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Food and Warmth for the Poor
Mexico Beginnings
VICS Responds in a New Way
Contents

3 From the Editor
Face to Face with Jesus
Pat Fitzpatrick CSSp

4 Reflections
Barney Kelly CSSp

6 Francis Libermann —
Annual Remembrance
Barney Kelly CSSp

9 All the Places I Have Been
Pat Doran CSSp (Interviewed by Peter Bugden)

12 I Hear Mary Reminisce and Muse
Pat Fitzpatrick CSSp

14 Food and Warmth for the Poor
Matthew J. Kuna

16 Mexico Beginnings
Paul McAuley CSSp

18 Gerry Scott CSSp —
A Passion for Life and for People
Paul McAuley CSSp

20 Deacon Doyle Brought a Smile
to One and All
Mickey Conlon

21 Food for Thought

22 VICS
An Evolution of How VICS Serves
Joyce de Gooijer
Jesus had phoned to say he was passing through town and wondered if I’d be at home. I said “Sure” ... and then wondered what I’d let myself in for. “In for” — Is that correct grammar — ending with a preposition? Would he call me out on the venial stuff? I hope he won’t get into the mortal.

Part of this house is a real mess ... maybe we’ll just stay in the front room.

He rang the bell. I hurried to the front door. Should I genuflect? ... Or kiss his hand? ... Or ...? We shook hands. I must have kept him there at the door, because he asked, “Can we sit down together somewhere?”

Well ... we got talking. “I like the scenery through your window,” he said. Now that he had drawn my attention to it I had to agree. The leaves were bursting out nearly all along the branches. We sat in silence and took in the view.

Then I began to think I was missing a wonderful opportunity. It’s not every day he and I get together.

“Lord,” I broke the silence, “are you happy with the way the church is going right now? ... What do you think we need to do to promote Catholic Education in Ontario? ... Lord, maybe you’d like a glass of juice or something? A beer? ... it would only take a minute to get one from the fridge.”

“Relax,” he said “I just want to sit here, the two of us, and enjoy the view. Do you like the way my Father in Heaven continues to shape and reshape those clouds and how the sun plays hide and seek behind them?”

Time was passing by and he’d be leaving before we got into any serious stuff about the Church and Catholic Education and Social Justice.

“Well, it’s good to see you again,” he said. Again? “How are things?” How are things? Doesn’t he know that already?

He went on. “You know, a lot of people invite me because they want to get my opinion on this, that, and the other. All I’d like is someone who’d just sit down with me, spend time with me; someone who doesn’t feel he has to entertain me — someone who’s just there. You know — really present.”

More silence. Then he nudged my shoulder. “Who do you say that I am?”

I started by telling him what some of the deep theologians were writing: “You are the eschatologically manifestation of the ground of our being. You are the complete revelation of the Trinitarian, Christological and Ecclesial mysteries of our lives.”

I could see his eyes glaze over and his mouth open. He said, “What!”

Then he burst out laughing and shook his head. “You humans! I try to make it simple and you insist on complicating everything. Just be still now and again and know that I am God.”

And with that he got up and gave me a big bear hug.

“Til we meet again,” he shot back over his shoulder as he made his way out the front door.

“Til we meet again” — I wonder when that might be ... or where. You never know.
Dawn

I did Lough Derg twice. It is a penitential three days in Ireland which involves going to a remote island associated with St Patrick. The main components are prayer and fasting. The prayer was largely accomplished barefoot over stony ground; the fast consisted of one “meal” a day of black tea and dry toast.

The participants were a motley collection; the elderly, some quietly bowed down, others seemingly in their element amidst the privation; young people too with petition in their eyes and gratitude in the way they smiled.

The all night vigil is my abiding recollection. As some of us gathered outside, it was cold and dark and damp. I will never forget the first light of dawn. Our huddled group was transformed by the sight of it. We had known darkness — maybe in ways we had chosen darkness — but ultimately darkness does not hold sway.

“In the tender compassion of our God the dawn from on high shall break upon us.”

