It's hard, sweaty work, waging war on Satan.

The Power Team, four 300-pound clergymen of rock-solid muscle and might, is performing feats of strength, salvation, and salesmanship through tomorrow at Calvary Bible Chapel. Even after smashing flaming paving slabs, bending steel rods and exploding soda cans in their fists, group leader John Jacobs is quick to assure the audience the Power Team isn't here to show off.

"It's not the size of your muscles, but the size of your faith that makes you a champion," he told a crowd on opening night.

The flashy performances are engineered to draw "unchurched" audiences into the sanctuary, where they hear a Christian salvation message from men they can't help but look up to — John, Berry, Siolo, and Todd all top 6'3.

Rick Waldron headed up the Calvary Chapel committee that brought the troupe of strongmen to Toledo. He spent spare moments over the last two months gathering up assorted items the Power Team needs to win souls to Christ:

• 42 Louisville Slugger ball bats.
• 1,200 pounds of ice blocks per evening.
• Two dozen red rubber hot-water bottles.
• Assorted steel rods and pipes.
• Several 3-inch-thick telephone books.
• 16 tons of cement and concrete blocks, various sizes.
• A tree trunk.
• A telephone pole.
• A volunteer stage crew with wheelbarrows, shovels, fire extinguishers and plenty of muscle of its own.

Carpenters worked to extend the sanctuary stage by almost four feet, reinforcing the platform with 4x4 studs to withstand the stress. Waterproof sheets and plywood were laid over that, and great pyramids of concrete and ice are constructed each evening, transforming the cool, carpeted sanctuary into a dripping demo floor for righteous He-Men.

At 7 p.m. sharp, the lights go down, the spotlight snaps on, and the pounding beat of a Christian rap song fills the room. Mr. Jacobs gives rousing ringside introductions and bulk descriptions to Olympic wrestler Berry Handley (he's never tasted alcohol, never done drugs, and he's a virgin); former NFL lineman Todd Keene, (steroid abuse put him on his deathbed at age 25, but the Lord saved him, body and soul), and Siolo "The Giant Samoan who loves Jesus with all
his heart" Tauaefa.

Mr. Jacobs tells why he won't be using his 23-inch biceps to break things across his chest: He's recovering from shoulder surgery. Instead of adding to the mayhem, he describes how each flashy feat illustrates a "Bible Truth."

Crushing a stack of concrete blocks and ice illustrates Christ's power to "tear down the walls in our lives...walls of addiction, fear, bitterness or insecurity."

Karate-chopping a stack of flaming paving slabs brought out the Bible story of Three Israelite Youths, who were protected from harm in a fiery furnace.

"No matter what kind of flame you're going through, Jesus is walking there beside you, once you let him into your heart," Mr. Jacobs shouted over the crashing concrete.

The lung-power required to inflate a hot-water bottle to bursting point illustrates the great pressure youth feel to conform, he said.

The crowd in the pews loved it all, and responded with oohs, aahs, waving fists, and cheers at all the right moments.

"We do these things so people will come to hear a message," Mr. Jacobs said. "They'd never listen to this from a guy in a suit and tie. We have the tools to go where preachers can't go."

The Power Team has been lifting, smashing and twisting things for 18 years, he said. The ten-member group, each of whom is an ordained minister, splits into two units and performs in schools and churches throughout the world. About 100,000 people were "reached" in 500 schools and 71 cities last year, Mr. Jacobs said. "The Power Connection," the team's half-hour television program, is carried in ten countries.

Beyond the razzle-dazzle, the Power Team employs time-honored evangelistic techniques. The offering plate is passed, in addition to a $2 per person "suggested donation" at the door. Power Team t-shirts, drink bottles and videotapes are sold at tables in the hallway. An emotional appeal goes out to all souls present who aren't sure of their eternal fate, and everyone in the room, head bowed and eyes closed, is encouraged to raise his hand and pray along with Mr. Jacobs to "ask Jesus into your heart."

