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"Evangelist" Priest Hits The Sawdust Trail

By Louis Moore

HOUSTON (BP)--If it had happened at a Baptist church, it would have been called a revival meeting. But it was held in a Roman Catholic Church and tagged an "evangelistic preaching mission."

Mass was not celebrated at the Monday through Thursday services. Had the building not contained the trappings of the highly-formalized Catholic church, one might have thought he was attending an evangelically-fervent Baptist worship service.

And that's not too surprising since the Catholic "evangelist"-priest, Blaise Czaja, a Passionist father from Louisville, Ky., took some evangelism courses at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, under Kenneth Chafin, now pastor of South Main Baptist Church, Houston.

After the congregation had sung hymns for about 15 minutes, Czaja put a microphone around his neck, gave a fleeting glance toward the pulpit, and moved to the front of the church to deliver his sermon.

"Jesus is standing at the door of your heart and knocking. He wants to come in," Czaja declared.

"The Bible tells us we must repent of our sins, and then invite the Lord on His terms to come and reside in us."

His hands raised, his expressions dramatic, the priest added: "Jesus is asking us for that unconditional invitation to believe in Him, to believe He is standing at that door and knocking.

"He wants us to throw that door open wide and say 'Come Lord Jesus in all your glory and power.'

"The faith that saves is that trusting, open heart that lets God in."

Then, to the 100 or so faces peering at him in the auditorium of St. Edward's Roman Catholic Church in Spring, Czaja said:

"I am going to offer a different way of recommitting your life to Jesus. We're going to be giving you the opportunity to stand up and come forward, and in so doing to really manifest to yourself, God and one another, your desire to have Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior."

After a prayer, dozens of people streamed down the aisles to make their public profession of faith.

Though some points of theology differed, the five-day "evangelistic preaching mission" had numerous similarities to a Baptist revival.

Indeed, Czaja says, at one of the hundreds of Catholic parishes across the country where he has held similar meetings the parishioners placed a sign in the church yard that read "Revival Services Here Nightly." -more-

Except for the regularly-scheduled Sunday masses, Czaja's four nightly services during successive weeks at St. Edward's Catholic Church and St. Cyril's of Alexandria Catholic Church, in Houston, followed the revival format.

Instead of celebrating mass, the services included only hymn singing--Czaja says his favorites include "Amazing Grace" and "How Great Thou Art"--prayers, a sermon and an "altar call."

Monday and Tuesday nights the "altar call" occurred when Czaja asked the people to go to confession "as a way of recommitting your life to Christ." Facilities were set up so the people would go immediately and cleanse themselves by confessing their sins to their priests.

"In the confession, I really urge in-depth confession." Czaja said.

Wednesday and Thursday nights the "altar call" was given for people to come forward to make a public profession of faith in Jesus. Those who came forward knelt and Czaja prayed for them, sometimes gently laying his hands on each head in a type of blessing.

Czaja, who conducts about 30 such "missions" each year, says he has great admiration for the style and work of Baptist evangelist Billy Graham.

That admiration may explain some of the similarities of Czaja's services to Graham's services. Czaja says he has attended Billy Graham services, but never has attended a traditional Baptist revival service.

The priest says his work reflects the "great diversity that has developed in the (Roman Catholic) Church during the last 10 to 15 years."

He says he is the only priest he knows who is working full-time in evangelistic work. He actually calls himself an evangelist, and says "there aren't many Catholic priests who will use that title."

(Czaja has been accompanied for the past four months by Jim Thoman, a Catholic theology student.)

"Our goal is conversion," says Czaja. "The goal is to move the hearts to a commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior."

Czaja and Thoman say they use the term conversion to refer to helping people who are not Christian to become followers of Christ as well as to refer to helping a baptized churchman "who once walked with the Lord but has now become lackadaisical" to once again "walk with the Lord."

Czaja says he believes "as a Catholic our spiritual life begins in baptism as a baby."

But a person's spiritual life must be continually challenged "to grow and let the spirit take over," he says.

The priest says that during the past 10 years "there has been a fantastic reemphasis and change in the intellectual understanding of what the Catholic Church is and what it means."

"Everyone has been terrifically concerned to grapple with new meanings, new understandings."

"We (Czaja and Thoman) are moving at a different level and saying very explicitly that an intellectual renewal of church life is not enough. There has to be revitalization of that inner faith that really makes the church what it is."

"From Vatican II until a couple of years ago the Roman Catholic Church was caught up in external renewal. Now, many people are realizing there has to be an inner renewal. There has to be a reawakening of faith."

Thoman says he has been amazed at the reception given the message he and Czaja have been preaching.

"It's just like they've never really heard it said to them that God loves them and wants them to share His love."

"The response has astounded me. People just get all bubbly and enthusiastic about it."

As Czaja looks to the future he envisions eventually holding mass evangelism rallies in large city auditoriums--something similar to what many Protestant evangelists do.

