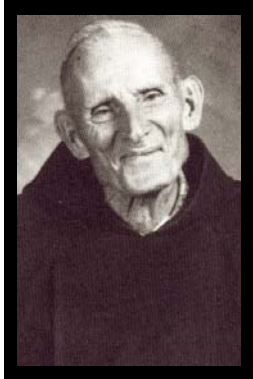


# Neerology

Philip "Berard" Casper  
1913 - 1998



The very core of Philip Casper's personality was missionary. He was, from the very beginning of his life, conscious of being sent. And faithful servant that he was, he responded to that call with all his being, heart and soul. Being a good missionary, he was also very conscious that he was the one who would plant the seed. Somewhere down the line someone else would water the seed. And finally it would produce the fruit. Philip was greatly blessed. He actually saw the fruit. Like Zechariah, he could then pray for release. He could come home.

Padre Felipe, the tall, lanky missionary of Nicaragua, Panama and Arizona, always appeared to be at peace with himself. He was practical and action orientated, a man on the move. He sometimes remarked that he was not much of a scholar and that he barely made it through philosophy and theology. Perhaps what struck people most about him was his open, unpretentious humility, his simple life style and a smile that powerfully expressed God's love..

"I felt that call to be a missionary as a young man" he writes. Shortly after his ordination to the priesthood, in 1943, the examining doctor recommended that he never be sent to the foreign missions because of his thin, wain appearance. But it was too late. He was already on the boat that arrived in Nicaragua after a two week journey. For the next 40 years he served the church of Latin America, ministering in one of the most difficult and physically demanding areas of the Nicaraguan mission on the Atlantic coast, working principally in Waspam and along the Rio Coco.

He never took medicine, avoided medical check-ups, and apart from his bouts with malaria, never got sick. His unbounded energy amazed everyone. He once commented that he sometimes went for months without eating bread and that he often drank from contaminated rivers and slept in all sorts of places. He often expressed his gratitude to God for his good health and God's protection in his many missionary journeys. "Who else but the Lord could have calmed the sea and kept the big waves from breaking over and into the small boat as I visited Indian villages along the Carribean coast of Nicaragua? Who else guided the footing of my horse up and down steep and rocky paths as I visited villages and Christian communities in Panama?"

He truly loved the Miskito Indians with whom he had intimately lived for so many years. He was especially dedicated to the Word of God and translated the main books of the Bible in the popular Miskito language. He wrote various booklets to help explain the Bible to the Indian people. Philip writes: "My parish included caring for more than 20

Indian villages along the lower Rio Coco...along the 30 mile Caribbean coast between Cabo Gracias and Kruta. In each town the Indians built the chapel made of rough lumber, bamboo walls, leaf roof, where people gathered for prayer with their catechist. I visited each village 2 or 3 times a year, staying a few days, celebrating mass and giving the sacraments to the people. I ministered to the Indians for 30 years, and it was certainly a great privilege to do so. The Indians are truly children of nature, and they taught me much about God. I have always been fascinated by the by the simple lifestyle of the Indians everywhere in Central America. I admire their culture and life values."

No one could ever accuse Philip of being too legalistic or rigid. If anything, some might feel he was at times too open and free spirited when it came to the details of Canon Law. He got along easily with persons of other faiths and worked closely with Protestant ministers in his frequent contacts with the American Bible Society. He had a unique ability to size up a person's character and sincerity — perhaps something he learned from working so many years with the Indian people. He avoided publicity and detested clericalism and falsehood. He never learned Spanish very well, and seemed most at home with the simple Indian people of the jungle.

Philip suffered a deep and personal crisis during the conflictive, unstable years of the SomosaSandinista-Contra revolutions. The Indian people with whom he had worked with were never supportive of the revolution, as many were forced to flee their homelands and find refuge in neighboring Honduras. Philip accompanied them in their struggles and was less than enthusiastic about the "glorious revolution". Profound changes were taking place in the pastoral orientation of the missions as well, which stressed "team ministry" and a "common pastoral plan". He felt he didn't fit in with all that was happening and felt divisions and misunderstandings among his own Capuchin brothers. With a feeling of personal rejection, but showing little personal bitterness, he left Nicaragua in 1979, and spent the next 7 years in Arizona, principally ministering to the Mexican migrant workers close to the Mexican border.

