

Pastor on restaurant quest can't live by bread alone

by [Doug MacCash](#)

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NEW ORLEANS(RNS) Minister Ray Cannata's mission is almost complete.

Four years ago he set out to eat at every restaurant in New Orleans. By mid-September, he'd already checked 719 eateries off his list and only had 10 meals to go before the ceremonial conclusion of his quest on Oct. 21, when he'll have dined in 729 establishments.

That last meal will be a celebratory steak-house dinner he refers to as "the last supper."

That is an interesting choice of words considering that Cannata, a 42-year-old with muttonchop sideburns and not nearly the belt size you'd expect for someone with his hobby, is a Presbyterian minister.

Cannata, who grew up in New York, says he got the calling from God while in college, later attended the seminary at Princeton University and then set out for a career in the ministry.

Within a decade, he was pastor of a thriving suburban New Jersey church with 300 parishioners and working on his doctoral degree.

The downside, he said, was the dullness.

Then, a New Orleans minister called, hoping to interest him in taking over a modest church on St. Charles Avenue with only a few dozen members. As so often happens, Cannata and his wife, Kathy, a school librarian, instantly succumbed to that old Crescent City magic. It didn't hurt that Kathy's father was originally from New Orleans. This was summer 2005. Before the couple could pay a second visit to their possible new home, their possible new home was battered by Hurricane

Katrina and swamped by floodwater.

It looked like the move was off. After all, Cannata already had gotten another attractive job offer in sunny San Diego.

But, as Cannata explains, "Christianity isn't supposed to be about moving away from the pain; it's supposed to be about moving toward the pain." There was plenty of pain in New Orleans in winter 2006, when Cannata bought a house for his family -- he and Kathy have two kids -- and dove into Redeemer Presbyterian, his new New Orleans church with fewer than 20 members.

"God loves an underdog," Cannata said.

In addition to helping steady the post-Katrina congregation, he also helped rebuild his adopted city. He said a steady stream of Presbyterian missionaries came to town to help repair nearly 500 damaged homes.

When dinnertime came, those missionaries, who'd been swinging hammers all day, wanted to know where to get some of that great New Orleans food. Cannata began keeping a list of his favorite spots. As the city began to rebound and he added restaurants, the list just seemed to take on a life of its own.

When someone casually suggested that Cannata continue until he'd eaten everywhere, a quest was born. Crescent City natives who heard of Cannata's goal volunteered restaurant recommendations. "To love the people in New Orleans," Cannata said, "you have to love the food."

To keep the number of dining establishments from becoming too daunting, it was necessary to impose certain criteria. First, he decided to confine his self-imposed challenge to Orleans Parish. He excluded national chains. He declared that every eatery on the list had to have more chairs at tables than at the bar. Finally, a meal doesn't count if he eats alone, Cannata said with a laugh, because "that's just binging."

The total number of New Orleans restaurants is a moving target, of course. Weekly, some open and some close. "To be honest," he said, "I may have missed one or two." But Cannata has been as thorough as

possible. Needless to say, his can be an expensive hobby, so he sticks to lunches when possible.

The portions in New Orleans, Cannata has found, are customarily large. He theorizes that, in the Crescent City, serving size is based on lavish hospitality, not profit.

Too much high-calorie hospitality could be a waistline hazard, of course, so Cannata always leaves a bite or two behind. Though he initially gained weight as he checked restaurants off his list, he's since dropped the extra pounds by abstaining from soft drinks and giving up his car.

These days, when Cannata unfurls a napkin and takes up a new menu, there's liable to be a documentary movie crew capturing the moment. One of those house rebuilding missionaries, Michael Dunaway, turned out to be a filmmaker who took an interest in Cannata's quest.

What was going to be a short video subject has morphed into a full-blown 90-minute documentary movie titled "The Man Who Ate New Orleans," complete with a cast of Crescent City celebrity chefs. The "Last Supper" will be the climax of the movie that may be shown by fall 2012. Proceeds from the film will benefit the ongoing post-Katrina rebuilding effort, Cannata said.

The membership of Cannata's congregation has grown to 160 on Sundays, and he says he's never been happier. He considers his quest to conquer New Orleans' restaurants as perfectly compatible with his faith. Food is central to many of the Bible's teachings, he says. "I'm just doing what God wants me to; I'm eating a lot."