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Down at Watkins Glen Track, He's 'The Priest of Pit 1'

Bill Beeney

The Rev. Austin B. Hanna has added another arrow to his religious bow. He's "The Priest of Pit 1."

Pit 1 is the principal maintenance area at the Watkins Glen automobile race course, the Grand Prix track.

Before the internationally celebrated Canadian-American Challenge Cup race last Sunday, "Father Gus" was called upon to say Mass for the assembled drivers, mechanics and race fans who were on the premises.

"Father Gus" (no one I know calls him Austin B.), who is chaplain at St. Joseph's Villa on Dewey Avenue, set up shop at Pit 1.

"Nick Fabroni, vice president of the track, invited me to come down. Actually, it was Father Joe Daley, a good friend of mine, who asked me to do it. He's pastor of St. Mary's Church in Watkins Glen, and the track is in his parish.

"I didn't know how large a crowd to expect. I thought there would be perhaps 40 or 50 people."

But between 700 and 800 turned out for the service at 8 o'clock in the morning.

"I was particularly astonished at the number of young people in the crowd. They didn't have to attend if they didn't want to. No one twisted their arms. They took communion, too.

"It was a very cosmopolitan group — from millionaires to hippies. Paul Newman, the movie actor, was there. I talked with him for a while afterwards. He's a real nice guy, very common and

ordinary and no celebrity complex. He's quite a race fan, I guess."

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"IT WAS sort of like the days of World War II, holding a service outdoors," said Father Gus, "Pit 1 is where the races start and finish. I told the people that was the logical place for a religious service — where everything starts and finishes."

And, of course, the priest had to throw one of his little jokes into the sermon.

"I overheard one of the mechanics this morning say to a driver: 'If the brakes don't work, try to run into something cheap.'"

When "Father Gus" referred to World War II days, he knew whereof he spoke.

He was an Army chaplain, joining the Army in 1940, the first priest to go into the service from the Rochester diocese. He served with the 1st Division in Europe and later was chaplain at the Army War College in Washington.

At the Watkins Glen race Father Hanna was impressed with the way the huge crowd was handled by the police.

"The Watkins Glen police were there, and the State Police, and the sheriff's men from Schuyler County, and some of Al Skinner's deputies from Monroe County were on hand; they were the best dressed of all, in my opinion."

Father Hanna was rather notably tired, too. "I didn't have a hat, and when the sun began bouncing off my bald head someone gave me one of those flaming red baseball-type caps the Kendall gasoline people provided. It was pretty jazzy."

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FATHER HANNA, who has been at St. Joseph's Villa for about 25 years, is director of operations at the Villa, a community where hundreds of boys and girls have found a home. His views on so-called "juvenile delinquency" are worth listening to.

"When all the fancy explanations for juvenile delinquency are boiled down to common terms, the real reason in most cases is lack of love. It's as simple as that. It isn't juvenile delinquency most times; it's family delinquency.

"At the Villa we try to give the kids love. I don't mean to sound corny, but, honestly, that's more than half the battle. You have to make kids feel that they are wanted. Ninety per cent of our children come from broken homes. The lack of love is reflected in their actions. You'd be amazed at how they straighten out under the influence of love, affection, and a sense of belonging."

Whether he is serving as chaplain of a home for boys and girls, or as "The Priest of Pit 1," Father Gus Hanna relates to his congregation.

They've invited him back to Watkins Glen in October to conduct services at the big Grand Prix race.