

Father Alberto Cutie gets standing ovation at first sermon in his new Episcopal Church of the Resurrection (Miami)

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Father Alberto Cutie offers his first sermon at his new congregation at the Episcopal Church of the Resurrection in suburban Miami, Sunday, May 31, 2009. The popular priest said that "church is about forgiveness" during his first sermon since leaving the Roman Catholic Church after photographs surfaced of him kissing his girlfriend on the beach. May 31, 2009.

BISCAYNE PARK, Fla. –

Rev. Alberto Cutie stood and tried to say hello. Then came the standing ovation.

More than 300 people rose to their feet and clapped. A few cheered. Several held cameras in the air, as though at a rock concert, capturing every moment.

Sunday, inside the tiny Episcopalian Church of the Resurrection, the priest nicknamed "Father Oprah" gave his first sermon since famously leaving the Roman Catholic Church after published photographs showed him nuzzling a woman on a Florida beach.

Unlike Roman Catholicism, Episcopal priests can marry. Cutie looked out at the crowd and said, "I am humbled by your presence here."



Associated PressThe

Above, the congregation listens as the Rev. Alberto Cutie gives his first sermon at the Episcopal Church of the Resurrection since leaving the Roman Catholic Church in Biscayne Park, Fla. on Sunday May 31, 2009. Meanwhile, his former church in Miami Beach continued to grapple with the departure of Cutie, who gained media fame across the Spanish-speaking world doling out relationship advice on television, radio and in print.

At his new church, Cutie delivered a sermon that spoke of common themes -- God's love, faith and perseverance -- with a few lighter moments referring to his leaving the Catholic church thrown in. At one point, Cutie spoke of a sea captain lost at sea for so long he ran out of water for his crew. Then another ship came by and told the ship's crew to lower their buckets. The captain thought this was crazy. Except, it turns out, the ship had wandered into an area with fresh water. It was a theme he returned to several times -- the love of God is all around. But first we must lower our buckets.

During another part of his sermon, Cutie referred to a note, one he didn't have with him at the moment because, "right now my stuff is in storage." The crowd laughed and he continued, "They didn't give me much time to pack."

Cutie closed his sermon saying, "Church is about living in the spirit of God, and the spirit of God is love."

What followed was more clapping and more picture taking. The hall, which held about 300, overflowed with people, with latecomers forced to stand. For most, this was their first time at the tiny, Earth-toned church, which recently had struggled to the point other Episcopal congregations were asked to help.

Those worries seemed to be washed away on Sunday, thanks to the followers of Cutie.

Among them was Fabio Gomez, 61, of Miami Beach, who said he hadn't been inside a church for five years. But he came on Sunday and sat in one off the last seats available, all the way in the back. He came "to show my support for Father Alberto to keep going with the church."

Afterward, Cutie spoke with church goers in a separate luncheon area where parishioners treated him like a rock star of sorts. They hugged him. They kissed him. They posed with him for photographs. By his side was his girlfriend, Ruhama Buni Canellis, 35, whom he introduced as his fiancée. The couple left through a back door, escorted by police.

After the service, Bishop Leo Frade, head of the Episcopal Diocese of Southeast Florida, said Cutie had approached the Episcopalian church months before the pictures were published. Cutie did so, Frade said, because the priest realized he had begun to think like an Episcopalian. It will take Cutie at least a year to be certified as an Episcopal priest. On Sunday, he wore the white robes of a lay person.

Harsher words came from Archbishop John C. Favalora. Pastors in South Florida read a letter from Favalora during Sunday services indicating his disappointment with the switch. "Father Cutie's actions have caused grave scandal within the Catholic Church, harmed the Archdiocese of Miami -- especially our priests -- and led to division within the ecumenical community and the community at large," read the statement, originally issued Thursday.

"I feel betrayed, disappointed and let down by Cutie, but I understand that he is human," said Anne Burgess, a 28-year-old member of St. Francis de Sales. She added that she does not plan to hear any of Cutie's sermons as an Episcopalian. "I come to the church for my faith, not for a priest."

In fact, the former priest's name was not mentioned until the last five minutes of the hour-long, internationally televised Mass. It was his replacement, Rev. Juan Carlos Rios, who briefly addressed the attendants of the midday Mass.

Anderson Castro and his sister Maria, who both live in Miami Beach and attended the service, lamented Cutie's departure. "He was the master of this church," said Maria Castro, lifting her glasses and wiping her eyes with a white handkerchief. "It almost makes me cry."

Her brother was less forgiving. "He should feel like a king dethroned," he said. Any ill will for Cutie was unfelt at his new church on Sunday. Instead, church members enjoyed watching their house of worship be filled with new life. Many in the crowd checked the program to make sure Cutie would be back next week.

Michael Stewart, 65, of North Miami, enjoyed the crowd, although not all the media attention attracted by Cutie. He has worshipped at the church for 10 years, he said.

"I wish people would come to church like this," he said, then paused for a moment, "every Sunday."

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