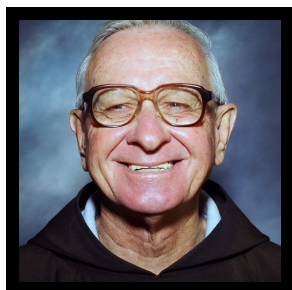


# Neerology

Kevin Heagerty  
1935 - 2015



On the feast of St. Peter Chanel, the Marist martyred in 1841 in Oceania, the Office of Readings was a eulogy written by a lay brother companion of Peter on the island of Futuna. What he wrote about Peter could well have been said of Kevin in his ministry in Panamá. "Because of his labors he was often burned by the heat of the sun, and famished with hunger, and he would return home wet with perspiration and completely exhausted. Yet he always remained in good spirits, courageous and energetic, as if he were returning from a pleasant jaunt, and this would happen almost every day." St. Peter was martyred at 38; Kevin began his ministry at 50. Kevin wrote for the Mission Connection in winter 2013 "I would walk 3-4 hours from church to church, serving the people and I would never get tired." When I was in Panamá with him, he often said after he returned from a mission trip that if he could just have a Coca Cola and a hot shower he would be ready to go out again. Quite a gift for a missionary to have.

Kevin was born in Detroit on March 22, 1935. His parents were Harold Heagerty and Helen Deterling. He was baptized Philip Joseph and his parents moved to Milwaukee where Kevin went to St. Boniface Parish and school. There his 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher recommended that Kevin go to St. Lawrence Seminary which he did, graduating in 1953.

He requested entrance into the novitiate in 1953 in Detroit and Gerald Walker, the rector of St. Lawrence at the time, said that Kevin was the holiest of the students being sent to novitiate that year. Kevin felt that he was blessed to know and live with Solanus Casey while in Detroit. After his first vows in August 1954, Kevin went to study philosophy in Huntington, IN, where he lived with Solanus again. Kevin professed his perpetual vows in 1957 and then studied theology in Marathon, WI and was ordained to the priesthood in 1961. After ordination, Kevin's first assignment was as assistant novice master at St. Felix in Huntington. He began his ministry with Mexicans in migrant camps around Huntington with the help of the Third Order members that he worked with. At first, when the migrant workers wanted to go to confession, Kevin only knew the words "sí, no and mañana." Even though he didn't understand Spanish very well, he was drawn to the simple faith of the Mexicans. After three years in the novitiate, Kevin was assigned to St. Benedict for Spanish study. For four months he also studied Spanish in Mexico. Surely, this was the origin of Kevin's deep love of Our Lady of Guadalupe, which he continually promoted in Panamá.

After the language studies in Mexico, Kevin was transferred to St. Joseph Parish in Saginaw, MI with Brian Braun, Malcolm Maloney and Bede Louzon, where his work was principally with Spanish-speaking parishioners. He was very involved in the Cursillos de Cristiandad Movement. In 1968 Kevin was transferred to Racine where he worked as the executive director of the Racine Spanish Center, which later evolved into the Cristo Rey Pastoral Center and Parish. Jesse Sabala was a vocation recruited by Kevin from the parish. This was another trait of Kevin; he was always inviting young men to join the Capuchins, something that he continued in Panamá, because he always had the view of establishing the Order in Panamá.

Kevin returned to St. Joseph Parish in 1975 with Mark James Pesch and Jerry Schroeder. In 1981 Kevin moved to St. Francis Parish in Milwaukee to work with Bill Lulloff in the Spanish-speaking ministry. There the parishioners were Puerto Rican and, then in the early 80s, Cuban refugees. This exposure to Caribbean cultures which are similar to the culture of Panamá was another important preparation for Kevin for the mission.

When the province began to look for another mission in Latin America, the choice was between Bolivia and Panamá. Kevin volunteered and in October 1985 he met with Myron Kowalsky and Larry Ablner and the archbishop from Panamá in Detroit. Kevin told me once that before he volunteered for Panamá he was visiting his mother and she died while drinking coffee at the kitchen table after they had gone to daily Mass. While it was quite a shock for him, he also felt freer to commit himself to the mission. After the first team of Kevin, Philip Casper and Michael Sullivan were selected, they were commissioned as missionaries and went to Panamá in the fall of 1986. When Kevin went to Panamá, he knew that "Kevin" did not have an equivalent in Spanish and just adding an "o" would make it sound like "que vino" or "who came" which leaves a Spanish speaker expecting another verb explaining why padre came. Given that Philip Casper was in the group and would be called "Felipe," Kevin chose the name "Francisco" by which he was known in Panamá. Similarly, Wally Kasuboski uses his middle name "Pablo" in Panamá.