(Luke 1:78)

When all is said and done, we don't know the half of it.

There is a feeling that throughout our life we work things out. Our early hope may have aimed too high. We have learned to compromise. Our lethargy fitted us like a comfortable shoe until a taste of tragedy jolted us into a new urgency and effort. In general we were too easy on ourselves, but we cared about people and we reached out to those who needed a helping hand. We didn’t protest or lobby or run for election, but we arrived at a sense of what was fair, that we were ready to vigorously defend.

We may then, after many years, have arrived at a personal stance that we consider to be decent, at a way of dealing with people that we deem to be honest. This is no mean achievement. Each step of the way has stretched our generosity. Each turning point has demanded painful sacrifice. Surely God will be pleased, may even reward us. True as this is, it’s only the beginning of the adventure.

St Augustine reminds us that God does not love us because we are good, but we are good because God loves us.
A shock to selfishness

Childhood memories may be unreliable in detail, but I can clearly remember a few incidents. In one, my parents had just given me a bath and I became sharply aware of how good they were to me. This disturbed me greatly and I began crying uncontrollably.

My parents were concerned and began searching the bath water for a sharp object and, finding nothing, started wondering if it could be something I ate. But my problem wasn’t physical. It was that I couldn’t understand the goodness shown me. I was beginning to realize that everything had a reason and had decided from my experience that this reason was self-interest. Not knowing the reason for my parents’ goodness to me made me suspicious and afraid.

John Shea says that we can divide our life into the time before we know who we are and the time after we know who we are. We come to know who we are when we realize that we are loved by God.

I feel I didn’t suddenly come to know who I am. Slowly it came home to me. I am grateful to my parents for giving me such a good start, for reflecting so well God’s love for me.

Whose earth is it anyway?

I share one other childhood memory. My father was doing some springtime gardening, preparing the ground for seed. During the day, while he was away at work, I decided I would help. So I got my little shovel, dug some earth and used a sifter to produce a pyramid of debris-free soil, ideal for receiving seed or bulbs.

My father was initially very appreciative, but the atmosphere changed when I raised the question of being paid for my labour. He didn’t see why he should have to pay for his own earth.

The truth of his position floored me. It had never occurred to me and I was crushed. (Where was the new cosmology when I needed it? The cosmos does not belong to us; we belong to the cosmos.)

When I got over my childish petulance (about thirty years later), I felt I had a head start in wrestling with the challenge of continuing creation. In our creative efforts, how do we fall into step with God and try to let a flicker of his graciousness come to earth?

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Today the word “ghetto” refers to a part of a European city where Jews were obliged to live. Francis Libermann knew life in the Jewish ghetto in Saverne, France, at the beginning of the 19th century. His father Lazarus was its rabbi – the guardian of its Jewish tradition. Francis was the fifth son in the family and he had a sister younger than him. His mother died when he was 11. His father remarried and had another son and a daughter.

In 1791 a very significant law was passed enfranchising the Jews in France. Previous to this they had been a barely tolerated group, outsiders who could not own property or take up a profession. They had become Frenchmen of the mosaic persuasion. But during Francis’ youth separation was still a sharp reality in Saverne. The sight of a priest in soutane, or even more when vested, caused Francis to run for his life.

Lazarus was in high repute as a scholar and was also highly regarded by the people. But he saw the move
towards French citizenship as an effort by the government to gain more control over the Jews by assimilating them. He saw this happening especially through mixed marriages and entering the professions. His own influence as a rabbi was slowly diminishing.

Francis’ eldest brother, 12 years older than him, was the brother who influenced him most. He became a doctor and broke his father’s heart when he and his wife became Catholics.

When Francis was 20 he went to study at the Talmudic School in Metz — his father hoped this son would become a rabbi. Samson was the brother Francis looked up to most, but his conversion to Catholicism came as a real bombshell to the younger brother. Francis was particularly influenced by Jean Jacques Rousseau’s writings. He wrote to Samson: “It makes no difference whether I am a Jew or a Christian, provided I adore God, or whether he is one Person or in three ... This is also why I excuse you for changing your religion.”

