

ST. JOHN

THE COMPASSIONATE
MISSION

'FROM UNDER THE BROOM-TREE'
NEWSLETTER • SUMMER 2022



St. John's Mission is a place for us all to rediscover that to become fully human, we need to learn to love. "God sells righteousness at a very low price to those who wish to buy it: a little piece of bread, a cloak of no value, a cup of cold water, a mite." — Abba Ephrem

One Wednesday, During Dinner

Kathy (not her real name) had tears in her eyes when we were answering questions before dinner at the Mission. Her reaction had nothing to do with the particular question, but was rather about something that had been triggered in her.

Later, as we were eating together, she shared her thoughts and her emotions. She said that at the next dinner, we should ask people a different question – “When was the last time you felt humiliated?” “That’s a good question, right?”

Kathy explained why she had thought about that. She had recently broken her arm. She already had a support worker and social workers assigned to her case, but now she had to accept not only support for

her mental health, but for her body as well. To be washed by another person, a stranger, in a situation of extreme vulnerability, and feeling ashamed of herself, brought into her soul the experience of humiliation. She explains: “You know, like how girls are sometimes ashamed of their body?”

Even while being ashamed of who you are, you are forced to receive the care of a stranger. This humiliates you. “The body, though,” says Kathy, “brings humility to the soul. You know, Jesus changes the humiliation into humility. God does that.”

She sounded relieved saying that. Somehow the memory of her humiliation had changed into something else.

— *Father Nicolaie*

Pilgrim of the Absolute

Maureen (not her real name) says she is thankful for the Mission. She says it has changed her life. When she moved into the neighborhood twelve years ago, based on seeing a local Starbucks shop, she thought it was for rich people. Suffering from a debilitating illness, she had moved into a public housing building down the street. One day Joanna invited her in for tea at the Mission, and “everything changed.”

Maureen comes from a large Ontario Irish Catholic family, one that’s produced many priests and religious. In her youth, one of her teachers told her parents that she had “a vocation.” In her words, this “really pissed me off – how could that person know such a [personal] thing?” Maureen has a somewhat jaded view of religion, and maintains an absolute distance from the chapel. Yet she’s obviously living something more extreme and experimental than her teacher could have envisioned.

Because of her illness, her life is regimented. There are set times when she can eat and drink, and perform activities. She takes pills eight times daily, and she’s limited about what she can do, and when and how she can do it. Her life is lived in absolutes, which are absolutely real. This is what brings her to the steps of the church.

She once observed that everyone at the Mission is trying to “survive.” This is

nowhere more true than when applied to herself. To survive, she depends radically on others, who are often quite vulnerable themselves. Her experience of the absolute has also given her an appetite for things that others would refuse.

She often battles her way to the Mission steps, and waits outside in all weather. She is available to everyone, in a vulnerable yet dignified way. She’s like a fountain that people gather around, and I’ve seen many people’s dispositions change on encountering her. Moms and children on the street approach her warmly; so too do homeless people, and people with addictions and other hard paths. Maureen calls people by their names, and they are disarmed by her. She conducts this ministry mostly from the bottom of the steps of the Mission, outside the front gate with her walker. She likes to joke about all the “unparliamentary language” she’s heard over the years there. “I like to be in the thick of things,” she says.

Maureen often has a unique look on her face. You see a lot of moody struggles there, and many other things that are harder to describe. They are the looks of someone fighting an unrelenting, brutal, battle for dignity and survival on the peripheries. Holy Mother Maureen, pray to God for us!

— *Brother Luke*

Please consider including the Mission in your will – don’t forget, “the shroud has no pockets.”

‘Needs list’ – can you help?

- apples; eggs; garlic; oranges; potatoes
- basil, oregano; brown sugar, white sugar; juice, juice boxes; regular tea, herbal tea; snack bars
- beans (for *arroz con frijoles*); boxed cereal
- canned chickpeas, lentils, tuna; canned tomatoes, sauce, paste
- jam, honey, condensed milk; pasta; rice
- tea towels, dish cloths; dish soap, laundry soap; vacuum cleaners; indoor house paint

“St. Lawrence was questioned by a pagan governor who had heard that the Church had a large storehouse of riches, and wanted St. Lawrence to give them over to the governor. St. Lawrence told the governor he would show him the storehouse of riches. He took the governor to the slums and pointed to the poor, the lame, and the ill and said, ‘These are the treasures of the Church.’”

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Refugees at Lourmel House

“Acts of charity pre-suppose a giver and a receiver, whereas mutual sharing generates fraternity. Almsgiving is occasional; mutual sharing, on the other hand, is enduring” — Pope Francis, ‘Message for the Fifth World Day of the Poor,’ 2021

Over the years, the community of St. Johns has taken in many refugees, in difficult situations. In the last years, the city (and the world!) have experienced more acute refugee crises. The visitors coming to the Mission’s Lourmel House have also increased in number, and frequency.

I remember sleeping beside a Muslim man from Turkey, who had been released from detention on the condition that he had a place to go. Coming directly from prison, there were fears in the community that he needed to be carefully supervised! He ended up staying for quite a while, volunteering with the children’s program, and working at the Bakery. Also, a family of seven from Afghanistan came recently, and amazed us with their prayerfulness and desire to help.

The third floor of Lourmel House has been converted into an emergency apartment for families with no place to go until a space opens up. When such families arrive at the Mission, they are introduced into the community, and to the ways of the House. They become a little community within a community. They are accompanied by whoever’s there at the time – Brothers and Sisters of Mercy, temporary and long-term workers, emergency guests from the community, and emergency homeless persons. Newcomers are given responsibilities in the House, and the Mission’s schedule. They are shown the common kitchen on the first floor, shared with everyone in the House. The accommodation is temporary, and the common kitchen is not always easy. But refugees are always grateful for a place that is safe, and bear the hope of a new life in Canada ahead of them.

In the beginning, they are often effusive about the community’s generosity.



Sometimes they stay for less than a week, other times months. The best experiences have come when the dynamic of generosity is replaced by one of mutual sharing. Often coming directly from the airport at the end of a difficult journey (one that was not lavishly finished by any means), it’s an honor to welcome them. It is limited in a way, but at the same time is very rich for those with the right vision.

Refugees invariably come to us in vulnerability, with many legitimate concerns for themselves and their futures. However, many find ways to give back to us, and this is always very moving. A young woman of twenty-two came to us recently from Colombia. She volunteered with the community while she was here, and afterward. She observed that Father Nicolaie seemed light-spirited for someone with his responsibility. “He goes around and talks to all the people and listens to their heaviness,” she said, “and he carries the weight of so many different moods. I could never

do that.” She is a capable person, and likely will be an intern at Romero House next year. Before she left, she hosted a gathering where she cooked Colombian food for the wider community. She taught us some new dances, and it was good to see our usual gatherings enlivened by the presence of her and her lively friends. Christ is risen!

— Brother Luke





The 'Brothers' regularly attend our seniors' food bank and daily breakfast. They share with us humour and a sense of simple appreciation for every detail of daily life. They are great teachers from the University of Life!

