

He Asked God for Nations

Alberto Mottesi remembers when Latin America's evangelical churches were tiny. Today, the region is engulfed in revival.

Evangelist Alberto Mottesi is eating a late dinner in a Mexico City restaurant when a 20-something Mexican boldly approaches him. The plain-looking man has just listened to Mottesi speak at the March of Glory, a 17-hour rally that drew 1 million Mexican Christians to the city during Easter weekend.

"Two years ago, you prayed for me so that I could receive the anointing of an evangelist," the man told Mottesi. "That experience impacted my life. I was shy. I could never be bold enough to speak.

"After you prayed for me, I have continually been preaching in the parks and streets of this city," he adds. "I also go and preach to surrounding towns. I am seeing great results and saved lives."

Mottesi asks the man to kneel, then he lays his hands on him and prays. But Mottesi was not handing his evangelistic mantle to someone else.

His work is far from done.

In fact, after 26 years of itinerant evangelistic work, the 61-year-old preacher is scheduled to minister 30 weeks this year in 10 countries, mostly in Latin America. And he has more than 100 engagements scheduled in California, where his ministry currently is based.

A native of Argentina, Mottesi has preached to some 20 million people, with more than 2 million receiving Christ mostly in crusades held in large stadiums and arenas. His work has earned him the nickname, "The Latin American Billy Graham."

"Personally, I have seen what God has done through this remarkable yet humble man," says Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, who died in July. "And I would not be exaggerating when I agree with many who consider him to be the Billy Graham of Latin America."

Regarded as a mentor by many church leaders, Mottesi also consults with national, state and local political officials, many of whom have accepted Christ through his ministry. With his wife, Noemi, he has also launched Save the Family, which is credited with helping to heal and restore shattered families throughout Latin America.

Additionally, Mottesi has a prophetic and apostolic ministry, in which he seeks to transfer the anointing of an evangelist to young people and women in Latin America, a region that is in the midst of an unprecedented avivamiento espiritual—or "spiritual revival."

A Father Figure

"The Lord is moving in Latin America through Alberto," Jamie Ramirez, pastor of Nueva Vida Foursquare Church in Santa Barbara, California, told Charisma. "He is a father figure to many Latin American Christian leaders."

Ramirez, who has worked for three years with Mottesi as his English translator, adds that there is a great need for

mentoring among Latin American ministers. "They see themselves as Timothy, and Alberto is like the apostle Paul to them," says Ramirez, 44, who has pastored his predominantly Hispanic congregation for 14 years.

Carlos Quiroa, who helped start the March of Glory in the early 1990s, says Mottesi is considered the spiritual father of Christians in Latin America.

"He is the most recognized minister in Latin America," says Quiroa, 42, who pastors a 1,000-member charismatic congregation in Mexico City. "He's raising up young people to be ministers."

Daniel de León, pastor of 6,000-member Templo Calvario Assembly of God in Santa Ana, California, the largest Hispanic church in the United States, agrees. "Being a Latino himself, he relates to them, but more importantly they relate to him," says de León, 62, a friend of Mottesi's for 25 years. "His passion for souls and his integrity in ministry has impacted my life."

Marcos Witt, a popular Christian musician and conference speaker throughout Latin America who has known Mottesi for 16 years, says Mottesi has "an amazing ability to connect with people."

"He understands the felt needs of Latin America," says Witt, 41, pastor of the Hispanic congregation of 30,000-member Lakewood Church in Houston.

Mottesi, however, sees himself as "just a voice."

"I'm an evangelist who prophesies, but I'm not a prophet," says Mottesi, whose ministry is based in Santa Ana, California.. "I believe the Lord has given me words to say to His church, His people, and the city and nations I go to."

During a rally the day before the March of Glory in Mexico City, Mottesi told Christians that for years Mexico was closed to the gospel. "For the past 40 years, I've seen the Latin American people depressed, abused and downcast from idolatry, witchcraft and political corruption," he told the crowd.

Mottesi then laid hands on several people, many of whom were overcome by the Holy Spirit and fell to the floor as he prayed for them. "I declare that Satan will not be able to stop this great move of God," Mottesi prophesied.

The evangelist says although countries in Central and South America were once Roman Catholic, there is a growing revival that is sweeping through the region. "It's unbelievable," says Mottesi, whose radio and TV ministry blankets Latin America. "Eighty percent of Christians in Latin America are Pentecostals or charismatic. This is the era of the Holy Spirit in Latin America."

