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CULTURE

Evangelizing the bayou: Catholic friar canoes a call to church

J-P Mauro | Mar 26, 2019

"The Lord's voice resounding over the waters" - Psalm 29:3.

A Louisiana friar is making headlines with an unusual method of building up his ministry. Two weeks ago, Rev. Antonio Maria Speedy, 42, was seen moving across the bayou in a simple canoe, ringing a bell and calling all those on the water to wade in and hit the pews.

The boat held a large sign that read, "Dulac, come back to Mass!" along with a schedule of services. As Speedy passed residents of Dulac, located some 70 miles Southwest from New Orleans, he would gently ring a bell in order to gain attention, before calling out in friendly tones to members of the community.

"We've been looking at different ways to evangelize this diocese," Speedy, an Australian native, told Dispatch. "One time we did a walking procession over the Intracoastal Canal Waterway bridge from St. Francis de Sales. We also did a Eucharistic procession up Bayou Lafourche in October."

He said he came upon the idea to evangelize on the bayou while meditating and paging through a local book commemorating the then-50th anniversary of the church in Dulac. He stopped on an old black-and-white photograph of a small group of local nuns being ferried across the water, and that's when, Speedy said, the idea came to him.

"This had to be a sign," Speedy said. "So I while I was praying vespers, I saw that the first sentence was 'The Lord's voice resounding over the waters.' So I figured this very well could be God's will."

Rev. Speedy said that the congregation at the Holy Family Catholic Church in Dulac has been swelling ever since the video and photos of his boat ride went viral.

“We talk about the importance of bayous to the Catholic faith down here,” Speedy said. “It’s a unique situation. Everything was founded on the bayous, so we’ve been looking to try to evangelize using the bayous. When the bishop asked me to go to Dulac we were praying about how to get people in church. A friend loaned me the pirogue, so I decided to try it. We knew the people would love it.”

Rev. Speedy was ordained a priest in 2014 and serves as a member of the Poor Friars, a religious order with just 34 members. The Poor Friars originated in Italy, but expanded to create a new community in Houma, in 2012. As they do not have any money, the friars are very visible to the community, walking around town or hitching rides when they need to go farther.

The community at Houma consists of three friars, who share a house that is generously leased to them for just \$1 per year. The house features a statue of St. Francis in the front yard, and several beehives in the back, from which they harvest fresh honey.



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