

Reflection on the History

25th Anniversary Dinner – St John the Compassionate Mission – June 9, 2011

by Mary Marrocco

It was a warm June evening, not unlike today; a Wednesday. 1992. A friend invited me to come to vespers and dinner with her at a place she loved. She took me over to a backstreet I'd never seen, across (she explained) from a housing complex called the Blake. Our destination was a small strip mall at 53 Blake St. We went through the little parking lot, littered with debris, and through a beat-up blue door. A hand-lettered sign overhead read: St John the Compassionate.

Inside was life! People, chatter, sounds, smells. Young children, adults of all ages. Cigarettes – allowed in those days. In the back, we could smell a meal being prepared. The scent was a little unusual as it was also mixed with – could it be – incense? Yes, to our left was a little chapel where vespers was about to begin. Before I could ask more, a large man with no socks welcomed me and gave me a booklet; he stood beside me during the service, showing me how to follow the service, and guiding me with his rich, beautiful baritone voice. This was Stanley, a neighbourhood man who'd long lived on welfare, one of my teachers who helped me learn to see. Stanley had many ways of teaching; it was he who one day creatively produced a carrot cake featuring whole carrots sticking out of the cake.

During Vespers, the evening light streamed in through the storefront window all blue and red, because on the window was painted the Annunciation: God's Good News of the Incarnation, here in this place where grinding, unglamorous poverty met the glory of God, in the lives of real people. I was in my second year of Ph.D. studies at the Toronto School of Theology. Little did I know, that night, that I was about to receive a university education of a new kind, teaching me what the church is.

After Vespers we crowded into wooden benches at the back, where the promise of a meal was fulfilled. I was amazed at how people knew each other's names, knew I was a stranger, missed Sue or Bob who was away that night, and took pains to make me feel welcome.

After supper, a slide presentation was shown, on an old fashioned slide projector. In it, I listened to the people of the Blake tell their own stories, and watched their faces and eyes on the screen, interspersed with images of the Trinity, Christ, the Divine Liturgy. I remember seeing slides of Edna and hearing her telling how she came every day and peeled potatoes and put them in a big pot. She also told the painful story of her upbringing and her life on the streets of Toronto. But here she'd found belonging, usefulness, companionship. Edna was in the room that evening, having peeled the dinner potatoes.

I afterwards spent many more such evenings, and days, as like my friend I quickly fell in love with the place, and became a regular volunteer, and eventually a staff member.

This first-night scene came back to me several years later, when St John the Compassionate Mission found itself homeless. This was long before the word "homelessness" was in vogue. After eight or nine years of service in the area of the Blake, St John's had outgrown its rented home. Partly because the rent was being raised, it seemed, every couple of weeks or so. By now there was a bakery as well as a drop in, kids' activities, women's program, youth activities, a farmer's market, icon-making, all sorts of things, and we were overflowing our space. To our delight, we were offered a permanent home in a church across town. Should we take it? Yes!! We packed up (a loooooong job after eight years of living), rented a van, and moved.

But the deal fell through, though we'd given up the little we had in order to accept it, and we were left on the street with no place to go! For a while, we had vespers and hospitality on the sidewalk--an interesting way to meet people. We continued our prayer life as St William's School up the street from the Blake, which St John's had served while it was there, invited us to use a couple of classrooms for Sunday liturgy and meal. And we



worked at raising money to buy a new place, at the same time visiting all over town to see what sort of services were already available. Though an excruciatingly painful period, it was (looking back) highly useful also. When you're running a mission it's hard to take time to visit other missions. We had a chance to explore where we might be most useful, and also to get some sense of what was unique about St John's. We learned lots, not only from official services but from coffee shops, walking around, visiting, chatting. A rich time of poverty!

What was unique about St John's? The answer was pretty clear to me. The personal connection, the creation of real "community" --- not community in the sense of a lot of people who think the same, or a group of random individuals with a common interest; but community in the sense of the icon you see now on the walls of this refectory, people participating together in the welcome only God can give, and so discovering one another. I remembered the slide show, how the people who put it together clearly loved the faces and voices and stories of the folks who came to St John's--for their faces and voices were the centerpiece, and in them Christ's face was seen and Christ's voice heard. I remembered how Edna's story, in her own words, told me what St John's was; as with stories I learned later, like Doughnut Joe, and May with the heart painted on her face, and Jacquie whose one-year-old son David became the first person buried from St John's, and Alice and Rose and Larry and so many other known not by numbers, but by names and faces and lives shared. Prayed for in the chapel.

