

When Is Tithe Time This Brazilian Church is Asking: Credit or Debit Card?

Contributed by José Wilson Miranda
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Starting Monday, October 6, parishioners from a Catholic church in Brazil will be able to pay for weddings, baptisms and even the tithe by credit card. The church is the cathedral of Ribeirão Preto, a town 313 km (194 miles) from São Paulo, in the Brazilian Southeast.

According to Rodrigo Assis, the church's secretary, the measure was introduced in response to demand by the congregation. "People started asking if they could pay by credit or debit card. More and more people were asking this same question," Assis told reporters.

What the church did was to transform the parish's general office into a kind of doctor's waiting room with air conditioned, comfortable seats, magazines, a coffee machine and two Visa and MasterCard credit card electronic machines.

"Nowadays it is very rare to see people carrying cash," says Priest Francisco Jaber Zanardo Moussa, better known as Padre Chico (Father Chico), who is in charge of the parish. He also mentions the fact that having less cash lowers the risk of being robbed, something that has already happened more than once in the past.

Apparently some Brazilian evangelical churches like Universal and Renascer have been using credit cards to get the tithe for some time now. The CNBB (National Confederation of Brazilian Bishops), however, says that they are not aware that any other Catholic parish in Brazil is accepting credit cards for church fees and tithe.

Father Chico says that he will be very careful not to use the credit card machines inside the temple and during mass. He promises that the little basket for collection passed during mass won't be abolished soon. He explains: "Mass has an eucharistic, ceremonial meaning and I cannot mix this with a credit card machine."

Weddings, which can now be paid by card, cost 350 reais (US\$ 171) if the civilian and religious ceremonies are included or 220 reais (US\$ 108) just for the religious side of it. Charge for a baptism is 42 reais (US\$ 21).

The bank is giving the church a break. The parish will pay only a 19 reais (US\$ 9.50) administrative fee instead of the 89 reais (US\$ 44) charged businesses.

The new church office is being inaugurated with a blessing ceremony this Sunday one day before being pressed into service. The old office has been converted into a religious articles and souvenirs store.

As Father Chico - he is in the third year of a Business Administration course - tells things wouldn't look so catholic and he wouldn't be using the credit cards if it weren't for the brilliant idea he had to get rid of thousands of pigeons who lived by the church.

About a year and a half ago he noticed that he was continuously losing parishioners because of the mess that some 30,000 pigeons, according to his calculations, were doing to the cathedral and the square around the building.

He first thought about using a grape-based repellent to scare away the birds. He was prevented from doing this, however, by the Ibama (Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources), a federal government agency.

The priest then recalled how as a child he used to frighten off doves using firecrackers and concluded that with something a little more powerful, like a rocket, he might be able chase away the pigeons.

Padre Chico tells that the birds were using the square as a bedroom and used to arrive at about 6 pm every day. "Every day, at 6 pm I would fire a rocket and they would disappear. At about 7 pm they would be back and I would fire another rocket. This saga lasted for six months. Today there is no pigeon in the square."

Since then the number of parishioners has tripled. "Before I used to buy from 1.800 to 2.000 hosts for the holy communion every weekend, today I'm buying from 3.500 to 4.000."

Today the parish has 800 parishioners who pay the tithe. The payment is completely voluntary.

"If you give to the community as an act of lack of ambition and availability, you will get God's blessings in return," explains the clergyman.

Father Chico won't tell how much his church gets from the tithe, but he assures that it's not enough to pay fixed expenses like electricity and wages to nine people who work for the parish.

"We promote parties and raffles to make up the difference." he offers.