In 1984 Philip came to Panama and served as pastor to the neighboring parish of Chepo. He joined the pastoral team with Kevin Heagerty and Michael Sullivan when the province began its commitment to the Chepo-Bayano Parish in 1986. Philip built the first resident house in Wacuco, where Wally Kasubosky presently works. He coordinated the construction of the pastoral center in Pasiga, a 6-hour trip by river and ocean. He also built the San Francisco chapel in Higuera. God knows how many chapels, altars, pulpits, and church benches Philip constructed throughout Latin America. His structures would never be described as fancy, as he preferred the rustic, natural and simply practical look. The Philip Casper structural or architectural style dots the landscape of Latin America.

One of Philip's greatest joys was to be present in Nicaragua two years ago for the ordination to the diocesan priesthood of two Miskito Indians in 1996, one of whom he had baptized. Jose Pinto, the first Capuchin Panamenean priest who was ordained in Panama this past year, attributed his decision to enter the Capuchins to the inspiration of Padre Felipe's life.

Joseph Philip Casper was born in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin on September 15, 1913, the second of four brothers and one sister. The Casper family traveled to the state of Montana when he was two years of age and became homesteaders on 320 acres of semi-flat prairie. He writes: "I first remember my family when we were traveling in a covered wagon. It took two weeks to travel 70 miles from Miles City, Montana to Stacey. I remember the creaking wagon sounds as my father drove the team of horses over the rough, roadless prairies, the rivers and over red-shaded hills. I remember my older brother and sister, and the over-crowded conditions inside the covered wagon. I especially remember the smell of the gasoline glow-torch that my mother cooked the meal on."

"It was war time, news was scarce. Finally the news of the November 11th Armistice reached us. Germany surrendered. Meanwhile, my little brother, Walter, died of pneumonia. He was only 2 or 3 months old. I remember when he was buried. A lady used her own wedding dress to make him a white robe for burial. My father made a little coffin and dug a grave behind the house where we buried him." His mother, Martha, lived to be 99 years old, and his sister, Dorothy, is presently a Franciscan nun living in Milwaukee. His brother Bernard lives in Florida. Larry Casper and his wife Marie and their children remained close to Philip. He cherished these family ties.

Plans were made long before January to visit Florida. Philip planned to visit his brother Bernard and spend some time fishing. He was staying with the Capuchins of St. Mary Province in Seminole when he suffered a heart attack. Philip died on January 5, 1998. On January 8 many friars and family members attended the vigil and Liturgy of Christian Burial at Mt. Calvary, in spite of a snowstorm with 10 inches of heavy, drifting snow. John Scherer spoke of Philip's smile and how that so simply and powerfully expressed God's love to people. Loran Miller, after reading the Gospel in the Miskito language, gave the homily. He concluded leading the assembly in singing a simple Miskito song. After communion, Florian and Agnesian Sister Ann Jude spoke eloquently of the dedicated missionary life Philip led. The provincial, Dan Fox, read part of Philip's report about his trip last year to Miskito lands in which Philip quoted the scriptures as he reflected on his and others' pastoral work among the Miskito Indian: "I planted, Apollo watered, but God caused the growth." The singing of "Resucito" and "Pescadores de Hombres" also helped to bring the missionary theme to the liturgy.

Just about everything he used or owned could be carried in a ruffle bag, which the exception of his fishing rod that followed him whenever he was transferred. As one might imagine, almost nothing was found in his room at Mt. Calvary after he died. He lived without possessions. But a few items were found to be placed in the casket during the funeral mass: a Miskito psalm book and a small collection of prayers and rituals used by Philip during his mission trips.

Our beloved Philip "Berard" Casper radiated an authentic, positive joy and hope wherever he went. We trust that he is now in the glory of the Lord, but we doubt very much that he is resting on some comfortable cloud. His spirit continues to move among the simple and humble people who loved him so much.

*Aisabe, moiki. Kli wal praubia. Tanki, tanki pall.* Goodby, brother. We'll meet again.  
Thanks, thanks a lot!

*Written by Kevin Heagerty and Loren Miller*