Times of Awakening

During the March of Glory in April, pastors, ministry leaders and laypeople representing more than 20,000 churches converged in Mexico's capital—the world's largest city, with more than 23 million residents.

The march featured a 10-mile procession on one of the city's main thoroughfares, in which four of its lanes were closed to

traffic for the march. The massive event required hundreds of police and security personnel.

“I’ve never seen anything like this,” Ramirez’s wife, Maricela, says while observing the multitude walking down Reform Avenue. “Mexico City will not be the same after this.”

The march, which took three hours to complete, featured a praise band, 400 dancers in uniforms of white and green, and young and old alike carrying Christian signs, banners and balloons with Scripture verses.

Broadcast live on 130 Christian radio stations throughout Mexico, the march culminated at the Zocalo, the city’s main square. Looming over the area is the National Cathedral—headquarters of the country’s Catholic Church—and the National Palace, which is the office of the president and Mexico’s lawmakers.

“The march ends here because it’s the historical, political and religious heart of all of Mexico,” said pastor Cecelia Pezet, who with her sister, Mercedes, launched the march with Quiroa.

After it, a rally—from 6 p.m. until 7 a.m. Easter Sunday—included continuous worship, prayer and preaching. The all-night vigil rivaled the excitement and atmosphere of a Latin American championship soccer game, as the majority of the participants stood, danced, raised their hands and shouted “Christ is alive!”

“Christ who walked in Israel 2,000 years ago is here today,” Mottesì told the huge crowd during constant drizzle. The

thousands gathered at the Zocalo erupted in a boisterous roar, even as the rain came down harder.

“Nobody is leaving despite the rain,” says Antonio Reza, 40, pastor of a Hispanic Southern Baptist Church in Moreno Valley, California. “They’re so hungry for the power and presence of God. It’s amazing.”

Mottesi notes that during a typical Billy Graham crusade in the United States, between 5 percent and 7 percent of the crowd respond to an altar call. “In Mexico, 12 to 15 percent accept Christ or rededicate their lives to God during a crusade,” says Mottesi, noting that he witnessed 42,000 responding to an invitation during one of his crusades. “In other Latin American countries, you can expect 20 percent of the crowd to come to Christ. The Latin American heart is so open to God.”

A Front-Page Revival

Growing up in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Mottesi remembers seeing only small Protestant congregations.

“Now churches are in the front page of Latin American newspapers,” says Mottesi, who was raised Catholic. “When I was a child, I would read about revivals and dreamed for a Latin American revival. I didn’t think that I would see that day.”

Mottesi cites an agnostic sociologist from the University of California, Berkeley, who recently investigated the spread of Christianity in Latin America.

“He speculated that in a few more years, the gospel will influence the majority of Latin America and that there’s a great possibility it will be known as a Christian continent,” says Mottesi, noting that Mexican churches have sent missionaries to Japan, Israel and Arab countries.

Latinos, who number more than 40 million, are the largest minority and the fastest-growing ethnic group in America today. It is estimated that 9 million of them are evangelical, and almost 70 percent of that number are Pentecostals or charismatics.

Mottesi believes as long as there is injustice and poverty in Latin America, Hispanics will continue to come to America. And as they come, they will bring their fervent faith with them.

“I believe that God moves Hispanics to America so that they can bring Americans back to the feet of the cross of Calvary,” he says. “[America] has turned away from God. But God will use these people as well as others so that America can return to the feet of Christ.”

In the next 20 years, Mottesi’s ministry plans to reach Latino immigrants through evangelism and education.

“I want to win Hispanics coming to America to Christ before the liberals win them,” he says. “Liberals target prospective Hispanic U.S. citizens.”

Citing a new trend in his Latin American crusades, Mottesi says a growing number of Latin American politicians are spiritually seeking. “The local and national authorities are coming to the meetings and are open to the gospel,” explains

Mottesi, noting that a governor, senator and mayor from Ecuador and Venezuela came to hear him speak earlier this year.

“Right now no president of a Latin American country can ignore evangelicals,” says Mottesi, who hoped to meet with Mexican President Vicente Fox this summer. “From a divine perspective, I believe God is touching political leaders. The revival taking place in Latin America will become a reformation movement in the political, secular and cultural arena.”

