

Neerology

Evarist Bertrand
(1934-2016)



Gary Thomas Bertrand was born and raised in a simple log cabin outside of Antigo WI on November 13, 1934 and baptized a month later in St. John's Church. His parents were Almonzor Evaris Bertrand and Theresa Genet. He went to St. John's Catholic Grade School and Antigo Senior High School, graduating in 1952. He spent one year at Antigo's Langlade County Normal College, before enrolling in 1953 at St. Lawrence College for the two-year college course offered then.

His classmates remember him as full of energy, ready to tackle his studies as enthusiastically as sports, even though he was not very adept with the latter. Within a semester or two at Calvary, he knew he wanted to be a Capuchin. So towards the end of his last semester, he applied for the novitiate, stating as his reason: "To become a holier and more saintly priest; to serve better as God's instrument."

He entered the novitiate at St. Bonaventure Monastery, Detroit, where he was invested in the Capuchin habit on August 31, 1955, taking the name Evarist, very similar to his father's middle name.

The following year, he made his first profession of vows and then continued his studies at Huntington, Indiana and Marathon, Wisconsin. He was ordained on April 20, 1963 at the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church in Marathon, and then assigned to the Migrant Apostolate based at Queen of Angels Friary, Saginaw MI for three months until he began his pastoral year experience at St. Francis Friary in Milwaukee WI.

In the spring of 1964, he was assigned to work in Nicaragua. On June 7th of that year, Evarist received his mission cross in his home parish, and then left with Capuchin Bill Frigo for Mexico City to improve their Spanish at the Instituto Mexicano-Norteamericano de Relaciones Culturales. On October 24, 1964, he arrived in Bluefields to work in the Cathedral Parish and at Pio X Seminary.

In March of the following year, Evarist arrived in Jalapa, Nueva Segovia and began pastoral work. During the course of his ministry, he devoted extra time to the teenagers and young adults. Eventually two youth groups were formed: the young men were known as the Antorchas (The Torches) and the women were called the Llamas (The Flames), based on the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount:

You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket; it is set on a lampstand, where it gives light to all in the house. Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father. (Matthew 5:14-16)

As a result of his work with the youth, the local Guardia (Army) reported him to their commanders in Managua, alleging that he was training a subversive group, and accused him of being in collaboration with the Sandinistas, who in those years were trying to overthrow the Somoza government. In spite of protests from his fellow Capuchins, Evarist was declared a *persona non grata* to the US Embassy in Managua.

In October, 1976, Evarist went to a formation meeting in Puerto Rico. When he returned to the Nicaraguan border through Honduras, his passport was stamped with a 30-day tourist visa on Nov. 11, 1976. The following month, on Dec. 13, the six Capuchin friars were having a fraternal meeting in Jicaro, when Evarist was summoned to Juigalpa. The next day, all the Capuchins accompanied him to the headquarters and Bernard asked to go with Evarist to the border, only to be denied. When the Capuchins tried to follow the military car, they were detained as Evarist was escorted to the border at Las Manos, near Ocotal. He was left off on the Honduran side, and ended up at the Church of San Sebastian in Danlí, about 20 miles north of the border. The following day, Evarist wrote to Lloyd Thiel (provincial minister), and described what was going through his mind during that experience:

The month and three days in Nicaragua was an experience which I pray showed that the gospel is a force not silenced with threats, etc. and the phase-out had to be evidently and physically forced on the part of the government. I felt St. Francis' spirit very close in that ride which could lead to the prison or torture or death or to simply disappear, or appear in Danlí.

The provincial was relieved to finally learn what had happened to the deported missionary, since the letter took about a week to get to Detroit. In the meantime, Lloyd Thiel had sent an urgent telegram to the U.S. State Department on Dec. 16 notifying them that "all contact with Fr. Evarist has been lost" and asking for their help. Then four days later, he sent a letter to the State Department sharing the good news that the order had finally made contact with Evarist in Honduras and asked the officials to investigate the precise reasons for his deportation.

The Nicaraguan military, however, were not content with expelling Evarist from the country. They wanted to get him as far away from the border as they could, especially after Evarist crossed into Nicaragua avoiding the obligatory stop at the border post for immigration's stamp of approval. In a few days, the immigration officials learned that he was back in the country, and they had to deport him again. So they kept exerting pressure on the Honduran government and the local bishop to remove him. The provincial wrote Evarist several times suggesting that he look into other possibilities – perhaps working with the New York Capuchins working up in the northeast corner of Honduras, with their main base at Nueva Ocotepeque. Another suggestion that he work in the formation house in Costa Rica or even consider returning to the States to work among the Hispanics.

