a funny-looking stick. According to his habit he stood up and clapped his paws and started to run toward the bewildered young man. The man shot him, and in that moment of surprise, pain, fright, frustration, and anxiety, Dusty couldn’t understand what was happening. And he finally realized what fear was and how terrible it was. He knew he was dying and that soon he would not see or hear or feel the breeze or experience the happiness of trust or the comfort of his family’s chiding.

In that last moment Dusty concentrated all his faculties and mustered a smile which grew through his last breath and remained on his strong gray face after his death.

Dusty became the one and only smiling bear rug in the hightree country of Purple Mountain. Many people remember the rug

and the atmosphere it created. Many children say that it talks to them, but in the language of an amiable bear. A lot of beautiful legends arose around the comfortable, though often dusty, skin of the gentle bear that wanted to befriend the world, and many people followed the (example of) his smile to develop their own.

Some say that the spirit of the gentle bear haunts the rug with his gladness and good will. I don't know if that's true. But everyone knows that a charitable life never ends and that *that* is the whole answer to the legendary pelt that clothed a gentle bear and told everyone who looked at it what creation was really for!

## Business As Usual

We interpret and signalize most great persons by the course of their lives. But some men we have to define and understand by their death. And so it was with Casimir. I was at first reluctant to add this final chapter, lest I be untrue to this "man of peace." If the purpose of his life and death was to be a reconciling factor, then the purpose failed. Casimir would never have allowed his name or person to be used to divide or create factions. He would modestly have refused to be a rallying point for the mildest revolutions.

But it may be a lesson to compare some facts and events with Casimir's own statements about peace and the purpose of life. . . .

Mr. Robert J. McCloskey, Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations of the Department of State, wrote to the Hon. Charles W. Whalen of the House of Representatives in Washington D.C., on October 16, 1975, four months after the massacre at Los Horcones. Rep. Whalen was responding to Mrs. Mary Jane Gross of Centerville, Ohio, who had asked him for information about Casimir's murder. Mr. McCloskey wrote:

"In regard to the question concerning relations between the U.S. based fruit companies and Hondurans, the influence of the U.S. Government on the conduct of U.S. based multinational preparations (*sic*) is very limited. However, it should be pointed out that workers in their plantations are among the best paid in Honduras and receive extensive fringe benefits. Honduran banana workers are represented by very effective trade unions which have received support from the American Institute for

Free Labor Development, an organization funded, in part, by the Agency for International Development. . . .”

Everyone must judge whether this reply was evasive or a whitewash or an honest answer. In an article, “Honduras: 1,000 years to Catch up with Industrial Economies,” written by Manuel Torres on February 28, 1984, nine years after Casimir’s death, Sr. Torres writes:

“Between 1970 and 1980, the increase in Honduras’ per capita gross national product (GNP) was the lowest in Latin America, with the exception of El Salvador.

“Honduras began 1980 at the bottom of the list of Latin America’s poorest nations, just under Haiti.

“The country’s 1980 per capita GNP of \$338 was only 34 percent of the average for Latin America, \$1,700.

“And this paltry sum is also very unevenly distributed, according to sociologist Guillermo Molina Chocano, who reports that 80 percent of Honduras’ four million people earn only 30 percent of the total income, while a fortunate minority of 20 percent have the rest.”

There has been no peace, no increase in the simple provisions to sustain life for the poor. *Honduras Update* (1151 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, Mass. 02138) monitors the situation in that country. In the March, 1985, issue of their publication, Fr. Earl Gallegher, an American missionary-pastor in Honduras near the El Salvador border, is quoted:

“I believe if Americans realized what was going on down here, the situation would change in a month. Now to say this in Honduras today would cause one to be labeled a subversive, guerilla and Communist—simply because you question the system here. . . .It’s not God’s mistake for this poverty. God gave us plenty of resources for all—it’s we who haven’t seen to it that wealth is shared well enough. . . .We must listen to the Latin American Bishops who spoke forcefully in their 1968 Medellin and 1979 Puebla documents, as well as to Pope John Paul II, who call on us to change unjust, un-Christian economic systems here.” (“The Wages of War,” by Martin Francis—a pseudonym.)