I'm not saying that no other city service values or loves the people it welcomes. But at St John's the people and their lives are the heart of the story in a way I've rarely seen elsewhere. Not as clients or the needy, but as God's beloved, who bring with them a blessing. The words of St John himself, written over the door: "Those whom you call poor and beggars, I call masters and teachers, for they and they alone can help us and bestow upon us the Kingdom of Heaven." St John's was always teaching me to see who people really are, instead of what they look like.

The second, connected, element is that people are welcomed, not by words but by a way of being, into the life of the Trinity--as I was that first Wednesday evening. Our longing for Christ helps us welcome the stranger. Our standing with him at Liturgy helps us learn to be with each other.

Our year of homelessness taught me a lot about what St John's is, partly because we ourselves felt the sting of homelessness. We really didn't know what we were going to do--it was no act, no research topic, but reality! When we did finally arrive at this Canaan, 155 Broadview, I certainly had a much different way of welcoming the homeless -- much better able to stand with others in their lost places, to meet them from my own poverty, and to see their poverty and beauty.

We were, in the end, given a generous loan, enough to allow us to put a down-payment on this building. Since then, the loan has been repaid, the mortgage paid off, a new bakery established and a building bought next door for it, a thrift shop opened, many renovations made, the chapel built, all sorts of programs developed, many connections made with local community services. St John's has become known throughout the city and even in other countries for the unique work it does.

Some time after we moved into this home and made it our own, a guest who came for lunch one day helped me again to understand what we were doing. By then, we'd turned the dirt-filled crypt of a basement into office and pantry space; upstairs, the little kitchen had been renovated into an industrial one, the main room had been transformed into a refectory, and the apartments at the back into an adjoining, beautiful wood-panelled chapel. While we were at the Blake, we tried to raise money to raise the ceiling of the little strip-mall chapel, so that the neighbourhood poor could see the incense rise. Our prayers were fulfilled beyond imagination in the transformation of two floors of apartment building into a truly gorgeous chapel.

On this day, in the lunch line-up, I got chatting with a woman who said she'd come to lunch because she used to live here, on Kintyre Street, in one of the apartments at the back. "Let me show you your apt now," I said, and led her through the door that now linked it to the refectory. She went in with me and, like so many, gasped when she saw it. I realized that out of our homelessness, a rooming home had been made into a home for Christ and his homeless.

All this has happened first of all through the presence of these people and this life of prayer. And with the often-hidden support of donors...the donations are the earthly reality that make it possible, and keep it going, a breath of air in a polluted city and a large glowing lamp lit in the darkness of a city where poverty and need increase daily.

A year or two after we –incredulously--moved into this building, I was introduced to a book called Facing East. Published in 1997, by Frederica Matthews-Green. Several of us who were volunteering at St John's passed it around eagerly; we had a waiting list (we couldn't afford to buy it on our own, sorry Frederica!) and I remember it was one of those books I read almost at one sitting. Had Frederica been to St John's? Apparently not! Yet she could show me so clearly how what was unique about St John the Compassionate had all along been: the life of Orthodoxy. It's not "just" a mission; it's Orthodox Christianity lived in this place among these people, lived thoroughly, comprehensively, in the flesh and blood and dirt and addiction and violence and meal-serving and dish-doing and volunteering and service and fellowship and joke-swapping and the lived lives of Broadview and Queen in Riverdale, Toronto. Thank you Frederica for helping me to see what I'd been in the midst of without fully understanding it. How delightful and God-given that you should be here with us for our 25th anniversary of life!

If I may be so bold, may I thank you and all here, for your invaluable support of this shared life, in the names of Edna, and Jacquie and her baby David, and John her brother, and Doughnut Joe, and Rose and Alice and Stanley and Diane and Tracey and Helen, and all our masters and teachers who bestow on us the Kingdom of Heaven.