The Rev. Andy Hill said the mess in his sanctuary is worth it, if just one person commits himself to Christ. Mr. Hill will surrender all for the Gospel at tomorrow's 6 p.m. performance. He has agreed to lie down on a bed of nails, and have a huge block of ice lowered onto his chest.

Perhaps he'll recall what Mr. Jacobs told audience members a few nights ago.

"Guys, God's love is tough love," the strong man shouted. "There's nothing stronger, there's nothing more exciting in the world than knowing Jesus. Nothing."

The Power Team performs at 7 p.m. tonight and 6 p.m. tomorrow at Calvary Bible Chapel, 3740 W. Alexis Road. The Rev. John Jacobs will preach at 9 and 10:30 a.m. services tomorrow.
A quiet group of 13 Buddhist Tibetan monks brought "Thunderbolt Energy of Destruction" from India to Findlay this week, and offered to aim their power at negative energies that keep people sick, depressed, addicted or accident-prone. They offered the service as part of a "Sacred Earth and Healing Arts of Tibet" weekend of culture, arts, and religion that continues through Monday at several locations in the Henry County seat.

For a "suggested donation" of $50 or more, two monks performed the ancient Dorjee Namjom ritual, a three-step spiritual cleansing that dates to the time of The Buddha himself — about 600 years before the birth of Jesus Christ. The half-hour sessions, held at the Findlay Mas- sotherapy Clinic on Lincoln Street, were strictly private, and booked solid for weeks in advance. The Blade attended one on Thursday morning.

The woman in the straight-back chair closed her eyes and let go of the morning.

Images of Findlay, the medical massage clinic in an antebellum brick house, the birds chirping outside the darkened window, and two red-robed Tibetan Buddhist monks behind a table spread with ritual items — all dropped away as she relaxed into the seat.

She followed Lobsang Gendun's voice. The monk's story, read from a print-out, took her to blooming lotus flower, with a full moon shining from its center. Inside the roundness sat a man, smiling and strong, the embodiment of compassion and raw power.

Tibetan Buddhists like the 13 monks visiting Findlay freely use creative imagi- nation to help others overcome life's problems. The holy writings of Indian and Tibetan Buddhism are full of religious fantasies, descriptions of true enlighten- ment and deliverance from the burdens of conscious living. These ancient techniques are folded into "creative visualization" or "guided imagery" practices used by many modern faith groups, as well as psychological treatment programs.

Lobsang Kalden, a bigger man with a bright yellow sash, joined the healing rite with a complicated, low-pitched song, something akin to an auctioneer's, punctuated by a ritual bell.

The assistant described the god-man in the imaginary lotus.

"Feel," he said, "as he reaches down his hand and touches your head."

The bell rang in rhythm to Lobsang Kalden's low singsong. The big man rose from his chair and moved toward the woman. She kept her eyes closed.

The monk sent a stream of holy water from a bronze vase onto the crown of her head. It trickled down her part, then off her forehead. The other monk held a basin below her chin, and caught every drop.

The dark energy she brought there with her, the negativity she'd collected over the years from living and non-living powers, was swept away by this Vajravidaran power, Lobsang Gendun explained. Diseases, obstacles, depression, allergies, all were being cleansed as a bolt of virtual, divine power moved through her body.

Another kind of baptism, she thought.

She breathed deeply, hoping for the best, but not feeling very different. She peeked into the bowl beneath her chin. There stood a little woman with a pointy nose, formed of whole-wheat dough, soaking up the water in the bowl.

Wasting no time, the young assistant pressed a ball of the same dough into the woman's left hand.

"Again, close your eyes. Touch this to the places where you have pain or problems," Lobsang Gendun said. "And visualize that pain passing into this dough."

She felt a little foolish, but touched the soft ball to her temples, recalling Mon- day's headache. She laid it against her throat and chest, and wondered if she'd need her ubiquitous wintertime asthma inhaler after this. She even reached down and touched it to her left foot. Maybe this could help cure the long-term damage done there by a horse's hoof two years before.

"Press the ball in your hand now, and make sure you leave the impression of your fingers there," the assistant instructed.

She did so. He took the little ball and flung it into the pot with the dough figure. The doll was by then soaked to the waist in the cleansing water — a totem meant to take the woman's place, absorb her pain, right her wrongs.