A cry from the heart
With his father’s permission Francis went to Paris. A friend of Samson, Paul Drach, a professor of Hebrew and also a convert to Catholicism, got him a position at the Catholic College Stanislas. But he became weary of not being honest with his father. His religious practice had virtually come to a standstill. He was keeping up appearances. Tired of a life that depended only on expediency, he decided to do a dangerous thing: pray again to the God he once knew — the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob.

“That moment was a very painful one for me: that deep solitude, that room where the only light was from a skylight, the thought of being so far from my family, my acquaintances, my country plunged me into a deep sadness. My heart felt weighed down by a most painful melancholy. “It was then that I thought of the God of my fathers and I threw myself on my knees and begged him to enlighten me concerning the true religion. I prayed to him, that if the belief of Christians was true, he would let me know and that if it was false he would at once remove me far from it. The Lord, who is dear to those who call on him from the depths of their heart, heard my prayer. In an instant I was enlightened. I saw the truth: faith penetrated my mind and my heart.”

He turns to God only as a last resort, but he turns to him with transparent sincerity. It is not important he is a tired man who has stopped running. What is important is that his cry comes from the heart. It is not important that he had to be crushed by sadness before he came to his senses. Everything in conversion is God’s grace — including the moment He chooses. This grace does not destroy, but only transforms him. Jacob’s ambition, his tenacity, his resourcefulness, his tact, all the inner resources he developed in the service of evasion will not disappear. Instead, they will be transformed and purified in the service of life.

It is not important he is a tired man who has stopped running. What is important is that his cry comes from the heart.
Seminary days
Soon after Francis’ baptism, he decided to enter the Saint-Sulpice seminary in Paris. His father heard about it and wrote a letter that reduced Francis to tears. But things went well until December 1828, when he had his first serious epileptic attack. His superiors arranged that he transfer to the Sulpician House of Philosophy in Issy, on the outskirts of Paris. His time was spent meeting with the students and helping them with their prayer life in small groups. Francis had arrived at a method of survival — even if it was a precarious one. When your big plan is thwarted, do something small.

But discouragement threatened — he was once tempted to suicide as he was passing over a bridge in Paris.

In 1839 the Eudists were re-establishing themselves after the turmoil of the Revolution and setting up a novitiate in Rennes. They asked the Sulpicians to recommend a novice master. They proposed Libermann. He went to Rennes in 1838 and stayed for two very difficult years. He felt a complete failure there, but some of his former students sought him out to lead a missionary adventure in the French islands of the Indian Ocean and Haiti. Francis went to Rome to propose the project to the Vatican. The odds were against him, but he was encouraged and permission was granted.

Dispelling discouragement
After a pilgrimage on foot to Loreto, he got news of his acceptance for ordination. A path was opening up in the wilderness. They founded the missionary society of the Holy Heart of Mary and in September 1843 the first missionary team (7 priests and 3 lay helpers) set sail for Africa. No news for a year — and then news of a disaster: all but one of the priests were dead. The surviving priest was carrying on with one lay helper.

“Most souls are lost through discouragement” — Francis’ advice to the superior of a convent. Time and again in his own life, he had to dispel waves of discouragement. Now was the time to regroup, not to withdraw. Eight months after receiving the bad news he was able to send a new team of two priests and one brother.

There was never a dull moment. One of the founding members of the missionary society, Eugene Tisserant, was killed in a shipwreck off the coast of Morocco in 1845. A year later the other, Fr Frederic Levavasseur, wrote a letter of discontent, asking for permission to join the Jesuits. It took him a year to get over this “temptation”. Libermann suffered from the pressure of leading the fledgling missionary society. He felt drawn to a life of solitude, but he felt chained to the missionary task.

His quiet perseverance reaped rich rewards. In 1848 his society merged with the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. Libermann became its eleventh Superior General responsible for preparing priests for service in the French Colonies.

