

# Legend of the Chip Monk proves to be true

## Church on the Strip has employee who cashes in casino chips left in collection box

By F. ANDREW TAYLOR

VIEW STAFF WRITER

Tour guides tell the story that there is a church on the Strip that often receives casino chips in its collection plate. Eventually, someone has to go to all the casinos to convert those chips to cash. That person is Arthur Nelson, otherwise known as the "Chip Monk."

However, Snopes.com, an urban myth debunking Web site, claims the Chip Monk doesn't exist. But don't tell that to Nelson, who has lived in Las Vegas for 49 years. For 40 of those, he worked as a church organist.

"I don't play the organ anymore; I'm retired," he said. "Let somebody else have the headache."

Nelson came to the Roman Catholic Guardian Angel Cathedral at 302 Cathedral Way, just off of Las Vegas Boulevard North, in 1967.

"I was an associate organist at Christ (Episcopal) Church on St. Louis Avenue and Maryland Parkway," he said. "They had an open house here to show off the stained glass. They just had a small organ. The organist was a friend and she said, 'sit down, play something.' The priest, if you'd have pushed him over, he would have been two inches taller, he was a wide fellow. He came up the aisle and I thought, 'well, I'll be out on the street.' "



DALE DOMBROWSKI/VIEW Arthur Nelson, also known as the Chip Monk, shows some of the different denominations of casino chips that have found their way into the collection plate at Guardian Angel Cathedral, 314 Cathedral Way, during Masses.



DALE DOMBROWSKI/VIEW Guardian Angel Cathedral, 314 Cathedral Way, is located right in the heart of the Las Vegas Strip and often receives casino chips on its collection plate.

Instead of ejecting Nelson, the priest offered him a job.

Nelson spent a dozen years overlapping his organist days working at the Las Vegas Review-Journal, owned by Stephens Media Group, which also owns the View Neighborhood Newspapers. He worked in classified ads and pagemaking and retired from the paper in 1980. He has worked full time at the church since then. His current title is registrar.

"I take care of parish records," Nelson said. "I record offering envelope totals and do all kinds of errands, like shopping for office supplies."

He has been cashing in chips for the church since nearly the beginning of his association with Guardian Angel Cathedral.

"I'm not sure who started calling me the Chip Monk," Nelson said, "but it got so when I'd show up at the casinos, they'd say, 'hey, it's the Chip Monk.' "

Nelson is quick to point out that he isn't really a monk, just a layperson who works at the church, but he clearly enjoys the name just the same.

"Who else has that title?" he said.

Accepting profits from gambling isn't hypocrisy on the church's part, as its opinion on gambling is not as severe as one might assume. When contacted for a clarification on this, the Rev. Albert Felice-Pace of St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Newman Center at UNLV quoted catholic catechism 2413, "games of chance (card games, etc.) or wagers are not in themselves contrary to justice. They become morally unacceptable when they deprive someone of what is necessary to provide for his needs and those of others."

Every few months, Nelson takes the sorted chips around to the casinos.

"I try to hit two casinos each trip," he said. "There's a service in town that will take them, but they charge 15 percent. I would rather take it and save that for the church. I have fun going, too. Is there anyone else who can say they go to all the hotels at least once every three months? I walk in and cash in the chips and never stop to gamble, I doubt many people can say that."

Nelson said in the past, he was able to take all of the chips to Caesars Palace. He said he would sort them by hotel and take them to a back cage, not the public one.

"They would take them all," he said. "Then, all of a sudden, Caesars had a new person running the cages and he stopped it, because when it was slow, they would have to sort them all."

After Caesars, Nelson said he had a friend at the Tropicana who would take all the chips.

"But the (Nevada Gaming Control Board) put a stop to that," he said.

Nelson said the church still gets chips from casinos that are no longer open, including the Silver Slipper, which closed in 1988.

"I love to see those," he said. "That was my home. I could walk up there, it was just across the street. If they needed me back here at the office, they could just call up the cashier and tell her 'we need Arthur.'"

"We get chips from out of the Strip and out of the country," Nelson said. "I can't cash those in. We also get a lot of funny money -- foreign currency. I take those down to the bank. It comes from all over."

Although Nelson said he loves his job, there have been times when it has proved stressful.

"Around 1982, I really got high blood pressure here," he said. "Tourists would ask, 'why do you have a church on the Strip?' To serve the tourists. Christ went to where the people were.

"This is a tourist church, it was put here for the convenience of the tourists," Nelson said. "Catholics tend to look for churches when they're on vacation. About 15 years ago, a second Catholic church for tourists was built on the south end of the Strip, on Reno Avenue (the Shrine of the Most Holy Redeemer). I handle their chips, too."

Despite that, the church is not without its local parishioners. For a time, Polish services were held there. The church has served several of the city's more colorful residents, as well.

"I played for several Mafia funerals here," Nelson said. "I guess I'm part of the history of the church now."

On top of the travel, another complication has been added to Nelson's duties. "Years ago, we used to get a lot more chips. Now, we're getting slot receipts, and they're only good for a limited time," he said. "But I won't turn them in for two cents."

He confirmed that the collection plate does indeed sometimes contain two-cent receipts.

"I ought to save them all," he said, "and paper a wall with them."