Atonement, she thought. A powerful, primitive form of symbolism that dates back beyond Moses's scapegoat, and the animal sacrifices of Abel and Abraham.

"We'll get rid of these at the end," the monk explained.

The teacher began again just then, so the woman quieted her mind to follow him again to Vajravedara, the beautiful, powerful, man in the vision. Next would be a sweeping-out, the teacher said, of whatever darkness might remain after that initial cleansing.

He described the great rays of healing light that shot from Vajravedara, hook-
shaped, catching up all the remaining pollution and sending it flying from her, "like a flock of birds flying before a pursuing hawk."

Lobsang Kalden’s deep staccato began again, and the bell rang even more insistently, clanging along with the steady cadence of his voice, calling on “the indestructible power that destroys all negativity.”

When she peeked again, the woman saw the lama standing up behind his altar table, waving a hand-sized fan of straw and peacock feathers in her direction, clanging the bell, calling out a minor-key psalm. Outside the window, she thought she heard the songbirds flutter into flight. From a room down the hallway came the muffled clang of another bell.

The bells, incantations, flying things — an exorcism, perhaps.

“Next visualization is very short, and meant to protect you,” said Lobsang Gendun. “Imagine it adding a new layer of protection to your body, keeping out any new illness, disease, obstacles. Lobsang will touch you with the dorjee, and the power of Vajravidaran’s protection will spread through all the regions of your body.”

The senior monk held the heavy gold symbol in his hand and continued his rapid-fire prayer. The woman felt the hard metal touch her head, both shoulders, her back, abdomen and knees. And her left foot.

The symbol represents a lightning bolt, but its decorations give it the appearance of a tiny, ornate barbell. In this ceremony, it symbolizes the male principal, the technique and training needed to put knowledge to work for mankind. The bell, meanwhile, stands for the female energy, the wisdom and knowledge behind the ceremony.

All things must balance one another, Lobsang Gendun said. Balance the method with the wisdom. Examine the motive behind the action. Question the principals you say you believe. Strive for enlightenment, and you’ll find yourself working not just for yourself, but for others.

After a sprinkling of rice grains and mustard seeds, the ancient healing ritual was finished.

Lobsang Kalden handed the woman a picture of Vajravidaran, the deity he’d described for her visualizing, embodiment of the cleansing energy he’d called upon. He repeated with her the words printed beneath:

Nama tsanda vajra drodaya hulu hulu tishta tishta...

This is your new mantra, he told her, a prayer that calls down the clarity, protection, and power of Vajravidaran. In moments of doubt or fear, she can repeat the prayer. She can wear her new, hand-twisted “protection cord” (“blessed by 1,400 monks at our monastery in Tibet”), and sip some of the spring water she’d brought, to which the Master had added some of the blessed water in his vase.

And, he said, if she follows the Middle Way of Buddhism, perhaps she may someday break away from concerns about food, clothing, health, and providence. Perhaps she’ll find inner peace, the monk said. The woman may find that her path to enlightenment began Thursday morning in Findlay.

And once she attains perfect freedom, she might follow the practice embraced by these Tibetan monks, and by missionaries of every stripe from all over the world: She’ll draw strength from the great peace, then step back into the chaos, and try to bring others home to her newfound faith.
AN oblong box took shape over two weeks' time in the garage behind St. Timothy Episcopal Church in Perrysburg. Mark Hreben and the Rev. Gene Pearson worked fast, sawing and binding oak veneer to plywood.

Randy Deye's time is running out. Within days, they know, they'll see their friend's body laid inside this coffin.

Randy is a former food service manager, husband to Macie, dad to Todd and Tyler.

He is 36 years old, and he is dying of brain cancer.

"The homemade coffin is a footnote in a story that began Nov. 5, 1992, the day a doctor's diagnosis divided the Deye family's life into "before" and "after."