His source of self-confidence
What was Libermann’s secret? What was the bedrock of his life, his survival, his success?

When his doctor brother was worried about his epilepsy and what it would mean for his future, Francis wrote back that the Lord looks after the most insignificant creatures: he feeds the birds of the field and “he loves me more than them. Are you afraid I shall die of hunger? Will he not find means to feed me also?” You may have to face all sorts of difficulties — but count your blessings first.

His commitment to a project, however worthy, came only when he was convinced that it was “God’s work”. This conviction allowed him to commit to the dream of Eugene Tisserant and Frederic Levavasseur. It was a real long shot, but he was convinced it was God’s work — and therefore unstoppable. He was prepared for all its twists and turns, its disappointments — as well as its achievements and joys. Being involved in God’s work was the source of his self-confidence — it allowed him to believe in himself.

So, as you face difficult decisions, all sorts of issues will crowd in on you to exert their influence. Give all of them your serious consideration, but make what God wants the determining factor in any decision.

Francis Libermann’s attic re-erected in its final resting place at the Spiritan General House in Rome.
All the Places I Have Been

Pat Doran CSSp

Interviewed by Peter Bugden, The Catholic Leader

"One day we buried twelve children ..." victims of war and famine, and as Fr Pat Doran thinks of them almost 60 years later the memories come flooding back, and so do the tears. Those children and thousands like them are close to the heart of the Holy Spirit Father nearing retirement from his Brisbane parish.

In the little Irish town of Rathnew, south of Dublin, he was once told he would never set foot beyond the altar rails to serve at God’s table. He has gone on to do exactly that for almost 59 years.

It seems Fr Pat’s used to doing what others tell him he can’t or shouldn’t do.

Determined to become a priest

Only last year, at the age of 86, he decided he wanted to go back to Papua New Guinea to lend a hand in missionary work there. Others, including some of his parishioners at Dorrington in inner north-west Brisbane, tried to convince him not to go and told him all the reasons why it wasn’t a good idea. He went anyway – for three months.

It’s a bit like when the young Pat was told he couldn’t be an altar boy. He went one step further and became a priest. Pat was the fifth of seven boys born to Lill and John Doran – a good Catholic family in Rathnew, County Wicklow. “All my six brothers were altar boys and when I learned the Latin to go with them on the altar, the lady in charge said, ‘You can’t go on the altar – you’re the biggest brat in the village. Never, you’ll never go inside the altar rails’,” Fr Pat said, laughing as cheekily as that little boy may have been, as he recalls that day. “When I came back for my first Mass as a priest, she was still there!”

Young Pat “never considered doing anything else” other than becoming a priest. “When I finished primary school – I went to the De La Salle Brothers – and the Brother interviewing me said, ‘What languages are you going to have?’ and I said, ‘I will certainly have Latin’,” he said. “He said, ‘Why?’ and I said, ‘Because I want to become a priest.’”

Fr Pat was 14 then, and halfway through high school he was accepted into the minor seminary by the Spiritans, or the Holy Ghost Fathers, as they were known in Ireland then. His love of the Mass attracted him to the priesthood and a desire to help poor people drew him to the Spiritans. He had read their magazines and was inspired by the stories about the missionaries.

Appointed to Nigeria

Ordained in 1959, Fr Pat and about a dozen other newly ordained Spiritans were sent off a year later on mission to Nigeria. It was tough and, after about two years, Fr Pat copped a bout of tuberculosis. “I was sent back to Ireland
and hospitalized for six months, and recovered and came back to Nigeria, and everything was good ... until 1966 and the Biafra War,” he said.

“Civil war started and the BBC broadcast an order that ... the British Government said all foreigners must leave. They gave us time — about four weeks. There were 300 of us missionaries there, and we refused to leave. The government and military had sealed off the whole Ibo tribe. All roads were closed, all airports were closed, all seaports closed. Nobody was allowed in or out.

