

Rally Round the Cross

The cross was old—nailed together from junk-heap scraps two years ago by a young minister and his Hell's Angel friend. And rugged—from the seven-month, 3,500-mile journey from Los Angeles to Washington, D. C.

But on a sunny Saturday morning in July, the ten-foot, 105-pound* cross was carried proudly at the head of a block-long band of demonstrators parading around the Washington Monument toward the Capitol. Later the cross was placed on a shaded corner near the monument, marking the headquarters of a forty-day nation-wide campaign for spiritual renewal.

The moment of glory was noisy and happy: traffic stopped and passers-by stared as the cross advanced on the shoulders of the Reverend Arthur Blessitt and former black militant Jesse Wise. The crowd followed, filling one lane of Independence Avenue and chanting, "Solution: spiritual revolution." Monitors with megaphones led other cheers: "Gimme a J—gimme an E—gimme an S. . . . What does it spell?"

"Jesus!"

"What does Washington need?"

"Jesus!"

"What does our President need?"

"Jesus!"

Waving signs with "Bridge over troubled waters: Jesus" and "Do you really care, Christian?" the crowd of some 800 was predominantly young with dress ranging from hippie to straight. But there were some elderly men in suits and mothers with strollers, and a good showing of middle-aged, middle-income America. For most of these it was their first demonstration. "Six months ago if you'd told me I'd ever walk in something of this nature, I'd have told you I'd have to be crazy," admitted Dr. Kenneth Balthrop, a minister from Albuquerque, New Mexico, who was national coordinator of the "Walk for Christ." "But it's worth putting your whole life on the line," he added. A 76-year-old Washington man explained: "I'm for it—anything

that gets the kids turned on for Jesus."

After the march, the cross was leaned against a platform near the Washington Monument while the marchers spent twenty-four hours in prayer and fasting for national renewal. Sitting on the grass in groups of ten to twenty, some with guitars, they sang, prayed, read Bibles, and witnessed to the curious who stopped by.

Groups of hippies were attracted by 29-year-old Blessitt's striped bell-bottoms, maroon leather vest, and gold Tom Jones shirt. "Are y'all saved?" he would ask them, pushing his long hair back from his sunburned face and grinning so disarmingly they couldn't be offended. From there it was a simple, hard-line but hip presentation of the Gospel—and hundreds of conversions within two days.

Fanning out among the crowds in the monument area, the young people who followed him took the same aggressive and honest approach. "We ain't rapping religion, man, we're rapping a way of life," one young hippie earnestly told another.

They were sitting around a candle stuck in the grass, with a large, full orange moon rising and the sharp white shaft of the monument etched against the dark sky. "When you have sex on mescaline, man, there can't be anything better than that," the unbeliever scoffed. "Look, I took it too," answered a young man with gold-rimmed glasses and soft brown chin-length hair. "But this is like shooting up every morning—it's like real truth inside your being. . . ." And so it went in clustered groups throughout the night.



* The cross was broken and splintered in a car accident in Joplin, Missouri. After it was bolted together with iron rods, its weight increased from 80 to 105 pounds.

The twenty-four hours ended Sunday, July 19, with a rally and challenge by Blessitt for all to go out in a forty-day evangelistic effort to "blitz the nation for Jesus Christ." Heading the outreach to the capital were two young Southern Baptist ministers, Leo Humphrey, who runs a coffeehouse ministry in New Orleans, and Sam Tippit, who is starting a coffeehouse in Chicago.

Those gathered were from all parts of the country, including many led to Christ along the way by Blessitt and others such as the "Louisiana Seven" (including Tippit), who walked and witnessed, pushing a wheelbarrow of Testaments from Monroe, Louisiana.

Blessitt and his wife planned to fast and pray the entire forty days, sitting near the cross and a phone booth on a corner between the monument and the White House. They promised to answer the phone (Code 202—393-8893) around the clock, taking prayer requests. In addition, Blessitt called out sermons, and his group casually talked with those walking along the busy street. His approach with businessmen: a few minutes of conversation and then the polite but friendly question, "Are you a Christian, sir?"

"You don't reach people unless you're in the world that they're in," Blessitt explains, urging a revival on streets and sidewalks. "I grew up in bars and night clubs—in that world the message of Jesus Christ never came." His mission has been to take the Gospel to these places ever since his conversion at the age of 7 and his first preaching at 15.

Ordained at 19 in a Southern Baptist church in Mississippi, he attended Mississippi College in Clinton and Golden Gate Baptist Seminary in San Francisco without graduating from either. "I haven't had time," he explains. Instead, he started churches in tough towns such as Anaconda, Montana, and Elko, Nevada. Now he operates a coffeehouse, "His Place," on Sunset Strip in Hollywood, between a topless joint and a liquor store. After the fast, he plans to return there, ministering to the 400 to 1,000 young people who pass through each night.

Why the campout on the Washing-

ton street corner? Blessitt points out that Jesus and his disciples went into the wilderness to pray and fast. "And brother, let me tell you, there's not a bigger wilderness in America than Washington, D. C.," he says. To him it's a "jungle of hate, violence, and chaos."

The wilderness the evangelist and his team walked through was real, too. Along most of the way people were friendly, but some (especially in the South) were hostile, refusing to let the team buy gas or groceries. Some drivers yelled and cursed; others tried to run over them, laughing as the cross-bearers fell in the roadside ditch.

"This gasoline says that cross will never make it to Washington," some young men threatened in Birdseye, Indiana. Hoping to burn the cross, they expected an angry confrontation with the travelers. "They were dumbfounded when we started sharing Christ," Blessitt remembers. "They bought us a Coke, and a few minutes later the guy with the gas can gave his heart to Christ."