In the three years and six months since, Randy finished up the business of living. He took his family to Disney World and on a cruise, and welcomed baby Tyler just over a year ago. He and Macie, a hairdresser, bought a small house in Perrysburg, affordable enough for a working widow. As his time draws near, Randy struggles to tie up the last loose ends. Details like coffins, epitaphs, and funeral music.

"It's not as crazy as it sounds," Randy explained. "People should go about dying the way they feel best, and not let anyone else tell them how they should feel or act. I wanted to have all the details taken care of before I went. I think this will make going a little easier."

The coffin might be the most visible of Randy's small rebellions against the behavior expected of a dying man.

"This project was Randy's idea," Mark explained. "He wanted to do this with his friends and family. He wanted to be here, be part of every step." He paused. "Randy is my brother-in-law. But you can drop the "in-law" part. Any more, he's my brother."

Randy's not morbid, Mark said. He's realistic. He's meeting death head-on.

"I'm participating in my own death," Randy said. "I feel like I've taken a part in my dying. I've personally taken a part."

"There's a little positive in every negative, and maybe that's the upside to cancer," said Macie. "People with cancer have time to say goodbye."

Randy isn't the first person to leave this world on his own terms. Earnest Morgan, an 89-year-old resident of rural Yellow Springs in Greene County, literally "wrote the book" on self-designed dying some 35 years ago. In the late 1950s, his Quaker church developed a private "burial society," dedicated to caring for church members from their final illness through burial. Their low-cost, hands-on approach created a national sensation. The society's written guidelines evolved into A Manual of Simple Burial, a book that's sold more than 275,000 copies in 13 editions since 1962.

Forty years ago, Mr. Morgan said, the subject of death was taboo in proper society, just as sex had been in earlier days. But starting in 1989, a series of studies confronted this "national denial."

Then followed exposés of crooked funeral practices, and analyses of how hospitals handled — or failed to acknowledge — the needs of dying patients and their families. Church-run memorial societies like the one in Yellow Springs emerged throughout North America, offering families low-cost alternatives to "traditional" funerals.

As Americans come to terms with the inevitable, their near-death experiences are no longer considered delirious visions. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's On Death and Dying normalized grieving with "the stages of mourning."

The hospice concept took hold and flourished. An academic discipline called "Death Education" was born.

And books like Mr. Morgan's Dealing Creatively With Death now provide readers with practical "how-tos" on creating their own meaningful rituals, effective goodbyes, and wooden "burial boxes" for their remains.

April 27 was sunny and windy. It was the Saturday Randy inspected the half-finished casket and said good-bye to St. Timothy's Church. His doctor didn't like the idea of his leaving the hospice, but Randy never let anyone tell him what to do.

While the staff struggled to balance his pain-killing medication and load him into a car, Gene and Judy Pearson had an easy chair set out on the rectory driveway. When Randy arrived, they moved him as gently as possible into the chair and covered his knees with an afghan. Randy chain-smoked as Gene and Mark brought the coffin near for him to inspect.
He touched its smooth sides.
Mark explained how the inside would soon be cushioned with foam rubber, and lined with blue denim.

It took a moment for Randy to respond. He took a long drag on his Marlboro Light.

"It's good. Real good."

Across the parking lot, parishioners had gathered in the church for spring cleaning. A construction project had left the sanctuary coated in dust. As the morning went on, workers trickled in ones and twos across the lot to the rectory drive, to inspect the coffin and greet the man behind it.

Hands were shaken and careful hugs exchanged. The coffin story was told several times. Tears flowed.

It's a family project, Mark explained. Russ Snyder, a St. Timothy's vestryman, helped draw up the plans. Macie's friend, Chris Gress, is sewing the fabric lining. Cabinetmaker Rob Stobinski, Mark's boss, finalized the plans and cut the wood. And Todd Hafner, Mark's brother-in-law, engraved the coffin lid with Randy's last message to this world. A labor of love, Mark called it.

Finally, Randy asked to be moved to a wheelchair and to the church, to view the renovations himself.

Mark wheeled him through the church, while workers waved and shouted hello. Parked before the big white altar, Randy leaned back and stared at the new wooden cross mounted on the wall. Slowly, his eyes closed.

