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A priest who stepped into the breach

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In an era when religion is too often cited as something that divides people, an article on the front page of the *Los Angeles Times* is a bracing reminder of the how faith can bind and heal.

"One God, Two Cultures" profiles Fr. Peter Banks from St. Lawrence of Brindisi parish in Watts -- a notoriously poor and violent section of South Los Angeles. Fr. Banks arrived in L.A. in the 1970s from Ireland -- and had never met a black person before in his life. His image of Southern California, he tells the *Times*, "was white. It was wealthy, it was by the beach. There was Hollywood and Disneyland ... The TV did not show Watts."

Immediately, Fr. Banks got to work, building ties with the African-American community. But as the decades moved along, Watts changed -- more and more Latino families moved in and shifted the character of the area. They competed for scarce jobs and scarce resources. Soon enough, violence sparked between African-American and Latino gangs -- reaching a crescendo in the gang turf wars of the mid 1990s that nearly tore this part of town apart.

Fr. Banks stepped into the breach, and has worked against the worst odds to bring both sides together. Things are calmer in Watts now, but it is an uneasy peace -- a peace that needs constant care and oversight. An unlikely caretaker of that peace is a 63-year old priest from a tiny Irish village several worlds away from Watts. His story is worth reading.

A week before the Catholic church launches a year dedicated to celebrating priests we seem to have run across a number of profiles of exemplary priest.

NCR editor at large Tom Roberts writes about Fr. Tom Iwanowski and my fellow NCR Today blogger Peter Feuerherd notes a story about Fr. John Powis.

It looks like we will have a lot to celebrate this year.

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