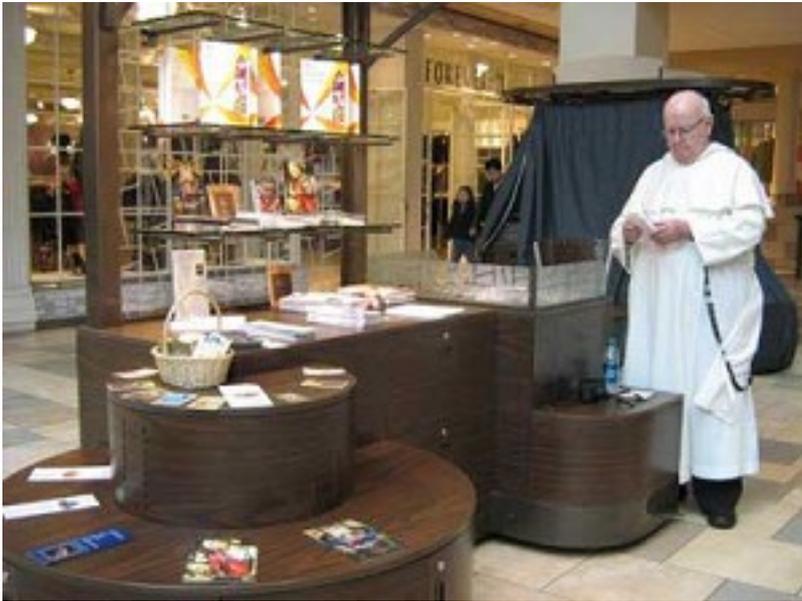


Friar who evangelizes in the mall: 'We are an absolutely passive church'

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Dominican Father Tony Wall thinks Catholics should spend more time living out their faith in the marketplace.

That's why he spent every day, except Sunday, for a month in Portland's Lloyd Center Mall. Father Wall, a priest for 60 years, wore his Roman collar or white friar's habit, simply making himself obvious for those yearning to talk about life's greater issues.

"People don't meet priests any more. We are hiding in the rectory," says Father Wall, who has moved on to lead missions from the Dominicans' California headquarters. He plans to return to Portland at the start of 2012 for another month of mall evangelization.

"Jesus sent people out on the road," explains the 86-year-old friar, who helped found the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, Calif. "St. Dominic was out in the crossroads and at the inns. He was not waiting for people to find him."

Educated in Rome during the 1940s, Father Wall counted the future Pope John Paul II among his classmates. He served in parishes and was a teacher before starting the Berkeley project. He served as president of the theological union for two terms. Then he joined the Dominican preaching band, men who give retreats on the road in honor of the itinerant charism of their 13th century founder.

In Mexico on a mission, he met a priest from St. Charles Borromeo Church in Harlem. The pastor said his church counted as many as 339 converts in a year and attributed that to the habit of priests standing out on Harlem street corners to engage the people and give them cards with Mass times.

When he visited Holy Rosary Parish in Portland, just down the street from Lloyd Center, he got thinking. There is no priest at the mall, and there should be.

"We are no longer a missionary church," Father Wall says of Catholics. "We are an absolutely passive church. We stand back."

Mall officials were receptive. There were limitations, however. Father Wall had to stay put in one place. Amplification and big signage was out.

That all suited the priest just fine. On weekdays, he chose a bench and sat, smiling. On weekends, he donned the habit and rented a kiosk near Macy's and filled it with free crucifixes, rosaries, holy cards and sacred medals.

Many shoppers asked who he was and that led to encounters, some brief, some lengthy. Everyone seemed impressed that a man representing deep matters had set up in a place devoted to fashion, skin products and fast food. He heard several confessions.

"People are hungry to have the church stand up and say, 'Come, come, come,'" Father Wall says. "I think every big mall in the country should have a Catholic presence. All I think the church needs to do is rent a chair and have a priest sit there and have a sign that says, 'Have a question? Ask a priest.'"

Mall security guards took a special shine to the priest. They passed a hat several times and gave him the money to further his work.

Mary Halvorsen is not surprised the priest had that effect on the mall workers.

"Father Tony had a great method of engaging passersby," says Halvorsen, prioress of the Holy Rosary Dominican Laity, a group that helped the priest on many days. "People just naturally were drawn to him. Father would ask those people what their names were and would tell them what their name meant in Latin or Greek or what saint was connected to their name. Some would be shy and say they knew a Catholic or used to be a Catholic."

Halvorsen says other vendors in the area would come introduce themselves to the priest.

"People are hungry for God even if they don't know it and when they are fed by a gentle, holy man they are filled with gratitude and joy," she concludes.

As for Father Wall, he talks a lovely torrent that puts everyone he meets at ease. Within the amicability, though, he has an urgent message.

"What we Catholics need is a four letter word — a little bit of z-e-a-l," he says. "And you have these zealous lay people just waiting for someone to point them the way and say, 'Go.'"