Mark wheeled him outside, back across the blacktop. He bent over the chair and planted a quick kiss on the top of Randy's head.

"I love you, buddy," he said.

Randy smoked another cigarette as Mark and Gene carried his coffin back into the garage.

He last worshipped at St. Timothy's the Sunday after Easter. He walked into the 10 a.m. service and stayed for the coffee hour afterward. His head was criss-crossed with surgical scars. He walked with a cane, but he stood up straight, smiled, and chatted.

Later that week, the sutures from his February surgery became infected. A new CAT scan revealed the tumor was growing again. Macie asked Gene to re-start the coffin project.

Randy isn't overly pious, but the church figures big in his family's life. Randy is active in a men's group, and Macie is head of the children's ministry. It was church folk who shuttled Randy back and forth to therapy sessions, and took turns sitting up with him at the hospital following surgeries. During these final days at the hospice, ladies of the church care for Tyler and Todd, while Macie and Randy finished up.

On Monday, a church member helped 9-year-old Todd tell his class at Frank Elementary School his daddy is dying. He told them about the hospice.

"They have a window in the ceiling there," he said. "You can look up through it and see almost clear to heaven."

"It's all very depressing," Randy said. "But this makes it easier, I think, to go. I see my wishes are being followed through."

Talking isn't easy for Randy, but he wants to make sure no one considers him a tragedy. He sat on a bench in a hospice solarium, held his wife's hand, and tried to explain why he planned his death down to the last coffin nail. His left side is paralyzed and long silences separate questions from answers. But he wants to talk about this, he said. People should know.

Planning ahead is healthier, much more positive, he said. It's easier on his wife, knowing she won't have to plan a funeral in the welter of grief that must follow his passing. It empowers him, during a time when doctors and therapies seem to dictate every move.

"At even my first diagnosis, and through the whole time, I never let [doctors] tell me how I was supposed to feel."

"And dying? "They never approached that."

"It's sad to have to go . . . I'm certainly not in denial about that," he whispered. "I'm ready. That's what this [coffin] project is about, clearing up my details. I fought the cancer. I can accept what's happening. I've come to peace with it now."

Macie leaned toward him and whispered into his ear.

"You're doing great, Randy."

He soldiered on. He wasn't finished.

"God's been here with me, every step of the way. I never got mad at Him."

Randy said he's not looking forward to dying. But he knows what awaits him, once he takes that last step.

His eyes closed. He bit his lip and raised himself up, and whispered.

"I expect to see my savior."

The Deyes decided to prepare for their own deaths 15 years ago, when Macie's brother died suddenly. The young couple was faced with making their funeral arrangements.

"We were just numb with grief, and we had to make so many decisions in that state," Macie said. "We promised each other that if we got back then we'd never want to do that again. If we could, we'd have our funerals at home, like people used to do — they used to bury their family members in a plot in the yard, or up the road at the church."

Preparing in advance for death was once a common practice. "Memory and Mourning," a display of American mourning customs now running at the Ohio Historical Society Museum in Columbus, includes a video of an elderly Irishman who tells how families dealt with death "back in the old country."

His mother sewed her own funeral gown years in advance, he said. Each spring, she'd hang it on the line to air, then fold it back into its special drawer.

Lex Sanders, an old-timer interviewed in the famous Foxfire folklore series, said the custom repeated itself in the Appalachian hills of North America.

"They were some people that had their buryin' clothes made for 25 or 30 years. They made 'em and just put 'em back, and of course I don't guess they was ever ironed or put on. I know Granny Bingham had her burying' clothes made, and she made 'em with her fingers. And they buried her in what she had made."

Randy will wear his favorite Gap jeans, leather belt, and denim shirt to his funeral. His obituary is already written. He knows who will speak, what music to play. Macie has a CD of Phil Collins, his favorite pop singer, ready to roll. But many details are secret, she said. Randy wants people to be surprised.
"That funeral's going to shock some people, but it's going to be a real celebration of Randy," she said. "It's going to be a really Randy day."

Randy and Macie hold hands. They reach for one another with increasing frequency as the end comes close. The helpers around them draw back when they draw near to one another. Their time together is running out.