Evarist responded with a hand written letter to the provincial on Aug. 4, 1977:

The power of faith, prayer, unity, love have been manifested once again in this opportunity, both among the clergy and the lay people. All action on the part of the church was with measured steps, united in the conviction of the truth, and with the force of the Spirit. Your support, and of the province, is very much appreciated. In the midst of the "scandal," life has continued very strong with prayer and the apostolate the primary concerns. Neither running to escape from calumnies nor making much of the invented problem have been the general attitude of all concerned.

Early in August 1977, the archbishop again requested Lloyd Thiel to remove Evarist from the archdiocese, to which Lloyd responded by requesting that the archbishop speak personally to Evarist. The provincial also wrote to Evarist to inform him of the archbishop's latest request and asking him to return to the U.S. "as soon as he reasonably can". Evarist responded in a letter dated Aug. 13:

I write so you understand why I have not arrived in the States – not to be a rebel son of St. Francis, but a son of St. Francis and your subject brother who wants to make the moves which certainly show the concerned parties are agreed that I should move out.

The situation seesawed between tense and relaxed for months until May 31, 1978, when the Nicaraguan newspaper, *La Prensa*, published the text of the Priests' Council of the Archdiocese of Managua to the secretary of the interior, José Antonio Mora, protesting the expulsions and refusal of re-entry into the country of "our brothers in the priesthood...who have worked with us for various years, sharing our lives and identifying with the hopes and sufferings of Nicaragua." That was the last straw for the Somoza administration. The Nicaraguan pressure on Honduras to expel Evarist reached its climax.

On June 5th, Evarist was detained by the Honduran authorities and held incommunicado. The next day, he was driven into El Salvador by authorities, but the car was stopped by Salvadoran internal security agents and then made to return to Honduras. On June 7th, immigration authorities put him on a SAHSA flight to New Orleans with five dollars (given to him by a sympathetic Honduran soldier) in his pocket, no extra clothes or personal things.

The following Monday, June 12th, Evarist appeared at the provincial chapter of the Province of St. Joseph opened at St. Lawrence Seminary, Mt. Calvary WI. One of the first orders of business was to formulate a message to the U.S. secretary of state, Cyrus Vance, and to the Honduran ambassador in the U.S., Robert Lazarus, concerning the detention and expulsion of Evarist Bertrand from Honduras without recourse either to U.S. embassy or to the ecclesiastical authorities. The next day, all 275 Capuchins gathered at chapter endorsed a letter to Cyrus Vance, demanding an investigation and answers from the State Department and the Honduran government.

Because Evarist could no longer work among the Nicaraguan people, he was sent to Cartago, Costa Rica, where he worked with the young Capuchins in formation until the Sandinistas took over the government and chased Somoza out of Nicaragua on July 17, 1979.

On August 11, 1979, once the new government of the rebels was up and running, Evarist went back to Nicaragua, and for a while worked with Joe Wolf in the parish of Rama, on the Escondido River. He also spent some months working in the cathedral parish at Bluefields, and, true to his love of working with youth, also taught in the minor seminary in Bluefields.

After a short time, he requested permission to return to the Diocese of Esteli where he was received with open arms. He took over the parish of Wiwili, and also was named the spiritual assistant for the Secular Franciscans.

Evarist's interest in promoting Capuchin vocations in Nicaragua led him to move to Mozonte where he served as a member of the formation team for men interested in the order.

During the years 1997-2000, he moved to the St. Joseph Community in Barrio Riguero, Managua, where he served as the regional minister of the Capuchins in Nicaragua, as a teacher at a school of formation for men and women religious, and as promoter of vocations. From 2003-2006, Evarist served as the national spiritual assistant for the Secular Franciscans, while living in Mozonte. The next six years he lived in Managua and in the Segovias.

In 2012, he went back to Rama to help out in the parish there, plus his work as spiritual assistant. Evarist requested a sabbatical year in late 2015, giving him an opportunity to return to the Segovias where he got so sick that he was taken to Managua. There he died on July 23, 2016. He is buried in Mozonte, Nueva Segovia, Nicaragua.

— Niles Kauffman