

What happens in an Orthodox church at 5 am Christmas morning?
At St John the Compassionate....

Waking up at 4 am on Christmas morning is waking up to a couple of centimeters of snow. It's hard to appreciate the beauty and fun of the perfect Christmas snow-fall as it takes extra time to get ready to drive to the Mission, and the streets are extra slippery. But it is beautiful in the night.

We wonder along the way if anybody will come for breakfast through the snow. The question is answered as we park at the Mission. Across the street we see a man struggling his bicycle through the snow and crossing over to enter the Mission.

When we first arrive at 5:00, Br Luke screens us at the door with great seriousness. I ask for a role and he suggests I take on the coffee station. Here I go, and here I remain for the duration. A prime spot to observe and be engaged at the same time. One of the COVID guidelines is that nobody gets their own coffee—a runner takes orders, and the coffee-station person (me) fills them so the runner can deliver. It's ideal for getting to connect with just about everybody, since kitchen staff also come from time to time for coffee or to replenish supplies.

Another volunteer is stationed just beside me at the entrance, and often she's a runner, talking with everybody and making sure they have what they need. Her name is Sarah, which makes me happy. I will be with Sarah all Christmas morning.

One of the early guests is a woman who's sitting at a table with her coffee and food. She has been reading the Christmas story to Br Luke from a bible. We exclaim at her beautiful Christmas sweater, and notice Sarah also has a fine Christmas sweater on. We admire both.

Another early guest is an older man who is sitting at a small table warming his hands and begging for coffee, one sugar one milk. He tells me it was too cold and wet to sleep last night, he just couldn't get warm. Slowly his feet and hands thaw. Somebody brings him a breakfast hot from the kitchen. He peers in and asks for pancakes and home fries instead – the breakfast he's used to. The volunteer kindly goes away to find out, and comes back explaining regretfully this is the only breakfast on offer: a gourmet combination of eggs, meat, toast, potatoes, fruit and more prepared by chef Alain and his wife Joanne. But the warming-up man wanted pancakes and home fries. He makes do with a heart-shaped ginger cookie that one of the kitchen volunteers found and brought over – every once in a while Sarah offers them to seated guests.

There is an empty chair in the front of the chapel where the straw is laid, for we are all by the manger where Christ is born. At 5:30 am, through the foyer comes a tall older woman with a walker; she is covered with snow, her ankles are bare, her shapeless pants shabby and too short. She greets everyone with a smile and a bright Merry Christmas. Br Luke helps her over to the empty chair and table in front of the chapel, and there she remains for the remainder of our open time, pleasantly sitting, receiving all offers of food and hot drinks graciously, and various people come and say hello. Leslie, one of the volunteers who's been here since 5, after awhile comes and stands 6 feet away and talks with her for over an hour, very engaged. I hear her telling the seated woman about her children and family.

When the breakfast time ends just before 9, the tall woman is assisted out through the refectory and, carefully, down the stairs by Nathan, where she is seen off like the queen at the end of a royal visit.

Around 6 am, Joanna arrives and adds to my joy by taking up a spot between me and Sarah. There I am between Sarah and Anna the rest of the morning.

Soon after, Derek comes in, disheveled, and sits at the little table and chair recently vacated by the Christmas-sweater woman and thoroughly disinfected by Leslie. He is sitting, but with great effort trying to get his pants to stay up. Jonathan, a volunteer, goes to find him a pair of jeans that fit, while Derek tries to remember his size. After awhile watching him, Joanna says to me: "He got out of jail this morning." How does she know? "Under his sweater you can see the orange jumpsuit." I look and see the flash of orange peeking out from under the sweater. She explains he had been banished from the Mission for awhile because of making trouble. "Today I told him he can come in as long as he's good. If he's not, I'll tell him to go. He knows me. He'll go." We ask Derek about this, and he says he was released from jail last night, Christmas Eve, at 10:30. He went to emergency at St Michael's Hospital and wasn't kicked out till 4 am. Then we were open at 5.

Later, she says musingly, "There was a shootout at Jones and Gerrard a couple of years ago. A guy was shot and killed. They arrested Derek for murder." I ask whether Derek was convicted of murder. Joanna: "No. He didn't mean to kill him." I raise my eyebrows; she does too. "I know, it doesn't make any difference to the guy who died."