One of April's final evenings found them leafing through photographs of the coffin in progress. They stopped at a shot of Mark, who smiles over the open casket and makes a signal with his hand.

"That's from Star Trek, Randy explained. It's the Vulcan symbol for "Live long and prosper."

Randy wants two things on the lid of his casket, Macie admitted. He wants a cross on there. And his final, favorite little Vulcan irony: burned into the wood: "Live Long. And Prosper."

There at the hospice, Randy struggled to split his hand into the familiar salute. His fingers were puffy, and his left hand lay useless. His smile disappeared behind clenched teeth.

Macie's hand came over and covered his fingers, curled them into a soft embrace. Randy's eyes closed. He sighed, and a tear slipped from the corner of one eye.

Back at the minister's garage, Mark stopped hammering.

"Randy's on a journey, and he's taken us alongside," he said. "Being with Randy through all this, it's made a lot of positive out of a lot of negatives. It's helped us realize that death is just another part of our journey here. Randy calls this coffin his way of spitting in the face of death. It's an honor for me to be a part of this. We're fulfilling the last wish of a good man's life."
This morning, James Fox becomes a bar mitzvah, a "son of the commandment." A man, in Jewish terms.

He's 88 years old.

The step up to the bimah at Temple B'nai Israel is usually an easy step up for adolescent boys and girls, but many youths, for many reasons, delay or skip the months of Hebrew study required to participate in the ritual. Some come around later on, and become bar- or bat mitzvahs as adults.

Most don't wait 75 years.

'There must be something to it. Here I am, saying things that my people were saying 5,000 years ago.'

Mr. Fox, a downtown attorney still in practice, said he knows why bar mitzvah training is a youthful pursuit.

"It's the Hebrew. Once you get old, it just won't absorb into your brain. I've never, never had such a difficult time learning anything before," he said. "I've been studying for two years now, with some of the best help available, and I'm still no good at it!"

Why did he wait so long? And why bother with it now?

"Good questions," he answered. "It's a long story. And there's no real answer at the end, anyway. It was just time to do it."

Mr. Fox's "long story" is tied closely to Toledo history. It includes sojourns to Hungary, homeland to the Fuchs family, and a trip up Woodland Avenue, where he grew up with an Americanized last name alongside fellow immigrant children. He was proud to be the only Jewish kid in a neighborhood of second-generation Irish, Italian and Polish Catholics, he said, but he never understood why being Jewish made him unique. His family celebrated Jewish holy days, but didn't go to synagogue often. He was a decidedly secular Jew, he said, skeptical about all things religious.

But there was never any doubt he'd marry within the faith. He met Shirley Goldman at a dance at the University of Toledo, at the start of the Great Depression. They dated through law school and his early career, and finally married at Shirley's family shul, Temple B'nai Israel, Toledo's Conservative congregation. The Goldmans kept a kosher kitchen. It wasn't hard adopting their dietary rules for himself, Mr. Fox said: Memories of his mother-in-law's kreplach and roast beef brisket still can make his mouth water.

He went to services at B'nai Israel a bit more often after the marriage, but most Fridays and Saturdays were spent playing violin or clarinet in swing bands, or turning his wife on the dance floor, he said. He and his Shirley could cut a rug. The years passed happily.

"Nobody pushed me to go to services," he said. "They knew I'd rather be out playing music, or golfing." Theirs was a typical American Dream — he established himself in the commercial law field, and she was a saleslady at businesses founded by her father and brother. They had no children of their own, but were always celebrating some holiday or other with family members. But slowly as time went on, the big family grew smaller.

Then, in June of 1989, his Shirley died of cancer.

Suddenly alone, Mr. Fox sought solace at B'nai Israel.

"It's our tradition to 'sit shiva' for a month — attend a memorial service, morning and
evening, every day for the first month, where they sing the Kaddish prayers for the dead. Really, traditional people do it for eleven months, even. So I started to go, just as a way to deal with my grief, you know. I went in the evenings. It was the same service, over and over. But somehow, I started feeling a peace. I started thinking about it, and I realized this religion has been around for 5,000 years. There must be something to it. Here I am, saying things here tonight that my people were saying 5,000 years ago.

