

## Poor Friars pass through Charlotte on way to March for Life

Last Updated on Wednesday, 28 January 2015 20:46



### Encourage students to stay focused on Jesus, getting to heaven

CHARLOTTE - Three members of the Poor Friars and Nuns of Jesus and Mary, from the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux, La., traveled through Charlotte Jan. 14 on their way to the national March for Life in Washington, D.C.

This Franciscan-Carmelite order of friars and nuns, based primarily in Italy, spends most of the time in contemplative prayer but also

engages in street evangelization by hitchhiking and spreading the Gospel, living in poverty and relying upon strangers' hospitality and almsgiving to provide for their journeys.

Friar Antonio Maria Speedy, Sister Effata Maria Teresa and Brother Jonathan spoke to faith formation and RCIA classes at St. Patrick Cathedral during their brief visit, sharing their vocation stories and encouraging the students to stay close to Jesus throughout their lives.

**Pictured from left: Sister Effata Maria Teresa, Brother Jonathan and Friar Antonio Maria Speedy answer questions from faith formation students at St. Patrick Cathedral Jan. 14. (Photo by Patricia L. Guilfoyle, Catholic News Herald)**

Friar Antonio, who was ordained to the priesthood just a month ago, told of growing up in Australia, serving at the altar as a boy but eventually falling away from the faith in his teenage years.

"I stopped believing in God altogether," he said, instead concentrating on building a lucrative career in art design.

An injury to his right hand in early adulthood shattered his career plans, however, prompting him to sink into depression and consider suicide. When he was 22, he met the Poor Friars and found his true vocation in serving God and others, he said.

"We weren't born in these habits," Sister Effata told the students. "We were normal people, going to school and everything."

"I personally experienced a lot of suffering in my life," she added.

When she was 4, her right leg was cut off during an accident on her uncle's farm. The injury left her questioning whether God even existed and if He did exist, why would He allow her to suffer so much, she said. "I was pretty lost, you know."

Her German Lutheran upbringing gave her no answers, she said. During a trip to Italy, she encountered Catholicism through the Poor Nuns and in the Eucharist "found the peace that I had always been searching for."

"God gave me the grace to understand what He wanted for me in my life," she said, so she converted to the Catholic faith and professed vows as a religious.

"Not everyone has to be friars or nuns," Friar Antonio told the students, but we can each bloom where we are planted, just as the seeds that fall on the good soil produce an abundant harvest, as Jesus taught in the Parable of the Sower (see Matthew 13:1-9).

If we do God's will in our lives, the friar said, "that means more people are going to be touched by our witness, our yes, and we're going to be able to help more people go to heaven.

"Many souls go to hell, says Our Lady of Fatima, because there's no one who prays and makes sacrifices for them. We're invited to pray and make sacrifices to help people come to Jesus. When we hitchhike, we just try to speak about Jesus, and we share our life, our example with them."



Father Antonio reminded the students that true happiness can only be found in God – not in the things of this world.

"In your own experience, in your own lives, you might even drift away (from God)," he said, but that's when you need to ask yourself if you're truly happy and at peace. We cannot be genuinely happy without Jesus, he said.

In heaven, we will all have glorified bodies and will live in complete joy and happiness with God, with no suffering, no disfigurements and no fear, he said. "We'll be able to embrace Jesus."

"We try to teach people this, and the more that we trust God the more that He blesses us. So when people meet us – we don't have any money, we're on the road hitchhiking – people start thinking: 'Maybe it is true, maybe I should pray more, maybe I should go to Mass, maybe I should meet Jesus in the Eucharist.'"

In Spanish, Brother Jonathan told the students about growing up in the Dominican Republic. At 7 months old, he fell face-first into a fire and suffered severe burns. For years he endured taunts about his disfigured face. When he was 14 he underwent skin graft surgery, and during the operation he had a near-death experience.

Through Friar Antonio as translator, Brother Jonathan animatedly described rising quickly out of his body and seeing the doctors below him trying to resuscitate him.

Then "he saw this beautiful woman, dressed totally in white, in brilliant clothing," Friar Antonio relayed. "The woman said to him, 'It's not your time yet. You have a mission on earth, a very big mission. You now have to go back and fulfill it.'" Brother Jonathan was revived, and just a couple of years later he decided to give his life to God and live as a Poor Friar.

"Now his witness is to transmit joy to people," Friar Antonio translated, as a broad smile lit up Brother Jonathan's scarred face.

"Not everyone has to have an experience like his to come to God," Friar Antonio told the students. "What's important to understand is that this life is passing quickly for all of us – regardless of how beautiful we are, how athletic we are or not. What's important is that we start thinking about the next life.

"We have this life – this one life – to try and understand how to get into the next one. Now is the time to pray, to try and get as close to Jesus, and try to do His will."

Learn more about the Poor Friars and Nuns of Jesus and Mary online at [www.poorfriars.net](http://www.poorfriars.net) and [www.poorsisters.net](http://www.poorsisters.net).

— Patricia L. Guilfoyle, edito

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