“The year went on, and next year we had famine. We had thousands of people dying of hunger because there was no way to get food, and because of the war the people were not able to work their gardens.”

Flying food in
Meanwhile, one of the Spiritans back in Ireland hatched a plan with a contact in Portugal to hire pilots to fly food in for the people who were “starving in great numbers”.

The Catholic, Anglican and Lutheran churches joined forces to “fly in food at night, over the guns, onto a road in the jungle. And then the federal army discovered what we were doing, and they had an anti-aircraft gun ... and we had what we called an intruder, when you hear a bomber coming over to drop bombs on us,” Fr Pat said. “Five pilots were killed and they destroyed three or four planes, but we continued on.”

Tears come with the memory
As the famine stretched into the third year, the Marist Brothers where Fr Pat was serving discovered 300 children in the forests, separated from their parents and barely surviving. “They brought them to their place and almost every day we had deaths,” Fr Pat said. “Children were dying. We couldn’t save them. That was horrible. One day we buried twelve children.” Tears come with the memory.

Then a Red Cross hospital was bombed, and soldiers killed four doctors. “And we were warned, so we decided to leave and try to get help. Halfway out we were stopped by two jeeps, and soldiers jumped out and took us. The soldier that had me put a gun in my belly,” Fr Pat said. “I looked down and he had his finger on the trigger. ‘Me shoot you. You’re not a missionary, you’re a mercenary.’ I said, ‘No, but if you kill me I am a man of God and if you’re in a war and people are being killed, you’ll be killed. And if you’re killed, you’ll stand before the face of God.’ The finger moved.”

The young missionary was safe for now, but he was still in danger, being held prisoner for a further ten days. The soldiers continued to accuse him of “feeding the enemy” and still threatened to kill him. This only changed
after a public outcry over the shooting of the four doctors at the Red Cross hospital.

The soldiers’ superior officers told them “you’ve made a big mistake, a big mistake, in killing those doctors. Release Fr Doran’. So they put me on a plane and they said, ‘Get out of here. And if you come back, you’ll be shot on sight.’”

Here and there — and nearly everywhere
He heeded the warning and returned to Ireland but, after about four months, his superior, who was still in Biafra, asked him to go to Sao Tome, a Portuguese island off the coast of Nigeria, where the Spiritans stockpiled food and medical supplies for the starving people on the mainland.

Fr Pat’s job was to fly in regularly at night to check on the food situation and what was needed. He left two days before the collapse of Biafra in January, 1970. “There were 300 of us deported then,” he said.

After four years teaching in Ireland and youth and vocations work in Canada, Fr Pat served in Malawi, another poor nation in Africa. “When I came out of Malawi, I had a breakdown — post-traumatic stress,” he said. “We got no help after we came out of Biafra and all the horrors we saw there. When we got back to Ireland we covered up all our anger and grief, but it came back on us about ten years later. It wasn’t just me; it happened to all of us.”

Good years
Fifteen years ministering in Papua New Guinea, at Aitape and Wewak, were good for him. “Of all the places, I loved PNG — the people of PNG,” Fr Pat said. “The charism of our order is that we live among the people; so we get to know them very personally. The people of PNG are very likeable. It was a good time for me.”

The past 17 years in Dorrington parish have also been good for him. The Spiritans had ministered in the parish since 1970, and Fr Pat said the people have become “very fond” of them.

“As a human being, as a person, I have never been loved as much as I’ve been loved here — not because I’m great or anything like that but because the people are that way,” he said. “They really are very, very good to me.”

And Fr Pat knows God has been good to him.

“When that soldier wanted to shoot me … I was inwardly saying ‘Lord, I don’t want to be a martyr,’ but I was able to say to that soldier, ‘You may shoot me now but one day, maybe soon, you will stand before the face of God’. “The Lord has been very good to me. He has been very good to me.”

“We got no help after we came out of Biafra and all the horrors we saw there. When we got back to Ireland we covered up all our anger and grief, but it came back on us about ten years later. It wasn’t just me; it happened to all of us.”