About 4,000 conversions were made during the walk on the highway, with evangelistic rallies and church meetings bringing the total to 8,000 or more, according to Blessitt.

In their exuberance, he and his group tend to see more of the lost being saved than evidence warrants. They reported that a radio announcer had called the publicized number, talked with an evangelist for twenty minutes on his night show, and given his life to Christ. However, Larry Glick of WBZ, Boston, told CHRISTIANITY TODAY he had allowed the evangelist to repeat the prayer of redemption over the radio, but had not prayed along and had no intention of becoming a Christian.

The five cross-bearers walked twenty-five to thirty miles a day, requiring up to twelve hours walking/witnessing time. In addition to Blessitt and Wise, they included James McPheeters, who accepted Christ while on alcohol and drugs at "His Place" two years ago and has since joined the Blessitt staff, and Daniel (O. J.) Peterson, once an alcoholic, later a condemner of "His Place," and now a staff member for a year and a half. Ramsey Gilchrist, a student at Southeastern Louisiana College in Hammond, joined the group in Oklahoma. McPheeters, a Viet Nam veteran, says the walk was harder than anything in the Marine Corps but adds, "We'd rather burn out than rust out."

Blessitt just may burn out. He says he has had five strokes. Doctors advised him not to make the trip, but he threw caution—and his medicine—to the winds (see July 17 issue, page 31). Although he felt fine on the trip,

he became dizzy and nauseated with exhaustion two hours before he was to speak at the climaxing rally at the Washington Monument.

As he stood to begin his talk, he called to his side his wife, Sherry, and Wise, Peterson, and McPheeters. Leaning on them, he gradually gained strength. Tears streamed down his cheeks—and the cheeks of others—as, with hair disheveled, he prayed in a broken, catching voice: "God, we'd rather die for you than live for anything else. Help the people in the nation to see that. . . . Oh God, we must have America come back to you or we die. . . . We can't live with our churches so cold, our preachers so dead, and our buildings so fine."

ANNE EGGBROTEN

Riches Untold?

The appearance isn't poverty, despite Pope Paul's recent efforts toward such an image for the Roman Catholic Church. In fact, some observers see the Vatican wealth as \$12.8 billion or more.

That's a "fantastic exaggeration," retorted the Vatican daily newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, in an unusual denial on July 21: "In reality the productive capital of the Holy See, comprising deposits and investments alike, lodged in Italy and outside Italy, is far from reaching the hundredth part of such a sum." This puts the figure below \$128 million.

Until release of the 1,800-word, fairly detailed statement, the Vatican had remained largely silent on the issue—despite wide publicity of charges, especially since the publishing of *The Vatican Empire* by Nino Lo Bello in New York two years ago. The denial was seen as a response to speculative articles in *Der Spiegel* of Germany, the weekly *Il Mondo* of Florence, and translations of Lo Bello's book into French, German, and Italian.

Controversy now centers on interpretation of the Vatican's statement, generally held to be accurate but carefully exclusive; for example, wealth of the religious orders is not included. Semantics is also a problem: just how is "productive" capital defined?

The article specifically refutes charges that the Vatican controls interests in various Italian companies and seven Italian banks.

Those arguments are "misleading," explains C. Stanley Lowell, co-author of *Praise the Lord for Tax Exemption*. The authority on church finance says that de facto control can easily be exercised by the Vatican.

"Why don't they come out of the shadows . . . and just say exactly what they do have the way other churches

do?" asks Lowell, echoing the demands of an increasing number of observers.

Meanwhile, the mysterious wealth remains a secret of the Vatican vaults. □

Strange Company

The Reverend T. Sherron Jackson, head of the entangled Baptist Foundation of America, Incorporated, is optimistic about the future of his tax-exempt, non-profit organization, but he is about the only person who is.

The 48-year-old president of the Los Angeles-based foundation was indicted last month on charges of grand theft, writing bad checks, and giving a kick-back to a loan officer. In two years, more than thirty civil suits for \$2 million have been filed against the foundation, which, since its inception in 1966, had an aura of respectability.

The *Wall Street Journal* blew the whistle on the organization—ostensibly founded to build hospitals for children, retirement centers for the aged, and other facilities—in its lead story on July 1. The *Journal* reported that the California Attorney General, the Securities and Exchange Commission, the Internal Revenue Service, the Post Office Department, and the Justice Department also were investigating.

Jackson, who holds bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Arkansas, formally organized the North American Baptist Association (now known as the Baptist Missionary Association of America) in Little Rock in 1950. It has about 200,000 members in 1,550 congregations. The Baptist Foundation of America's nine-man board of trustees includes five other ministers. Jackson's brother-in-law, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in La Verne, California, is vice-president.

The umbrageous dealings of the foundation are incredibly complex and devious. The ill-fated fund-raising venture appears to have been victimized as well as victimizing several well-meaning businessmen. Many of the transactions in question involve millions of dollars' worth of promissory notes in exchange for assets and property—some of which apparently never existed at all, according to the *Wall Street Journal's* intensive five-month study.

One unusual project was the reported purchase last year of the Global Baseball League for \$3 million. The league never got off the ground, and its international teams complained of unpaid salaries and hotel bills.

A foundation director, the Reverend Ray Chappell of Santa Ana, told *Los Angeles Times* religion writer John Dart that Jackson is "a man of very high integrity" and that the charges won't amount to anything "when all the information is in." □