Mottesi continues to hold private meetings with Latin American politicians, and he keeps his contact with them confidential. “I want to keep the door open,” he says, noting that Latin American political leaders are notorious for being corrupt, womanizing and dishonest. “But I ask them to do two things. I invite them to accept Christ, and if they decide to, I urge and demand that they live in integrity.”

The mayor of Villa Nueva, Guatemala, says that after a Mottesi crusade earlier this year he was “profoundly shaken up by God.” During a Mottesi crusade in Choloma, Honduras, in June, Mayor Sandra Deras and her husband publicly accepted Jesus.

However, Mottesi says there are some drawbacks to the spiritual awakening among politicians.

“Unfortunately, there are only a few Hispanic churches in Latin America that are prepared and mature enough to receive many of the leaders who are being touched by the Lord,” he says. “I believe God will give churches the revelation on how to disciple these political leaders.”

Reaching politicians for Christ might cause some evangelists to fall into pride. But Mottesi seems to keep both of his feet on the ground.

His passion remains simple: to equip normal Christians to become evangelists themselves. He seems to love the common men and women who hold the real key to transforming Latin America.

"I believe in them," he says of the people who respond to his altar calls or enroll in his school. "Many of them are simple people who have no education, but they have a fire within them to serve Jesus.

"When I pray for them, it is as if the Lord Himself tells them: 'You can do it. I want you to do it. If you place yourself in My hands, that is all I need in order to fill you with My power and send you out to the world.'"

The End of Machismo?

Throughout Latin America, Alberto Mottesi is challenging the notion that men should dominate women.

To evangelist Alberto Mottesi, one of the components of the unprecedented Latin American revival is coming from an unlikely source: mujeres en el ministerio, or "women in ministry."

"I believe that in this Latin American revival, there is a great freedom for women in ministry taking place," he explains.

Jamie Ramirez, pastor of Nueva Vida Foursquare Church in Santa Barbara, California, saw it firsthand over the Easter weekend when he and his wife, Maricela, traveled with Mottesi to Mexico City for the March of Glory, a 17-hour event that drew 1 million Christians to the capital. The gathering featured women preaching, praying and prophesying, as well as leading worship.

“One of the miracles in Latin America’s spiritual movement is the freedom you see in the women expressing their spiritual gifts,” Ramirez says. “Traditionally, Latin America is very, very macho, and women are always the subordinate. But that is changing.”

Over the last five years, while he conducted meetings throughout Latin America, Mottesi has publicly repented for the mistreatment of women. “I have asked for forgiveness from the Latin American women for machismo,” Mottesi explains. “I asked for forgiveness for the sins of my people.”

Mottesi says machismo means “total subordination” of the woman to the man in areas of opinion, leadership and giftedness. “Pretty much she’s expected to be in the kitchen even supporting the rebellion of children and her husband,” the evangelist says, adding that some Latin American pastors have been known to beat their wives.

“Machismo is contrary to the will and Word of God,” he says. “It’s sin. I think it’s crazy that machismo stopped women from ministering.”

Mottesi notices a difference when he repents during his crusades. “After I ask for forgiveness, women tell me later:

'I feel like a mountain of rock has fallen off my head. I felt like I couldn't be called [to preach], but now I can,'" he says.

And attitudes are changing toward women in ministry in Latin America, he adds.

"I've seen more women involved, and I expect more to be pastors and evangelists," says Mottesi, noting that women make up about 60 percent of Latin American churches. "It's happening, but slowly."

Yamira Gonzalez, who helped lead dancers during the huge Mexico City march, says it's a work in progress

"We're not fighting anymore," says Gonzalez, 44, who spoke before hundreds during rallies before the march. "Even though we don't have the title of apostles or prophets, we are the secret agents of the church."

Cecelia Pezet, who also preached during the march, says many pastors in Mexico are still resistant to women in ministry.

"But some pastors are open to receive the revelation of women," Pezet, 49, told Charisma. Pezet is considered an apostle by local Christian leaders. She pastors a 500-member Pentecostal church in Mexico City, and she preaches at other congregations that are pastored by men.

"The Bible says the Holy Spirit came upon everyone, including women," Pezet adds. "Little by little the Holy Spirit is releasing the women and raising them up. The real ministry

comes from the Lord. It's Christ in us."

Eric Tiansay is the editor of Charisma News Service. He traveled to Mexico City in April to file this report.