Seven years have passed, but the memory of mourning still fills his eyes with tears.

"I couldn't get out of bed in the mornings, but I went every evening. I went there for the entire 11 months. I gained that peace. I found those services really did me good."

In order for Kaddish prayers to go on, a minyan, or quorum, of ten worshipers must be present at the synagogue, Mr. Fox explained.

"I learned how necessary it is for some people to make a point of attending, so we can carry on the memorial prayers," he said. And after those months were up, I started to attend the [regular] services more. I went from being a religious spectator, to someone who was needed."

He was elected to the board of directors at B'nai Israel. He took the first chair position in the Jewish Community Orchestra violin section, and joined other cultural and synagogue-related committees.

"Then I saw a bar mitzvah class graduate, and saw some ladies and men doing that, and I said, oh. Maybe I'd better start learning some Hebrew, so I can join in the spoken prayers."

The Beginner Hebrew class at Jewish Community Center convinced him he was no linguistic scholar. He dropped out a time or two, but finally joined an adult bar mitzvah class with four women. This morning, all five will stand before the holy scroll and read aloud a portion of Hebrew scripture for a crowd of friends and relatives.

"I'm still no good at Hebrew, but those girls are wonderful," Mr. Fox said, his voice full of conviction. "We're going to go up there and read that Haftorah, and we're going to do fine. I'll get by. I'm not happy with myself, but I've gone too far to turn back now. I've got invitations printed up and sent out, and a bunch of relatives coming in to see me do this."

Mr. Fox said he doesn't want anyone to fuss over his achievement.

"I'm still not sure why I'm doing this," he said.
The labors of Lange, Bowman, and DeLille might have passed into obscurity if Pope John Paul II weren't such a record-breaker when it comes to minting new saints. The present Pope is fond of native-born, ethnic Christians who can better connect their communities to the worldwide Catholic church, and he has canonized or beatified more than a dozen such holy people each year since he took the papal throne in 1978.

"All three of these women were educators who recognized that knowledge, both secular and spiritual, means power," said Beverly Carroll, head of the Secretariat for African-American Catholics. "It's not well-noted, but African-American women have had a profound effect on the church in the United States."

Sister Theo Bowman, a member of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in LaCrosse, Wis., died only six years ago, but the nuns at her convent are digging into her past and hoping for the miracle that will put their sister on the calendar of saints.

Ms. Bowman was born in Yazoo City, Miss., in 1938, the daughter of a local doctor who could afford to send her to parochial schools. Her early exposure to Catholicism led to her conversion at age 12, and her entry to the convent at age 15. She was a natural leader, according to Sister Maria Friedman, and quickly earned doctoral degrees in literature and linguistics. Even though she was the first and only black member of the community, Sister Theo seemed to find her identity there. She taught at several schools, founded a black literature studies program at Catholic University, and helped to found the Institute of Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University.

But it is for her vocal support of black spirituality that she's best remembered, and the advocacy of ethnic identity she expressed in hundreds of workshops, concerts, dance studios, and classrooms. Sister Theo was diagnosed with terminal cancer in 1984, but she kept going. In 1987, her work and many national awards landed her a spot on CBS's "60 Minutes." By 1988, she was using a wheelchair, but she used her time then to write several books and record an album of spirituals. She died in 1990.

"I bring to my Lord and my church myself," she said. "My black self, all that I am, all that I have, all that I hope to become, my history, my culture, my experience, my African-American song and dance and gesture and movement and teaching and preaching and healing."

Sister M. Virginia Fish of the Oblate Sisters of Providence in Baltimore prays every day for the recognition of Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange. A special prayer has already been written for the purpose, and the Mother Mary Lange Guild actively campaigns for her.

Mother Lange was a refugee, a black Hispanic who fled with her parents to Cuba from a revolution in their native San Domingo, now the Dominican Republic.

