Missionary Witnesses:

Father Casimir Michael Cypher, OFM Conv

A reflection by Father Patrick Greenough, OFM Conv

Those that met Father Casimir Michael Cypher would say that he did not stand out in a crowd. That he seemed in most ways quite ordinary; except for his outstretched welcoming arms and his quick and friendly smile. This is his story and how the ordinary becomes extraordinary by being open to grace.

Michael, which was his baptismal name, was born January 12, 1941, on a farm in Medford, in central Wisconsin. Family was a big part of his life as he grew up with eight brothers and three sisters. Michael was considered the runt of the family. Yet, at the young age of 35, he would stand head and shoulders above everyone as he gave his life serving as a Conventual Franciscan priest in the Department Of Olancho, Honduras in June 1975.

Growing up on the farm, Michael loved nature and like St. Francis whom he would later follow, he saw the sublime artistry of God in creation all around him. As a priest he wrote simple meditations on nature and faith, which are both humble and beautiful. In one meditation he wrote – "Seed planting time is for enduring hope; sprouting is the fulfillment of faith; and fruit is the abundance of charity; and the life lived is the greatest book of theology..."

As a young man he entered the novitiate of the Conventual Franciscans of St. Bonaventure Province in Lake Forest, Illinois on August 14, 1959 on the feast day of another Conventual Franciscan martyr, St. Maximilian Kolbe. Michael professed first vows and took the name Casimir. He attended Loyola University in Chicago where he earned a Bachelors in Psychology in 1964; graduating with average grades. Apart from his genuine friendliness and kindness, he was, in every other way, quite ordinary. And it is from this very ordinary friar, turned student, turned priest, turned missionary, that we see how God takes a very ordinary life that is open to His grace and makes it extraordinary.

Father Casimir spent just a few years in parochial ministry in California when this jovial, ordinary priest from Wisconsin decided to do something quite extraordinary – he requested to go to the new Conventual Franciscan mission in Honduras. Little did he or his superiors know how extraordinary his life would become from this seemingly simple request.
After several appeals, he was finally granted permission to go to Honduras in 1974. He lived in Honduras only 18 months, minus a medical leave to return temporarily to the United States over Christmas for the treatment of tropical diseases.

Honduras is a small and very poor country in Central America. It is about the size of West Virginia and just as mountainous with an oppressive tropical climate. It was in the rural precincts of that poor country that Father Casimir would make a most profound impact on the people. From his main parish in Gualaco; Father Casimir traveled to several small villages in the mountains to minister and offer the sacraments to the “campesinos” – the poor, rural peasants of the region. These trips took many days on horseback. There were of course no hotels or indoor plumbing or running water on these journeys. Initially he had a very difficult time riding a horse over the rough terrain, so he tried walking through the mountains which proved was even worse.

Facing frequent illnesses, poverty and many other obstacles he once wrote "I am forever being frustrated by the smallness of my own humanity. But at the same time I’m getting impressed with the power of God and the endurance of Charity."

The campesinos of Honduras were very poor. Where Father Casimir lived and ministered, half of the infants born died before the age of five. The campesinos had little or no education, limited medical care and frequently faced hunger. They had little property and often no land of their own to cultivate food to feed their families. Honduran law called for land reform for the peasants so they would be able to provide for themselves. The Farmer's National Union, a peasant movement organized to help the landless campesinos, appealed to the government for the promised land reforms; and this in turn, caused conflict – with sometimes violent reactions – from some of the wealthy ranchers owners and the paramilitary.

Father Casimir did not engage in any of these political activities. He was a simple priest more concerned with serving the people rather than being a political activist. He cared for his flock through his priestly ministry, administering the sacraments, writing poems, painting and, humorously, struggling with his Spanish. He lived a rather ordinary life, even for a missionary.

On the morning of June 24th, 1975, Father Casimir drove a beaten down truck – a gift from the United States – from Gualaco to the capital of the Department of Olancho, Juticalpa for repairs. The next day, June 25 the Farmers' National Union was gathering for a six day
"Hunger March" to the nation’s capital from all parts of Honduras. The symbolism of the march angered the military and some of the ranchers and landowners and thus began a series of fateful events that day.

