News



by Peter Feuerherd

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It's Friday night in the first week of Lent, and on a drizzly, cold, late winter night here at St. André Bessette Catholic Church, the heat is not working. Neither is the dishwasher, so tonight will feature paper plates. By 7 p.m., the 25 guests, mostly men, almost all on the far side of 50, are filtering in, with each receiving a name tag. Signs offer a reminder of the rules: no shouting, no drugs, no alcohol.

Being a field hospital amidst the downtown of this growing, generally prosperous community can get complicated, acknowledges Holy Cross Fr. Tom Gaughan, while showing a visitor around the site for an array of programs, including Reiki, haircuts and a weekly movie for the homeless and the poor.

"It's helpful to have some organization," he says, noting that the rules are needed so that everyone who comes here for tonight's offering of broccoli and cheese soup can be provided with a sense of security and welcoming. Gaughan became pastor last year after decades of service at the University of Notre Dame in campus ministry and as hockey coach chaplain (he is a goalie seeking a team in the Portland area), and in parish ministry in his native New England.

Holy Cross Br. Joe DeAgostino offers volunteers for the evening an array of guidelines as well as a prayer for a man who recently died on the streets.

"We are not here to fix anyone," he says, a mantra repeated by other long-term volunteers and staff, who come from parishes throughout the Portland area as well as the University of Portland, a Holy Cross Fathers institution.

At the end of the food line, Archdiocese of Portland seminarian Justin Echevarria, a former Starbucks barista, offers some finishing coffee, tea or hot chocolate. He stands adjacent to a cardboard cutout of a smiling Pope Francis.

Francis' injunction that parishes should be a field hospital, in which the wounded are healed, gets lived out at this parish on West Burnside Street,* next to two rock theater venues and the city's tallest office tower. The church is barely recognizable, fitting into the urban landscape like another office building in a neighborhood which includes a series of social service venues for the city's growing homeless population. There is no space between the church and the street.

Portland, a city whose unofficial motto is to stay weird, has long attracted the unaffiliated, ever since it was established as a 19th-century logging village, bringing with it single men seeking a fortune in the Pacific Northwest. Today Portland is filled with quirky coffee bars and taverns, legal pot outlets, and a growing influx of young hipsters tired of the hassle of long commutes in southern California and other places. The result: rising rents and increasing homelessness, especially for the mentally ill and the drug addicted who crowd certain streets here.

Deonna Sayles, parish outreach coordinator, is a native Californian who came to Portland on a basketball scholarship at Portland State University.

She repeats the St. André parish outreach mantra: "We are not here to fix anyone. We're here to be compassionate." But that can also mean understanding where people can get help if they so desire. She recently attended a workshop on handling those diagnosed with schizophrenia, which she says was quite useful.

St. André Bessette has long seen its outreach to the poor and homeless as more than a nice add-on. It is central to the parish mission. The parish, which this year celebrates its centennial, was founded as a mission outreach of the nearby Cathedral church for returning World War I veterans. During the Great Depression, it grew in local fame for its outreach to the unemployed.

Now, nearly everyday, there is something being offered for the homeless and the poor, including morning breakfast, a food pantry, an art program, foot care and a

weekly movie.

Jack Jezreel, author of *A New Way to Be Church: Parish Renewal from the Outside In*, cited St. Andre as the rare kind of parish which makes its outreach to the poor a central focus of its mission rather than just another parish project.

One of the Friday night regulars is Jean, who bounces into the cafeteria hall with a French hello to Gaughan. Jean is 63, a Canadian native who landed in Portland, his ex-wife's hometown, after a pro wrestling career. As a wrestler, he would play a character named Castro.

He was a waiter who lost his job more than a decade ago. He has landed in some low-cost housing, but comes here to enjoy the company. The security helps.

"They really care for the people," he tells NCR. It's early in the month, so the hall is about a quarter filled, with 25 guests. At the end of the month, when food stamps begin to run out, the tables will be filled with nearly four times that number, says Jean.

Meanwhile, Jean sips at his soup, grabs a few sandwiches to go, and quotes extensively from Deepak Chopra, "Forrest Gump," and Wayne Dyer to anyone who will listen. "Always learning. That's what I've always been doing," he says.

Two days later, the parish gathers for Sunday morning Mass. It is a quiet service, attracting about 35, mostly regulars, a small and tight-knit community. The Sunday collection is just a little more than $1,339, with weekly bills listed as $4,358. The parish boasts only 80 registered parishioners and 300 or so connected as volunteers to the parish outreach.

That smallness is part of St. Andre's charm, says parishioner Judy Kittle, who has been coming here since moving to Portland from southern California in 2005.

"I wanted to come to a smaller church where I could live out my faith more," she says.

St. Andre's outreach has earned a national reputation; students, many inspired by the Holy Cross Fathers' network, come and volunteer from places such as Stonehill College in Massachusetts. They will spend a week sleeping on the floor of the parish building.

"One of our missions is formation," says Kittle, noting that the parish exposes those who come there as volunteers to the lives of the poor of Portland.

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Patrick Meegan came here from Chicago 17 years ago to live close to family in his retirement. He lives in a senior housing building, and first noticed St. André when it offered a Centering Prayer program.

Tom White comes for Mass and service to St. André from Vancouver, over the state line in Washington. He sees the parish mission as a simple one: "to offer a safe and peaceful place to warm up, an afternoon or a half day at a time." While the parish remains committed to hospitality, not overtly fixing the lives of its guests, visitors from the Veterans Administration and neighborhood social service projects are welcome, offering assistance and a possible way off of Portland's streets to those who want it.

One recent homeless guest was lugging around an oxygen canister, looking for an outlet to plug in his device. By evening he was settled into a permanent room.

It was a small fix to one man's problems, growing out of the hospitality the little office church offers routinely, proof that compassion can sometimes have a long-term impact.

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**This story was updated to clarify the church's address.*

This story appears in the **The Field Hospital** feature series. View the full series.
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