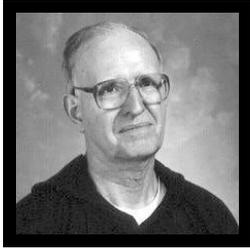


# Neerology

Ambrose Simon  
1924-2018



Ambrose Francis Simon was born on Sept 19, 1924 on a farm near St. Kilian, Wisconsin. His parents were Francis Xavier (Frank) Simon and Margaret Mary (Schrauth) Simon. He was the ninth of ten children, three of whom became Sisters of Saint Agnes. He attended first grade at the local public school, and the remaining seven grades at St. Kilian parish school, taught by School Sisters of Notre Dame.

Ambrose continued on to four years of High School at St. Lawrence Seminary at Mt. Calvary WI (1938-1942). After graduation in 1942, he went on to novitiate at St. Felix Friary, Huntington IN where he received the name Romuald – a name which he retained during his years in the Nicaraguan missions. He changing back to his baptismal name, Ambrose, after his definitive return to the U.S. forty years later.

After first profession on Sept. 1, 1943, Ambrose followed the Capuchin formation process customary at the time – namely four years of philosophy at Garrison NY (1943-47), followed by four years of theology and scripture at St. Anthony Friary, Marathon WI (1947-51). He was ordained to the priesthood at Marathon at the beginning of his fourth year of theology on August 23, 1950.

His first extended assignment was to Bluefields, Nicaragua missions where he arrived on Oct. 4<sup>th</sup>, 1951. He served there, with brief interruptions in the U.S. during the next 31 years. Following brief experiences in Puerto Cabezas and Bluefields, he was assigned to Rama where he served on and off for some ten years.

Ambrose probably did his best pastoral work at Rama. At the time, Rama was a semi-ghost town, perhaps some 30 or 40 families who stayed on in the dilapidated houses still standing after the Standard Fruit Company abandoned the area. There were no roads – just weed covered streets and a couple worn cement sidewalks that led off into the jungle that overgrew what were once residential areas of the abandoned company town.

But Rama, at the junction of three major rivers, continued on as a small river port where the poor who farmed those river banks brought their surplus corn, beans and bananas in exchange for salt, kerosene, and a few other basics. The “business” section of Rama consisted of a couple taverns and four or five little shops owned by Chinese immigrants. The only school in the entire parish was a one-room school taught by a sister of the Divine Shepherds. Another of the sisters – a nurse – had a tiny “clinic,” 8' x 8' ft square, with basic remedies, mostly for malaria fevers and intestinal parasites. The only connections with the outside world were a telegraph office and two flat bottomed diesel-powered barges that made twice weekly trips to Bluefields, some 60 miles down river.

It was against that rustic background that Romualdo (later Ambrose) Simon, began his fruitful years of mission in that 70 x 80 mile Rama parish (and no roads). The Catholics still living in town were few – about 25 women and two men (mission employees) bothered to come to Sunday Mass. So the real life of the Rama parish was along its rivers. Families lived in leaf roofed houses on the river banks, and the rivers were the highways to reach them.

Ambrose was a people man. Whenever possible, he was out visiting those families scattered along the rivers. Eventually he compiled a database on every family, which he typed up when back in town. Whenever someone from the rivers came to town, Ambrose enjoyed the opportunity to update the data, writing between lines and in the margins. Eventually Ambrose not only knew all those people, but also knew all *about* them! Those of us who eventually followed Ambrose in the Rama parish enjoyed reading his sometimes juicy marginal comments. His sheaf of detailed notes continued in use for years until finally lost when Hurricane Juana (1988) left the parish offices under eight feet of water. Ambrose's valuable person to person focus and typed out database were his trademark wherever he served.

But even more challenging for the young missionary were the Rama parishes's mission trips to its approximately 30 rustic chapels along those rivers, each chapel about a day's journey apart. First Florian Ruskamp, and then Ambrose spent most of their time in three or four week mission trips along each river. They worked their way up the rapids in dugout canoes, from chapel to chapel, for one or two night stands per chapel. In the head waters, where travel by boat was no longer possible, they continued on by horse or on foot, reaching far into what is now the neighboring province of Chontales. Once, when no horse was available to navigate the deep rainy season mud, Ambrose was long remembered for doing the six hour trip riding an ox instead!