Reprinted with permission from The Catholic Leader, Brisbane, Australia.
I hear Mary reminisce and muse:

They tell me Pilate asked the crowd,  
“What am I to do with Jesus called Messiah?”
Restless, tossing in the dark, Joseph used to ask me,  
“What are we to do with him, Miriam?”
On Calvary today I remember asking,  
“What am I to do with you once more in my arms?”

When you were taking shape within my womb,  
I pondered by the open window, puzzled by it all.
With Elizabeth I had a glimpse of what it meant:  
“The Mighty One has done great things for me.  
Holy is his name,” she said.

Why distant Bethlehem and not at home, among our own?  
Why shepherds? Newborn lambs they understood  
But fragile human birth ill met their awkwardness.
And then those foreign-speaking, courteously salaaming  
Star-struck men from far away.
Why gold and frankincense and myrrh?

Across the valley from our upper room last night  
Is Temple Mount where Simeon foresaw  
A piercing sword.
Twelve years later you asserted teenage independence  
And were nowhere to be found on  
Our return journey from Jerusalem.
Once more I heard your father’s voice:  
“What are we to do with him, Miriam?”

Then came the years of piecing it together  
In patient perseverance.
Back home in Nazareth they said you had my looks.
At Cana I knew what to ask of you  
When the wine ran low —  
You knew what to do with barrelled water.
I needed you when Joseph was no longer with us.
Then not long after he had gone  
You too were gone from home.
My widow’s question was:
“What am I to do without you both?”
One day the mother in me wanted you back home.
I baked the bread you liked.
I searched and found you
With the ragged and untrimmed,
With sinners, lepers, tax collectors, outcasts,
Children, bearded men and kerchief-covered women —
I had lost my only son to strangers.

On Skull Hill today I can offer nothing
Beyond my lap and my enfolding arms:
After thirty years I hold you once again.
In Bethlehem I placed you in that feeding trough
And marvelled at your sleeping face.
Now — they’ll take you from my arms
And place you in that tomb
For yet another sleep.

But that tomb will contain you no better than my womb.
The day after Sabbath you will be once again at large:
Dinner on the road, breakfast by the lake.
What was it in meals that so attracted you?
I baked for you through all those years in Nazareth.
Now I meet you once again whenever we break bread.
Is that why you chose to come among us
In Bethlehem, the house of bread?

This group of ours needs looking after:
My mothering begins again.
“The Holy Spirit will come upon you”
Was the explanation Gabriel gave.
Now in prayer I dare to wait once more
For this disturbing Spirit.

I often think of Joseph’s question,
“What are we to do with him, Miriam?”
I think I know the answer now:
“You have to let him go to get him back.”
At least I had to.

— Pat Fitzpatrick CSSp
Food and Warmth for the Poor

Matthew J. Kuna

This past January, I visited a college classmate of mine who now works in Manhattan. During my stay there, the city was practically frozen over after a snowstorm that closed its public schools. Though we trudged through nine inches of snow and ice to get from place to place, the trip was well worth all the hassle.

Walking toward Penn Station on the Friday of my visit, I came upon the Church of Saint Francis of Assisi — home to the Franciscan Friars’ well-known apostolate to the hungry of New York, the Saint Francis Breadline. Given that it was First Friday, I decided to stop for a few moments in the lower shrine church where Adoration was taking place. I took a seat in the back, as the pews of the chapel were almost half full.

Some in the congregation were obvious regulars to the First Friday devotions. An older lady to my left knelt on the tile floor and, grasping a wooden rosary in her tired hands, silently mouthed the words to her treasured prayers. A few minutes later, a businessman in an impeccably pressed suit entered and sat in front of me, removing a Divine Mercy prayer book from the side of his black briefcase (perhaps seeking a few minutes of peace from the chaos he faced at the office). A number of others sat in quiet prayer before the Blessed Sacrament.

