



From two Toronto priests, the gift of bread: Fiorito



By [Joe Fiorito](#) Columnist
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The two priests have just met, but Fr. Roberto doesn't miss a trick. He asks Fr. Hernan to say a blessing at the staff lunch. Fr. Hernan, quick on his feet, begins to improvise: "From this little corner of Toronto, the gift of bread."

I confess.

The meeting was my doing.

Fr. Roberto Ubertino is a practical priest whose good works underpin his faith. He runs the St. John the Compassionate Mission — it is Carpatho-Russian Orthodox — on Broadview near Queen.

He feeds the poor, opens his doors for an out-of-the-cold program, and offers regular mass; the miracle, for me, is the business end of the operation. St. John's Bakery provides jobs with good wages and benefits for some 30 people who might otherwise be on welfare.

Fr. Hernan Astudillo is also a practical priest. He serves the Latino community from the Anglican Church of San Lorenzo, on Dufferin St. south of Lawrence.

Hernan and his congregation have built a community centre, and a Spanish-language community radio station; every year they send cash, food, tools, clothing, as well as used school buses and used ambulances, to El Salvador and other countries in Central America.

The two priests do similar work, but they had never met, so I made the introductions.

And Roberto invited Hernan to lunch at the Mission — a bowl of vegetable soup, superior when brightened with a bit of salt, and also some of that bread.

Roberto began by asking Hernan about his work.

Hernan said, “We started 12 years ago, at the moment when there were two earthquakes in El Salvador.” There are many Salvadorans in his tiny parish; everyone knew the extent of the disaster.

Hernan said, “No one did anything, no other church. I was just ordained. We started a project. We were cooking rice and beans, making frijoles; we raised \$70,000.”

If that sounds simple, it is.

Hernan said, “With the money, they built houses in El Salvador. They established a little town, San Lorenzo de Toronto.”

To date, Hernan’s parish has also sent 48 used school buses and 30 ambulances to Central America, and a lot more money raised from the sale of rice and beans.

I asked Hernan about the radio station. He said, “When I came here, I didn’t understand the language. I was playing my pan flutes in the subway. I was feeling we didn’t have much radio. I was ordained in 1999 and in 2000. I applied for a radio licence.”

It is, as far as I know, Canada’s only Latino community radio station.

Hernan had similar questions for Roberto, who said, “We started in a little storefront in public housing; we opened the doors and children started coming.”

They outgrew that place, and were forced to move; for a time Roberto and his volunteers did outreach from park benches. Eventually, the place on Broadview — it had once been a Pentecostal church — opened up.

And what of the bakery?

Roberto said, “One of our people had been a baker. He lost the bakery in a fire. He was sleeping out front, in his car. He started by making bread for our meals, and then he made bread to sell in the neighbourhood; little by little, it developed into social enterprise.”

Thirty people now work there, earning decent, competitive wages; they make 3,000 loaves a shift, and they support themselves, and they pay taxes.

Roberto said, “Work is a human need and a human right. Work expresses who we are, and it is very healing.”

Also, the bread is very fine.

After lunch, Roberto showed his new friend around. Hernan’s eyes lit up at the sight of the oven. It is a massive Italian beauty, custom-built.

Hernan, impressed, said, “One of our symbols is the pupusa, a tortilla with cheese. We say with bread we can build anything in the world.”

I expect these two to cook something up together.