Later still, Joanna tells me: "He grew up in Donmount," a low-income housing down the street from the Mission, "with 3 brothers. His dad was a drug dealer. One day some guys burst into the apartment shooting. He and his mom and brothers hid under the table."

About 5:30, Dennis arrives and sits at one of the little tables with a Christmas-themed mask on. He tells me his wife died last January; he cries as he shows me a photo of the memorial he made for her at home. He has a dog named Nugget – "see that Christmas card on the bulletin board? Looks just like that dog on the front." I am glad he has a companion at home.

Volunteer Jonathan, who's been one of the servers, stands for a long time 6 feet away from Dennis, chatting and exchanging stories.

Dennis is going to play Christmas carols on the piano. After eating and chatting, he sits at the piano and asks for requests, but doesn't take any of them – he wants to start with what he does play, which is a proclamation-style rendition of Joy to the World. The chords resonate throughout the refectory; people who'd stumbled in through the snow perk up listening. Dennis goes on to O Come All Ye Faithful, Hark the Herald, and many more.

I ask Joanna, if she could talk to the Mayor and make 3 requests, what would she ask for? Her first two answers are immediate. First, more housing. Second, more mental-health care; "they put them out and expect them to be fine. They're not. They do drugs." She can't think of a third thing; more St John's missions, I suggest.

P.Roberto wanders by and says to us, 'You let one person in and everything goes bad' – referring to the scowling young woman sitting in the corner by the back door from 6 am on. Refusing all offers of food and drink. Trying to wander around from time to time, told to stay put, not keeping her mask on. Joanna says to me at one point: "She says she's waiting for a skinny white guy." I point out there are a few around, but apparently they are not the one. Joanna and I make a bet as to whether he'll come or not.

Eventually, the woman is asked to leave if she won't keep the mask on. Half an hour later she returns. Immediately P. Roberto goes to her and asks her to leave. Angrily she replies: "I've got a mask on!" – holding it in her hand, bare-faced. Fr Roberto, Nathan and Br Luke surround her and briskly walk her out.

Joanna told me, back at 6 am, "my boys will be coming". They are members of Good Neighbours in Scarborough but come down for breakfast by the night bus, three brothers, 'my children', Gordon, Don and John. They arrive together at 7:30 and each is given a separate chair and table. They sit smiling, the 3 of them pleased as Punch to be there, glowing on everybody, saying Yes Thank You to every offer, and reveling in their hot breakfasts, fresh scones, and coffee. They look like brothers, each with big eyes, tousled gray hair, chapped faces and a wide smile. Sarah goes over and gives each of them a chocolate-covered heart-shaped ginger cookie. John holds his to his chest so we can see his heart is happy. P.Roberto comes over to give them presents – every guest gets a bagged present – Gord knows the gift in P. Roberto's hand is for him, but P. Roberto has paused to speak to somebody, just a few feet away, and stands there talking and holding the gift. Gord points to it, turns and looks, looks at us pleadingly, totally focused on his gift that's at hand but isn't quite coming over. Joanna laughs and says, "They're children – they're my children. Joanna has raised her own children and grandchildren, and babysat countless other children. "Mommy," John calls out. And Gord says "thanks Daddy" for the gift he has received at last from P.Roberto and is eagerly unwrapping.

John asks me my name, and when I say Mary, he asks without missing a beat: "and is your last name Christmas?" Later John tells a volunteer, "there are 500 guys where I work and they asked me to be Santa." Somebody else comes in and says Merry Christmas to him – "no," he responds, "happy birthday." "Right," says the first person, "it's Jesus' birthday."

As the brothers are getting ready to leave, John tells me, "I'm Christian, that's why Br Luke likes talking to me. You guys are kind of Christian too."

Since 5 am at least, the man in the corner by the kitchen, sitting at a little table, has been sleeping on his chair, his knapsack on his back. He's okay, Joanna assures me, he's nice. I ask if they give people a time limit; she says if they're homeless and need to be there, they stay as long as it's possible to let them. About 8 he starts stretching; someone brings him coffee, someone brings him breakfast.

A volunteer comes over, saying the washroom is in need of toilet paper. I point her to Joanna, who goes to the secret location to release the highly-prized roll.

Around 7 am, Lynn arrives, dressed smartly in black. Her father Peter volunteered here, Joanna informs me. She shows me his photo in the office, on the wall with those who have died and are prayed for at the Mission. Later I learn he died suddenly and very young, 17 years ago, and was a

faithful and dedicated volunteer. Lynn said she came to see what he'd been up to, and why he travelled so far to get here, and stayed and volunteered herself. His death 17 years ago was like yesterday. There are tears in her voice and eyes.

