



# ST. JOHN THE COMPASSIONATE NEWSLETTER

CHRISTMAS 2008

Merry Christmas from St. John's  
Celebrating Joy To The World For 21 Years And Counting



“When the doors of Heaven are open,  
so the doors on Earth are also open.”  
Mother Gavrilia







Country dancing at the Mission

## Volunteer Appreciation Night

On November 22, 2008 our annual Volunteer Appreciation Night was celebrated with country dances and a live 5-piece band! A very alive dance caller led all into the steps of several new dances. Gerald Dwyer received the prestigious Peter Stire Award. Presbyteria Maria, Board President, gave the keynote speech. Everyone dined to fabulous fried chicken, potato salad and buns, fries and assortment of cakes. The food was generously provided as a gift by George of "Chicken Joy".



George of "Chicken Joy"



Presbyteria Maria, Board President



mmm... chicken



Gerald Dwyer receiving the Peter Stire Award

## Saturdays at the Mission

Saturdays at St John's are a bit different from other days. We don't have a formal meal, such as lunch or dinner, instead a "buffet" meal is available as and when people come in. There are the usual regulars and others who find their way to St John's for the first time. A quiet Saturday can be 30 people, a busy one 60+. Another difference is that the food is prepared by groups who come to involve themselves in the work of the Mission. The groups vary quite a bit.



One Saturday it can our faithful regulars from St George Antiochian church who now are well known to their friends at St John's. Another well known regular group comes from "Meet Market". "Meet Market" folks are responsible for another feature of Saturdays at St John's, "the tour". The tour includes an introduction to the life and work of the Mission as typified by the icons of the saints in the chapel (bring your coat for this in the winter) and an introduction to the bakery (and a chance to lighten your wallet from all that too-heavy-to-carry change).

We have been happy to welcome young groups, from OCF at U of T, some local (and not so local) Coptic churches and our own St Silouan's. We encourage smaller groups of 5/6 people as this allows for greater interaction with the regular community at St John's. Aspiring groups/individuals are welcome to come for "the tour" to find out what it is all about. Book early or you could be disappointed!

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## Christmas-Making Room For God And One Another

We lived some intense moments as we approached the winter. The sudden news of City Funding being cut out for our winter night program. Would our doors be closed to the most vulnerable people (2847 last year)? Then we heard how some of them went to City Hall and “raised” their sorrow and anger at this decision. Then the ceiling at the Thrift Store, on the very feast of our Saint John the Compassionate, started to fall. Through your prayers no one was hurt. The death of street people we knew and who were part of last year’s winter hospitality touched our hearts with sorrow. The near flood that could have been electrically disastrous at the bakery. The tap in the kitchen that leaves us without water for days as no one can seem to find the broken part. Vicky with cancer; Janice who every Friday seems to go to a funeral. The new and creative ways for personal tensions, like the day we almost had a racial incident over who got bacon (and the hole that miraculously appeared in a wall after the “battle of the bacon”). The guy who promises to fix your walls and then cleans you out of all your tools and the money you paid him as a down payment. The man, who all the while he is stuffing himself at our table, curses us for never having given him anything. These are just a few of the things it means to make room for God and each other at the Mission. It is real people, real broken people, all of us who somehow through God’s mercy find room at St John’s



Inn. Most days are difficult and without the cosy feeling that can come from helping others.

Nonetheless, the love I see in some of our regular volunteers who, for years now, come and serve at this Mission is deep, real and without any sugar. We also laugh, as sometimes the daily drama is just too intense. If God chose to be born in a stable then I think we qualify. I don’t place my sense of hope in anything that ultimately makes sense. I place my hope in that ultimately all that is - love. A harsh dreadful love, that is willing to be born in the midst of all this daily human chaos and misery where the only demand is that we make room for Him.

The cause for our oppression is interior. It comes from having shut out God. There is no room anymore for God. The rich are suffering, the poor are angry, but this suffering and oppression is much of our own making and we have put in the place of God denying systems to keep us locked into this finite 2x4 world. That is why at Christmas, as throughout the year, making room for God is the condition of being able to make room for one another. Prayer, the icons, the celebrations of the Church, all the visible signs of our faith, are concrete ways to make real room in our neediness for the Infinite One.

Without God there is no birth at Christmas. This is the lesson we are trying to learn and that the realities of the Mission somehow give us no choice but to embrace.

This is the mystery of this feast that we see how true it is that without God there is no humankind, and that humankind cannot be without God.

*This is the real meaning of Christmas.*

*Anonymous*







## Memorial Meals

Coping with the sudden death of a loved one is always a struggle. Some Greek Orthodox families have turned their grief into an opportunity to do something for others here at the Mission. It is a traditional Orthodox practice to offer a meal to the poor on behalf of the deceased and thus bring relief to the soul of the departed.

The families paid for all the food for a dinner, helped to cook it and, after a memorial service in the chapel, served it to the community gathered at the Mission.

Our thanks go to them for these beautiful acts of mercy.

## Sitting With The Saints

The job of the Church, as Metropolitan Hierotheos says, is to make individuals into persons. A truly alive person is what we call a Saint. A Saint is not someone necessarily who is perfectly adjusted, respectable and productive. I believe in fact that true holiness needs human weakness and brokenness to be manifest. Today I see each day real saints on the fringe of our society. I discover saints where most don't even bother looking. For example: the other day a woman came and sat beside me at lunch. I did not like this person, she always seemed to have issues. Something made me stay and not rush off to the next very important task that of course I should be doing.

Slowly she just started to talk. She spoke about how today she was feeling lethargic and then wondered if this would lead to laziness which is the door to many harmful sins. She looked at the food and said, but thank God I still have a good appetite but again that could still lead to forms of gluttony? She spoke of the soul as if she had just read the Philokalia (a book of spiritual writings of saints) a few moments ago. Then, as she looked at me timidly and saw I was listening, she spoke about how the person she shared a room at the house she is living in had just recently died. How disfigured her face was. How once she looked so beautiful. How tragic her death was, what a waste of life. For the first time apart from the teaching of the Orthodox Church I heard a street person talk about the necessity and value of praying for the dead.

My eyes were finally open and I saw for the first time Lucy's beauty. I saw behind her anxious face, the light that shines through her eyes. I saw what sorrow she must be carrying, what suffering her mental illness must cause her. Now she was no longer a "problem" but a sister, a beloved friend of God. Is this not what holiness is helping us to become more persons, more human and therefore more open to become God? Lucy in her poverty and weakness had shown me also beauty and vulnerability.

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## Bishop Hilarion's Visit

On October 23, 2008 Bishop Hilarion of Vienna and Austria, Head of the Representation of the Russian Orthodox Church to European Institutions in Brussels, Bishop Hilarion gave a talk on "Orthodox Mission in the 21st Century", at the Mission. He challenged us to find creative ways to "build bridges between the street and the church."



## St. John the Compassionate Mission

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