After the initial adjustment to life in Chepo, the group began to explore the vast mission area that the parish of Chepo encompassed. Francisco enjoyed mission trips more than he enjoyed life in Chepo. He never was a fan of the cult of San Cristóbal, the patron of the church in Chepo. He was always enthusiastic about the number of people who came to the Mass and their deep faith. André Weller commented on Kevin as being the eternal optimist. André would tell Kevin that the sun even shone at midnight for him!

Under Kevin's encouragement many lay people became active in their communities as Delegados de la Palabra, catechists, lectors, youth ministers and musicians. Kevin could drive on horrible roads, walk miles on steep trails or ride in canoes on the rivers or fishing boats on the Pacific Ocean. Once he was on the ocean at night when the engine ran out of gas. Kevin suggested that the people pray, and as they finished the rosary another ship showed up which towed them. Kevin enjoyed being accompanied by the sisters from Las Margaritas and lay people from Chepo on his mission trips. He wanted a chapel to be built in every community

and on his vacations gathered statues for patron saints for them. He also commissioned local artists to paint images and the Emberá Indians, who carved animal figures in cocobolo wood, at Kevin's initiation, began to carve crucifixes and other religious figures. When Kevin couldn't buy everything they were producing they had to sell them in Panama City. They are still producing religious figures for the tourist trade.

The major seminary in Panama City began sending seminarians on mission trips with Kevin in the 1990s. He was an inspiration for them because of his dedication and willingness to go to the margins for the poor. When the National Mission, which was an evangelization of the entire country in preparation of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of the Catholic faith to Latin America, came to Chepo in 1992, Kevin organized lay missionaries from all over Panamá to go to all of the communities. It was a massive effort which richly benefited the parish.

Kevin loved the triumphal church, the high church, with all its fanfare! The candles, the flowers, the incense, the many servers, deacons, concelebrants, the great choirs, etc. — the more, the better! And yet, in Kevin's personal celebrations, he was very simple, but very sincere and devotional. He had a good singing voice and was a practical homilist.

Kevin would do anything to skip meetings! But once in them, he was very sociable and knew almost everyone by name. He had a fabulous memory for names and places and could recognize someone coming to the door in Chepo by name and immediately knew which community they were from. He was loved very much by the little people from the remote areas. He had his favorite communities, and all of the Capuchins knew this and would tease him about that fact.

There were some conflicts during the years when Ken Reinhart was provincial with the Panamá mission, which led the normally positive Kevin to express his hurt that he was being asked to move from being pastor and superior of the mission to be replaced by André Weller in 1991. In the end it worked out for the best, as André stayed more in Chepo and Kevin was freer to go to visit the communities which he loved more. In 2006, after 20 years of the mission being our responsibility the mission became the responsibility of the vice-province of Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panamá. Kevin welcomed the Costa Rican friars who staffed the parish.

Kevin had a gift for writing catechetical materials, some of which have been used by the church throughout Panamá. In the final years in Panamá, Kevin would spend much time in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament.

Kevin began to have health problems in 2012 and was hospitalized in Panamá. He returned to the States in the summer of 2012 for a complete physical. It was found that he was suffering from kidney disease and it was decided it would be best if he stayed in the States. He was able to go back to Panamá again accompanied by Debby Van Ermen and TL Michael Auman in February 2013 for a goodbye. While at St. Fidelis he was well enough to go on a cruise as a chaplain which he enjoyed very much. As death approached and Kevin was in hospice, he

continued to participate in the communal prayer as much as possible. He even shared with the community what he was going through as he was dying.

Some friends of Kevin who visited Chepo in 2006 wrote Dan Anholzer that they were impressed with Kevin's work in Panamá. They called him the "priest who smiles" as Kevin was so attentive to everyone he met and served them with such kindness. They said he was happy to be a Capuchin, a priest and a missionary. Kevin died on February 14, 2015, a fitting day for a man who loved so much.

— John Scherer