A church of warmth, rest and safety

However, the majority of those gathered sat bundled in blankets, seeking warmth, rest, and safety from the frigid winds outside. A few clutched large garbage bags filled with personal belongings. Others wore hats and gloves, and closed their eyes for a little bit. One person even left half of a sandwich in the pew next to me. Although they were most likely not at Saint Francis that afternoon for the Catholic devotions, they appeared to be comfortable and even prayerful in the presence of our Lord, perhaps searching for a hope that they could not find elsewhere.

Sitting in that Adoration chapel, I became very aware of the ways in which I was encountering Christ. His Presence in the Eucharist is the supreme gift He gave the Church at the Last Supper, and gives us at every Mass. Christ is the Living Bread that nourishes our poor souls and accompanies us along the pilgrimage of earthly life. He was most especially present on the altar in that simple monstrance.

Yet in another sense, He was also present in the community of people around me, particularly in the faces that silently cried for help. Some were hungry or thirsty; others may have been naked or sick, alone or afraid. Perhaps they carry the crosses of poverty, homelessness, discrimination, addiction, family instability, or mental illness. They were the “least among us” in whom our Lord calls us to meet him. I was invited to see the face of Christ in that sacred space, a sanctuary from the coldness and bitterness that swarms outside. We truly saw God there. In awe, I sat in my pew and reflected on this.

The authentic Christian life unites our love for Christ in the poor with a love for his Real Presence in the Eucharist.

The authentic Christian life

Saint John Chrysostom reminds us of the deep connection between the Eucharist and Christ’s poor. Preaching once, he remarked: “For he who said: This is my body, and made it so by his words, also said: You saw me hungry and did not feed me, and inasmuch as you did not do it for one of these, the least of my brothers, you did not do it for me.”
In the polarizing times in which we live, we too often witness leaders who divorce their practice of faith from a robust commitment to the vulnerable in society. If we do not open our hearts to see the face of Christ in his poor, then we are not authentically living our baptismal call. Likewise, if our advocacy and social work on behalf of the marginalized are distanced from the sacramental life of the Church – especially the Sunday Mass – then we certainly cannot claim to do God’s work in the world. The authentic Christian life unites our love for Christ in the poor with a love for his Real Presence in the Eucharist. Nourished by the Mass, we are sent forth to proclaim Christ and to serve our brothers and sisters in his name.

Now is the time for us to commit (or re-commit) to living out this call as Christians. Many in our own communities have no shield from the cold of night or the hunger that seems to pervade our streets. Local shelters, food pantries, and outreach services ask for our assistance. Our Lord is inviting us to serve him by encountering those who need us most.

The Mass is the celebration of Christ’s saving work, namely his Passion, Death, and Resurrection. As we reflect on his Easter Mystery and grow closer to him in the Eucharist, we experience a perfect moment to seek the face of Jesus, both in the Blessed Sacrament and in his struggling brothers and sisters.

Our world longs for a healing that can only be found in Christ, the One who calls us to his Altar and to the peripheries to give of ourselves in his service. Now is the time to encounter him.

Matthew Kuna is a seminarian for the Diocese of Allentown. A version of this article first appeared on Seminarian Casual, the blog of Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary, Philadelphia.
When most Canadians hear about Mexico, their thoughts likely turn to sunshine, sandy beaches and holiday resorts — in places like Acapulco, Cancun or Puerto Vallarta. For those of a more political bent, Mexico probably brings to mind “the Wall” or “the Dreamers” and other contentious political debates south of Canada and the USA.

For the Spiritans, however, Mexico means one of our most vibrant missions that started literally “on a whim and a prayer” back in 1971. Three U.S. West priests — George Reardon, Patrick Townsend and Charles Coffey — were...
heading home to the States after their mission in Peru had closed in 1970. They stopped off in Mexico City where they celebrated the Eucharist at the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, asking her, if that was the will of God, to show them where they might work in Mexico in a place in keeping with the Spiritan charism.