On reaching a chapel, the missionary spent most of the first night interviewing couples for marriage and preparing children so they could make first communion the next morning. Usually some older lady led the rosary, while the missionary went about his ministries. In these early mission trips, there was no time for evangelization, nor pre sacramental preparation. There were as yet no catechists or lay ministers.

What made these trips even more difficult was their early, pre Vatican II dates, when strict fasting – not a crumb or a drop of water after midnight, was obligatory before Mass. Even worse, the Mass and sacraments were still in Latin, with back to the people! Needless to say, the women in the chapel (the men didn't bother to come in) understood none of it. But they waited patiently for the priest celebrant to finish his "prayers" so he could baptize their babies. Ambrose estimates he blessed some 1,000 marriages and baptized at least 5,000 people during those years. It's understandable that in 1962, he needed to interrupt his ministry in Rama with a year in the U.S., teaching Spanish and religion in Mt. Calvary WI.

But in July 1963 his love for the people of Nicaragua, brought him back to the missions. After a year as administrator of Puerto Cabezas and two six-month assignments to Bonanza, he was assigned for the next nine years to Pius X minor seminary in Bluefields (1965 to 1974). He much enjoyed his years there alongside the founder, Salvador Schlaefter. He served as teacher and vice rector until Salvador was ordained bishop, at which time Ambrose continued on another three and half years as rector.

His final extended assignments in Nicaragua were spent in two new parishes, formed from the vast Rama parish where Ambrose began 24 yrs earlier. These were in the new parish of Nueva Guinea where he was assistant to Rene Wilson (1976-'78), and then as pastor of the recently formed parish of Muelle de los Bueyes (1979-'82).

After a total of 31 years in the vicariate (now diocese) of Bluefields, Nicaragua, Ambrose left the mission, as he wrote, "very sickly, weak and sleepy," and returned to the U.S. in May 1982. In the U.S., Ambrose spent almost a year as chaplain at Sacred Heart Home in Phoenix, Arizona. His health improved there.

Then, invited by Central American provincial minister Paul Schmitz, and by the Panamanian archbishop, to join in establishing a new foundation near Panama City, Ambrose accepted the invitation. He spent most of 1984 with Vidal Banazek, founding the new parish of Tocumen - Pacora there. The area was a rapidly expanding patchwork of shack towns, with some 40,000 inhabitants. The area, later subdivided into five more parishes, was virgin territory, without any previous church presence.

After 10 months there, and again broken in health, Ambrose returned for good from the missions and retired to Saint Lawrence Friary, Mt. Calvary (1984-1992). At Calvary, Ambrose helped the other brothers who were also struggling with health issues. He also served as chaplain to the Villa Loretta Home for the aging and to the Christ the King sisters there.

In 1992, when the new St. Fidelis Friary in Appleton opened, Ambrose was among the first residents there, always grateful for the excellent care. Eventually, his age and his needs for more assistance, caused him to transfer to St. Paul Elder Services in nearby Kaukana where he died on Nov 4, 2018 at 94 years of age.

Looking back, we often noted that, despite Ambrose's wonderful talent for people to people pastoral ministry, he was usually reluctant to accept the responsibilities of being pastor. He preferred to be assistant to the pastor, or at most, temporary administrator, and did a great job at it.

Secondly, he struggled most of his life with health issues, some of which, it seemed to us, were imaginary. His malaria fevers and frequent intestinal parasites were real, as was his later heart by-pass surgery. In his final years, he was limited to a feeding tube for nourishment. But so often he diagnosed himself with new sicknesses, and new remedies, some of which (such as a papaya per day to help with his digestion) could be effective. In the end, he lived 94 years and has probably outlived us all. So may God bless Ambrose for his many years of great service to the missions and the church. He was a great pioneer in the missions.

~ August Seubert