Now the U.S. has set up airstrips and military bases near the El Salvador border in Honduras to teach combat techniques. But with the militarization

of Honduras and the U.S. presence has come no relief of poverty (rather an increase!), no freedom for the Church.

The article of Francis continues: "General Gustavo Alvarez, head of the Honduran Armed Forces, told a recent gathering of bishops to 'prove you are not communists.' It seems that after the brutal killing of American-born Father Casimir Cypher, OFMConv., along with Colombian priest Father Ivan Betancur and twelve other church workers at the hands of the Honduran armed forces and landowners in June of 1975, the church began to back away from its social development programs. The Church has returned to a very traditional manner of work to 'prove' that it is not 'communist.' As one Church official concluded, 'We do much. We speak little. In other words, we are to do strictly pastoral work, but we organize people very quietly, and we do not speak out against the government.'

"When a different Church leader was asked, 'What is the best thing we American Catholics can do to help Honduras at this serious time?' he said, 'Send more missionary priests.' In another part of the country, a Church spokesman stated that General Alvarez does not like the bishops speaking about 'peace' since his men are trained for war. Yet another Church leader quoted Salvadoran Archbishop Rivera y Damas: 'You supply the arms, we supply the dead.' "

Casimir had some words to say about peace, too. He does not mention "God" or the "Church," but these are implicit, because he starts with peace of the soul, which is the peace which this world can neither give nor take away. His statement is undated, but was written, to judge by its location in his spiral notebook, in Honduras in 1974 or 1975.

"In the search for Life and its meaning there is a way above all others that is more convenient, more sure. It is called 'peace'—peace in which to watch things grow, in which to think, in which to live in a real and truthful fashion. For some a certain place is necessary, but we will run out of place. For some a kind of profession is necessary—a situation for acting successfully in an orderly and constructive manner, but eventually we have to limit our time and wall up our work to keep the world from using us. Some seek it within philosophy or religion, but eventually they have to put down or renounce others. Nothing is necessary for peace but the true desire for it.

"Peace is never found without patience and waiting. It can never be

manufactured or learned in the usual 'read and do' manner. It grows as a weed grows—always growing stronger, always taking up more room, forcing us to live with it always or root it up. But we must wait for the seed to plant itself or replant itself. Years spent waiting for peace will accomplish more than all other work. . . . Those who don't have peace have a regular routine for rooting it up.'

It is a worn-out phrase to use, but I will: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church," which was written by Tertullian in northern Africa when Christianity was weak, persecuted, and a novelty in the Mediterranean world. Perhaps Casimir's blood will nurture the "weed of peace," capable of choking out the plants of greed, rapacity, and exploitation.

Casimir—except for June 25, 1975—would probably have ended his life like another simple friar, Brother Juniper, in the *Little Flower of St. Francis* (St. Francis prayed for a forest full of such "junipers"), in quiet obscurity, perhaps with occasional flashes of St. Francis showing through his writings. But the Master of Life impressed on him the seal of His Son, Jesus.

On a water-color painting Casimir made in Honduras, now in the possession of Paul Vogelsburg in Salinas, Kansas, Casimir lettered in this quotation: Live so that when the summons comes. . . . you go not like a quarry slave at night."

There will always be some mystery in understanding God's purpose in Casimir's death. For the people of faith nothing happens by chance. Perhaps God knows we need heroes at every moment of the Church's way through the world.

Casimir wrote a poem (more or less) entitled "There Is a Purpose." It contains his usual humor and unexpected turns of phrase. It is a fitting meditation with which to close his biography, which, in any case, was delineated by himself in the documents he left as part of his memorial:

In all the birds that ever sing,  
In all the blades of grass,  
In all the rocks that make a mountain,  
In all the ants that a little bear eats,

In all the hairs in a puppy dog's ear,  
In every whisker on a nightingale's beak. . . .