Earlier, that day, June 25, the Bishop’s residence was sacked by the para-military forces, as were several rectories, and a house of formation for seminarians. Then soldiers attacked a group of peasants who had gathered in a compound in Juticalpa, to begin the walk to the capital of Tegucigalpa. The soldiers killed four people, wounding, beating and arresting many others.

In the chaos of that morning, Father Casimir entered the compound, came upon a man who had been wounded and rather than running for cover or walking away, he like the Good Samaritan, stopped to help the wounded.

How many times have we just walked away or kept going when we have seen someone in need? Not making eye contact, not stopping to help, not reaching out a helping hand because of the “cost” of getting involved?

Father Casimir could not turn away. Like St. Francis and the leper, his Faith and Love impelled him to reach out to the wounded and dying. Seeing Father Casimir tend to and serve the injured and dying, the military seized him. He was arrested on the spot and taken to the city square. There his clothes were ripped from his body and publicly and fiercely beaten. After the violence done to Fr. Casimir in the square, the military then took him to a prison where, even though he had been stripped, humiliated and brutalized, eyewitnesses saw him minister to others that had likewise been beaten and imprisoned.

As the day lengthened into night, Father Casimir Cypher, Father Ivan Betancur, from Columbia, and 12 others were taken away to a private farm called “Los Horcones” of Mel Zeleya, Sr. where the crimes that would occur would be hidden from public view. Casimir and the others were tortured throughout the night. The prisoners were beaten and whipped and insulted. Their torturers tried to get them to blaspheme God and deny their Faith. Even to have immoral sexual relationships with the other women captives. All of which they refused. Tortures too gruesome to detail here were committed against them. An eyewitness reported that through it all Father Casimir’s lips were moving in silent prayer. Finally, after hours of vicious torture, Father Casimir was shot, his agony ended.

Father Casimir and the bodies of the other victims were then thrown into an abandoned well which was dynamited and covered up to hide the massacre. After public outrage and
international pressure, a government inquiry sought the bodies, and on July 17th, the remains of the victims. His memory and the memory of all those who died that fateful day of June 25, 1975 are still remembered by the people he served and their children, and their children's children. Vocations to the priesthood and religious life have been inspired by his heroic charity. The people of Olancho erected a marble tomb in the parish church and a painting of Fr. Casimir has been erected in his memory.

Father Casimir was a regular Conventual Franciscan priest who did not stand out from the crowd. He lived an ordinary life and preached through the example of holiness of doing the simple, ordinary things that a Franciscan friar – and all Christians – should do every day. That is, until one day he had the opportunity to go from an ordinary Christian life to an extraordinary one. He heard shots ring out, he saw people that were hurt and dying, and like the Good Samaritan, he went to help in whatever way he could, with no concern for himself.

In one of his homilies, Father Casimir wrote, "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."

And so, a 35 year old Franciscan priest from a farm in Central Wisconsin crossed over from the ordinary to the extraordinary; from a routine priestly life, to the cross, to eternity!

The Bishop and the people of Olancho Honduras and the Conventual Franciscan friars of St. Bonaventure Province have not forgotten the outstretched arms and smiling face of their brother Casimir, or the sacrifice of Faith and Charity he made for others. Through the efforts of those that knew him, the Bishop and the people of Olancho, the process of canonization for Father Casimir has begun.

Whether Father Casimir becomes a saint is secondary to the fact that his life and death speaks to each of us in our own ordinary, everyday lives as we too wait for the grace of extraordinary moments to come along. Will we accept them?

Father Patrick Greenough, OFM Conv is minister provincial, St. Bonaventure Province (USA and Australia). The cause for his canonization for Father Casimir has been inaugurated. Please report any personal knowledge of Father Casimir Cypher OFM Conv, or favors granted through his intercession to: Attn: Fr. Patrick Greenough OFM Conv, Conventual Franciscans of St. Bonaventure Province, 6107 N Kenmore Ave., Chicago, IL. 60660-2797; email Patmi3@aol.com