For those rallies, 15-20 Catholic churches in an area would join together to sponsor the event, he says. To do this the bishop of the diocese in which the meeting takes place would have to approve.

Czaja says he is working on a brochure to mail several selected bishops to see if they will approve such a meeting.

"If that is what the Lord wants, He will help us to do it," says Czaja. "If He doesn't, He'll let us know."

Don't Separate Morality
And Policy Ford Tells NRB

By Stan Hasteley

WASHINGTON (BP)--President Gerald R. Ford said here that the separation of church and state "was never intended . . . to separate public morality from public policy."

The President's remarks were made at a congressional breakfast sponsored by the National Religious Broadcaster's during that organization's annual meeting here.

The breakfast also featured the presentation of an award merit to a Southern Baptist Convention agency, the Radio and Television Commission.

The NRB is the largest national organization of religious broadcasters, claiming a membership of 650, or about 85 percent of religious producers and broadcasters in the U.S.

Ford told his audience, which included about two dozen U. S. Senators, U. S. Congressmen and other public officials, that his advisors have cautioned him about making comments on religious subjects because of the principle of separation of church and state. He stated that in his view separation "says that the power of government shall not be used to support or suppress any one faith, but, in the same sentence, protects profession and propogation of all faiths."

The President's reference was to the First Amendment of the U. S. Constitution, which states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

Ford noted that the remainder of the First Amendment guaranteeing freedom of speech, press, assembly and petition is inseparable from the religious clauses.

"Freedom to exercise one's religion would be meaningless without freedom of speech and assembly; without freedom of the press there can be neither religious books nor religious broadcasters."

The President reminded his audience that in his first speech to Congress after becoming President he had stressed the need for national morality and during his inauguration he took the oath of office on a Bible open to a text in Proverbs urging dependence upon God.

"That is what I have tried to do and will try to do," he said.

The NRB award of merit for program production was presented to Paul M. Stevens, executive director of the Southern Baptist Radio & Television Commission, based in Fort Worth, Tex.

The award, one of only two presented by the religious broadcasters this year, cited the Radio and Television Commission as the largest producer of religious programming in the U. S. and for making "the fullest possible use of the mass communications media for the proclamation of the Gospel."

Among the programs produced by the Southern Baptist agency are "Spring Street, U. S. A." (in cooperation with the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board), "Baptist Hour," "JOT," "The Human Dimension," "Powerline," "Country Crossroads," "MasterControl," "Soul Searchers" and "Nightsong."

-30-

Foreign Missionaries Set
Up Panama Baptist Mission

Baptist Press

PANAMA (BP)--The Panama Baptist Mission has been organized here by Southern Baptist foreign missionaries, who will work in the Republic of Panama and the Canal Zone.

Six missionary couples and a single woman formed the new team of missionaries as the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, which now has work in 82 countries, inherits the work in Panama and the Canal Zone from the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board.

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The Home Mission Board began a ministry to the Canal workers in 1905. Recent figures indicate that Panama now has 6,755 Baptists in 47 churches and 82 missions.

Six of the missionary couples transferred to Panama from other countries. Mr. and Mrs. Ervin E. Hasteley arrived from Mexico in January, 1974, to cooperate with the Panama Baptist Convention in evangelism and the seminary program. Mr. and Mrs. Harold E. Hurst came from Honduras in response to the need for an administrator at the Marvel Iglesias Hospital on the San Blas Islands.

From the Bahamas, Mr. and Mrs. Robert V. Myers will be responsible for camp ministries, and Mr. and Mrs. Robert C. Hensley will serve in business administration of the newborn mission.

Mr. and Mrs. Hubert N. (Ted) Lindwall came from Guatemala. He will direct the seminary. Mr. and Mrs. Alex F. Garner came from Argentina to work in general field evangelism.

The single woman in the mission is Miss Naomi Page, a registered nurse who served for six years at the Marvel Iglesias Hospital with the Home Mission Board. Mr. and Mrs. Marshal Durham and Miss Helen Stuart were named honorary members of the mission for their remaining time of service in Panama under the Home Mission Board.

Three additional couples for Panama are currently in foreign missionary orientation. Dr. and Mrs. Daniel D. I. Gruver, former home missionaries, and Dr. and Mrs. W. Tom Kent of San Mateo, Calif., will serve in the hospital following orientation. Mr. and Mrs. Philip R. Overton are missionary associates from Texas and will work in construction and maintenance at the hospital.

These missionaries will minister to four distinct cultural groups--West Indian, American, Spanish-speaking and Cuna Indians--and serve three vital institutions, the hospital, the seminary and the Baptist camp.

Hasteley was elected chairman of the mission; Garner, secretary; Hensley, treasurer; Mrs. Hensley, statistician; and Mrs. Lindwall, press representative.

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