For every part of a spider's web,  
For every wax cup in a honeybee's comb,  
For every color in a butterfly's wing,  
For every piece of snow in a snowdrift,  
For every toenail on every foot,  
For each little breeze in valley or cliff. . . .

There is a purpose and a purpose profound  
To each part of creation from life to sound.  
Think of the simplest thing that can be:  
It can't be creation without its mystery—  
and neither can you and neither can me.

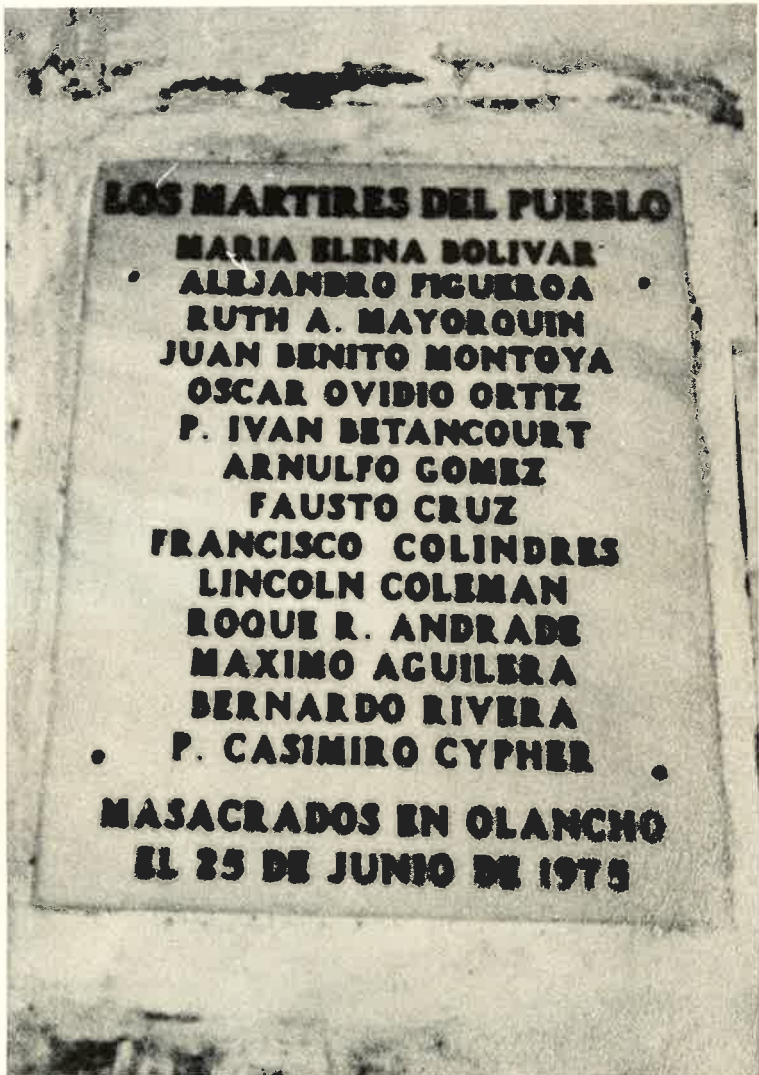
There's reason for the color of your hair  
And the varied hues in your eyes,  
For your particular musculature  
And the strength and tone of your sighs.

There's a purpose in the way you walk  
And in the clothes you wear,  
Also for the particular sound of your voice  
And what you think is fair.

There is a reason for how much truth you need  
And for each little personal vanity,  
For your physical shape and the shape of your thoughts  
And for your life and what all it can be.

Some purposes change or are completed in life,  
Whatever that life might be,  
But there will always be more purposes  
And always the mystery.

— The End —



Plaque affixed to the church wall in Honduras where Casimir Cypher is buried.