By 8 am, Dennis has left after playing his 'set'. We play radio music instead. Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer comes on, and everybody in the Refectory bursts into song along with it – a choir is born – belting out “had a very shiny nose” and in the Refectory we hear the echo, “Like a light bulb!” Eventually all together, “You’ll go down in his-to-reeeee!” People are laughing and almost dancing in their separate places.

Various volunteers say hello to me on various errands. Most of them introduce themselves and then say, “which day do you come?” So many people, it seems, come once a week to serve breakfast to the ‘homeless’. It’s a connection, a little island of community with a surprising array of members. The longer I am here this morning, the more I realize this is not just about filling stomachs, though that certainly is happening. People came here at 5 am for a reason. Relationship is here. Warmth is here. Humanness is here.

While coffee and breakfast are being served in the refectory, out on the front step coffee and take-out are being offered. The kitchen crew is simultaneously scrubbing and polishing the kitchen and new stove.

Nathan, one of the outdoor volunteers who frequently comes in with requests, came in early on and prepared his own coffee. Having received instructions, I informed him on his next visit that he would have to give me his order and I would prepare it. Not pleased, he went away coffee-less. Later he came back and allowed me to prepare it for him, with strict instructions as to amounts and timing. The next time, I remembered the original instructions and he added some more. By the end of the morning, he seemed to enjoy overseeing the process and making sure together that the coffee came out just the right temperature and flavour. At least, I hope he did; in any case, his enjoyment of the coffee returned.

Around 8:30 I say to Sarah, who has brought a request for one coffee with 2 milk and 3 sugars, one coffee with 2 milk and 4 sugars: “as the morning goes on, the sugar requests have been growing. Early on it was one sugar or black, then lots of double doubles, now this.” Next time she comes it’s with a request for “coffee black,” and we both laugh.

Sarah has been standing welcoming, serving, chatting, and serving some more, since 5 am.

Alain the cook comes to say hello and have a little rest. I ask him how he likes the new stove. “How come they get the new one and I get the old one?” he asks, and departs. Ordinarily he cooks at the sister location, Good Neighbours in Scarborough. He has spent the whole week thinking about, planning, and working towards, a lavish and tasty Christmas breakfast here. I have watched all morning as the generously-filled, carefully-arranged containers are eagerly received.

Leslie told me, back at 5:30, that she is here because her son comes to volunteer for the breakfast program every Tuesday morning, and she wanted to be with him today. He’s one of the young men who frequently come in and order a coffee for one of the guests on the front steps. At the end of the morning, he and his mother leave together bestowing Merry Christmases and big smiles on all.

At 8:30, Brother Luke gets everyone's attention and announces we have to be quieted down and cleaned up by 9 for liturgy. The next half hour is a flurry of activity – people leaving out the front door, people entering through the back door. Take-out service on the front steps continues along with kitchen clean-up till 11 am.

Finally, a little before 9, all is calm, all is bright, and quiet too. Ten well-distanced people are standing silently on the straw. Since two who were registered for liturgy couldn't come, Lynn has been able to stay. We stand in the straw, strewn throughout because we have been at the manger with the animals all along, waiting for hope to be born among us. Out of the silence, a single clear voice sings into the emptied refectory where guests from the wilderness have been seated like royalty and have gone back out into the snowy Christmas morning: "Thy Nativity, O Christ our God, has shone to the world the light of wisdom."

In his sermon, Fr Nicolaie tells us how good it was to arrive before liturgy and encounter joy in the refectory.

Just before the end of liturgy, Joanna's sharp ears hear something and she goes out to the front to check on something. Returning, she tells me: "He came." We smile. I forget which way the bet went, so I don't know who wins, she or I. I only know how much joy it has given me to spend the morning with her, and Sarah, and all, in this way.

