

# God's 'made man'

## Rocco Morelli describes his journey from Mafia to Christ

By **DARRIN STINEMAN**  
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Rocco Morelli used to make offers you couldn't refuse.

Then God made one to him, and his life changed forever.

"I said no to the godfather and yes to God the Father," Morelli told a crowd of about 500 at Thursday morning's Salina Prayer Breakfast, which is an observance of the National Day of Prayer. The event was at the Salina Bicentennial Center.

Morelli, 45, said it was his mother's prayers that brought him out of the Pittsburgh-area Mafia and into a relationship with Jesus Christ.

"My mother never gave up, and that's what I tell people: Don't give up on your children," he said. "Don't tell me that prayer doesn't work, because you're looking at a living miracle that God answered my mother's prayers. That's what this day is all about."

In a 35-minute address that followed music, prayer and a buffet breakfast, Morelli told of his rise to power as a gangster in New Kensington, Pa., which is known as "Little Chicago" for its Mafia influence.

"I grew up a Christian. I went to church, I went to Christian school, I came from a good family," he said. "But this dark cloud of a generational curse was upon me. My grandfather was the don (head of an organized crime family) in Italy."

Morelli said he had a "head knowledge" of Jesus as a child, but it didn't change who he was.

"My heart and my brain had not been connected by the time I was 15 years old," he said. "I knew how to gamble, I was a card shark, I knew how to stack the deck. I was a fence. I was a junior wise guy already."

He eventually became involved in the "Pizza Connection" drug traffick-

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Mafioso-turned-evangelist

ing ring that used pizza parlors and other businesses to launder money.

"In my early 20s, I said, 'I might as well go all the way. I'm a gangster, and I'll never be anything but a gangster,'" Morelli said. "I had power but the wrong kind of power. Not the kind of transforming power I now know through Jesus Christ but the kind of power where, with a phone call, I could have somebody taken care of."

He eventually was given a chance to be a mob boss, but first he had to "whack" his best friend, a member of the Pizza Connection who had become an informant for the FBI.

As he was preparing for the hit in February 1989, a friend of Morelli's mother invited him to a "gospel meeting," and he agreed to go as a means of providing an alibi if he were questioned about his friend's death.

"I went to satisfy my mom and all these praying people that were fanatics out to get me. It was a conspiracy against me in those days," Morelli said, drawing a laugh from the crowd. "(An evangelist at the meeting) was talking about Jimmy Hoffa and all this stuff, and then he had enough guts to say, 'It takes a real man to stand up for Jesus.' And he said something about the shortest verse in the Bible is 'Jesus wept,' and something

happened and I began to cry.

"My question was, 'Can God do for me what he did for you? Because you don't know what I'm about to do.'"

Morelli didn't carry out the plan to kill his friend, but shortly after his conversion, he was convicted of crimes associated with the Pizza Connection and sentenced to two years in prison.

In 1988, he was given an opportunity to appear on a Christian television station and give his testimony.

"Prison ministry was birthed that day," he said. "People from all over the country were calling the prayer line and accepting Jesus Christ and saying, 'How can we support the prison ministry?' There wasn't one. It didn't exist."

Today, Morelli is pastor of evangelism outreach at Global Harvest Christian Center in the Orlando area and is a national spokesman for the Prison Fellowship ministry started by Chuck Colson, who was imprisoned in the 1970s for his role in the Watergate scandal.

This year's National Day of Prayer theme is "God shed his grace on thee," and Morelli explained that salvation is impossible without God's grace because no one is without sin.

"It's not by anything we can do, it's by his grace, which is undeserved favor," he said. "We are all offenders. The only difference is that some sin is punishable by legislation. The only difference between guys like me and (Colson) and you is, we got caught."

Through the life of crime and the prison time, the prayers of Morelli's mother never stopped, he said.

"I truly believe the reason I'm standing here before you today to share my testimony and the word of God," he said, "is because I had and still have a praying mother."

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