No one is sure how young Elizabeth got to Baltimore, but she came in a wave of French-speaking countrymen and brought along a generous inheritance. It was 1813. She was a free black woman in a slave state, and she immediately used her money to establish a school for immigrant and slave children of color.

In 1829, after 10 years of poverty and labor, Ms. Lange was asked by Baltimore's archbishop to found a religious order dedicated to the education of black children. He said he'd provide funding and oversight if she would encourage other "women of color" to join the congregation. And so was born the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the first congregation of African-American nuns in the history of the Catholic church.

It was a dream come true, Sister Virginia said — for years Elizabeth had longed to dedicate herself to the church, but black women and men were barred from taking holy orders. She and three other women were called to the task, and set about educating and evangelizing throughout black Baltimore. They bought and freed slaves, some of whom joined their ranks. They ran schools, an orphanage, and a homeless shelter; and nursed the sick during an 1832 cholera epidemic. One of her schools, St. Francis, is now the prestigious St. Francis Academy, one of Baltimore's finest private schools, according to Oblate Sister Naomi Smith.
But prejudice still reigned in Baltimore, and the city's Catholics participated. Even as they worked to further the Gospel, sisters were made to worship in the basement of St. Mary Seminary, out of the sight of white society.

Mother Lange's glory days ended when her priestly patron died. Money dried up, and pupils and fellow nuns abandoned the mission. Racist neighbors shunned her and her outreach efforts. As the years went on, Mother Lange "gave of herself and her material possessions until she was empty of all but Jesus, whom she shared generously," one biographer wrote. She died in 1882.

"It is time! Long overdue time!" said Sister Virginie of the canonization process. "The church has been woefully delinquent in recognizing the holiness and contributions of North Americans of African descent."

Sister Naomi said the order has spread throughout the United State and several Central American and Caribbean countries. Mother Lange's devotees over the years wrote testimonial letters to the Baltimore headquarters, telling of healings and answered prayers and attributing them to the founder's intercession. No one less than Cardinal William Keeler, then-president of the National Council of Catholic Bishops, urged the Oblate Sisters to start filling out Mother Lange's canonization paperwork.

Henierte DeLille may be the best-known of the three saintly candidates — her name appears in several books on African-American history, under "religious leaders."

Members of the Sisters of the Holy Family, an order of New Orleans nuns, recently hired Virginia Gould, a specialist in the history of "Creoles of color" to dig into ancient city records and collate Ms. DeLille's life story.

Young Henriette was born on the bayou in 1813, and raised to be the mistress of a rich white man, a profession followed by her mother and sister. She learned to read and write in two languages, dance, sing, and charm her way into society's upper echelons.

Ms. DeLille's life changed at age 14, when she befriended a French nun working among the city's blacks, both slave and free. The sister befriended her, and soon Henriette was helping nurse the sick and teach the children. Other girls, black, white, Cuban, and Creole, joined the work, but their efforts to organize a religious community failed. Another, later effort was squelched by the local civil government because of its interracial membership.

Meantime, Henriette abandoned her mother's career path, saying "one hour with God in church is worth more than all the vanities found in the ballroom." Her mother offered to send her to a convent in France, where racial prejudice was less severe, but her daughter insisted on serving her own people in New Orleans.

Finally in 1842, with the support of a visionary French priest, Henriette and her fellows quietly organized the Sisters of the Holy Family, an order restricted to free black women. The city's white nuns objected, so the new nuns were forbidden to wear habits. The order was not acknowledged by the white society, which called them simply "a group of pious colored females."

We off Creoles supported them nevertheless, and the sisters gathered in New Orleans to adopt the sick, and oversee its orphans. When a state law shut down all religious groups of people of color, New Orleans chose to enforce it against the Holy Family Sisters.

The Civil War era almost spelled the end of the little order. Mother DeLille died in 1862, and the new archbishop forced the sisters to become his personal servants, in exchange for permission to accept former slaves into their ranks. In 1871, a habit was finally designed and publicly donned by the sisters — almost 40 years after their foundation.

Today, Holy Family missions in Africa and the Caribbean join the New Orleans community in supporting Mother DeLille's canonization, Ms. Gould said.