- Mary

*Ed. Note: Ordinarily, the larger-than-lifesize fresco of Mother Maria on the Mission wall by the coffee station looks a little grim. But some noticed that this morning, she seemed to be smiling.
R.Daddy*

Dennis and Leslie



Dennis Plays Christmas Carols ... thinking of his Dog





Christmas Sweaters

P.Roberto Watches Over
Everyone while Guest
Relaxes



Kitchen Labourers



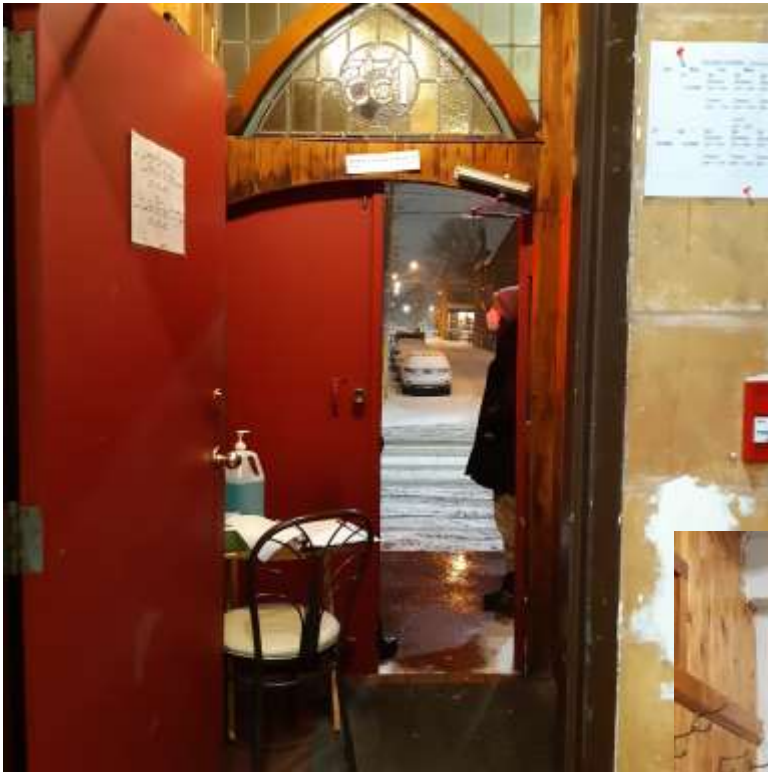
Doing Dishes, and Dishes,
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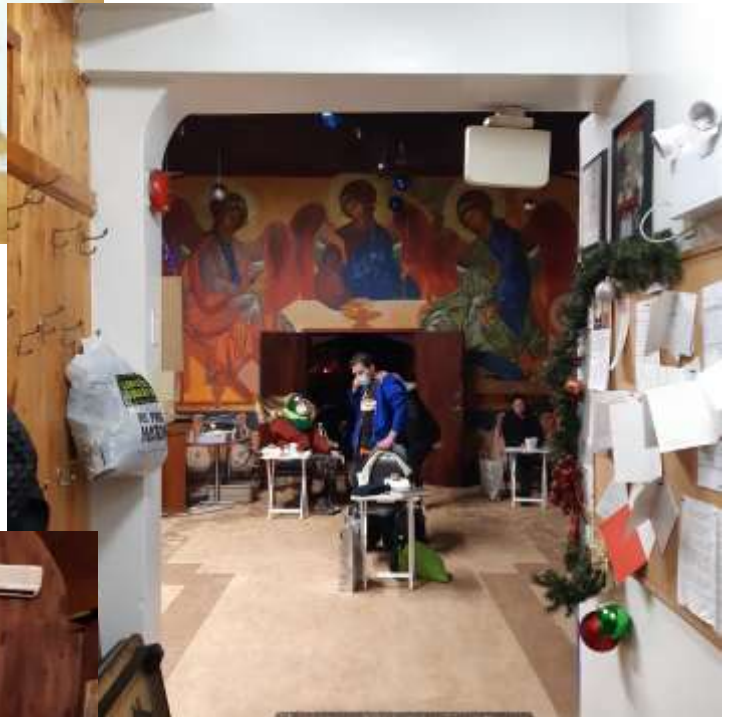
Luke and Guest Reading the Bible



Leslie Disinfecting



Doorway to the City



Doorway into the Manger



Doorway into the Heart of the Mission

Meanwhile, on the Front Steps, Coffee and Take-Away Meals are Being Served



Christmas Morning Snow at the Mission



Gord, Brother 1

John, Brother 2



Don, Brother 3



Table by the Chapel – waiting for a guest.... Till the
Woman with Walker Arrives



Good-bye and
merry
Christmas!





Joanna Finds the Toilet Paper

Volunteering Outdoors All Morning





All Are Welcome At
Our Table



Christ Is
Born ...
Glorify
Him!