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NOTRE AMI

Friar uses bayou to reach the masses

By Dan Copp
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Only in southern Louisiana would you see a friar traveling down the bayou in a pirogue.

Two weeks ago the residents of Dulac saw just that.

The Rev. Antonio Maria Speedy put on a life jacket, hopped into a pirogue and cruised across the bayou under a sign that read, "Dulac, come back to Mass!" He rang a bell as he passed by the fishing boats.

The 42-year-old friar said his



Speedy

plan to boost church attendance is slowly but surely paying off.

"We've been looking at different ways to evangelize this diocese," the Australian native said. "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."

After photos and videos of his endeavor went viral on social media the friar said some people have been returning to the pews at the Holy Family Catholic Church in Dulac.

"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

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The Rev. Antonio Maria Speedy sales down a bayou in Dulac to get the word out about Mass. [SUBMITTED]

FRIAR

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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."

One Facebook commenter said, "I love it. I enjoy his Mass when I come to Dulac to visit family. Love this idea." Another said, "Love it. He might be what

this bayou needs to bring the people back."

Speedy, who was ordained as a priest in 2014, is a member of the Poor Friars, a 34-member religious order under the Catholic Church. You may have seen Speedy and his fellow friars hitchhiking or walking around town.

Friars have been around for hundreds of years. Unlike monks, friars work with people in the community and are not isolated in a secluded monastery.

The Poor Friars originated

in Italy and established a community in Houma in 2012. Since members take a vow of poverty, the friars don't have any money and often hitchhike to get around town.

Speedy and two other friars share a modest one-story house in Houma along a bayou surrounded by a wooden fence. A statue of St. Francis stands in front. A tiny opening in the fence reminiscent of a Hobbit's Shire dwelling leads to a well-manicured lawn with a small chapel. The backyard

contains several beehives, where the friars harvest fresh honey.

"Since we made a vow of poverty we have friends who let us rent this place for a \$1 a year," Speedy said. "They help us out a lot."

Another miniature door is visible from the friars' kitchen. A sign that reads "Strive to enter the narrow door" is displayed on the wall next to it.

"A lot of things we do are symbolic," Speedy said.

One such symbolic act

was using the bayou to rally people back to the pews. While Speedy was meditating on ways to inspire parishioners, he was thumbing through a book commemorating the then-50th anniversary of the church in Dulac. The pages contained a black-and-white photo of nuns being ferried across the bayou in a pirogue. Eureka.

"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."

You can meet Speedy when he blesses the fishing boats from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Sunday at the Holy Family Catholic Church in Dulac. A New Orleans film crew is scheduled to be on hand to film the event.

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