After their visit to the basilica, they spoke to several people and were directed to the diocese of San Luis Potosi, a 19-hour drive north of Mexico City. The bishop welcomed them, but said that if they were looking for a place with the greatest needs, they should go to the three-year-old diocese of Ciudad Valles, badly in need of priests and missionaries.

In Ciudad Valles the bishop offered them some large parishes. When they asked, “Are there any other places with greater needs?” the bishop spoke of “a few parishes up in the mountains” in need of missionaries.

So they came to Tanlajas on the morning of February 22, 1971 — a market day. As they climbed the road near Tanlajas they saw many people going to market with heavy loads on their back. They looked like people who were over-burdened and needy, laden down by the loads they were carrying: their kind of people.

A small mud dwelling at the back of the church was the only parish house. A local woman had the keys. No running water, no light. They decided to stay, put up curtains to mark off rooms — and settled in.

A few days later they heard that on the previous December 12, feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Tanlajas All Night Adoration Group had spent a special vigil pleading with her to send them a priest. She sent them not one, but three priests.
Gerry Scott CSSp

A Passion for Life and for People

Paul McAuley CSSp

“A Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other” — one of the first pieces of wisdom I remember hearing from Fr Gerry in my novice year of 1981. Today, he might have upgraded it to “A Bible in one hand and an iPhone in the other.”

What Gerry was saying, of course, was that to be an effective religious or priest, one had to be fully engaged in the world, attuned to what was going on in people’s lives and families, along with the movements in church, community, country and the events, politics and issues of the world.

While the saying has always remained with me, it was not necessarily new or original. In 1848 the second founder of the Spiritans, Fr Francis Libermann, encouraged the clergy to vote, to take part in society and in doing so, bring gospel values to transform society for the better. Our Saviour Jesus Christ got into trouble for basically saying the same thing, even though there were no newspapers or iPhones in first century Palestine.

Fr Gerry was a people person. While not underestimating the importance and power of prayer, meditation and reflection — he knew that they were the tools for his ministry — the ministry itself was to people and for people.

St. Paul writes to the Romans: “The life and death of each of us has its influence on others.” We do not live in a vacuum, we are not shut away. Each moment of each day can bring us face to face with another person and the possibility of passing on the goodness of God’s grace to that person whether they be friend or stranger.

The Gospel of John recalls the comforting words of Jesus, “Do not let your hearts be troubled … there are many rooms in my Father’s house.” Gerry should have no trouble fitting in then, for while he was with us, he was a person of many rooms.

If you look at his CV, he was all over the place: Ireland, Trinidad, then the appointment to Canada — teaching in Toronto, hospital ministry in Hamilton, parish ministry in Guelph, studies in St. Louis, Missouri — then Formation and Novitiate in Connecticut and Farnham, Quebec. Off again at a later age in life to the very difficult ministry in Papua New Guinea in the South Pacific. Then Australia, back to Toronto at St. Joseph’s, Highland Creek, followed by St. Rita’s parish in Woodstock, Holy Spirit parish in Edmonton, and when called to help again in formation, Gerry left his comfort zone and ministered in Houston, Texas.

In the late nineties, he came back to Guelph a second time, and then for the past number of years, to the Cathedral and St. Stephen’s Chapel in downtown Toronto, and in Whitby. Yes, there were many rooms in Gerry’s life — he won’t have a problem with the many rooms in our Father’s house.

Growing up in the village of Elphin, County Roscommon, Ireland (population about 1,600) I wonder did young
Michael Gerard Scott realize he would travel the world and impact so many others?

A people person
God used Gerry’s personality to further his mission — he was a people person — just as comfortable talking with a woman at the market in Papua New Guinea as spending time with a seminarian in Houston, Texas.

A people person is someone who is comfortable in their own skin and has a positive outlook on life, even in times of difficulty. The prophet Isaiah reminded Israel in their troubled times: “Shout for joy, you heavens; exult you earth! You mountains, break into happy cries.” Yes, being human is difficult; it is not all lightness and smiles. We all have times of great joy, fun and celebration, but we are also hit with moments of sadness, pain and sometimes even despair. I was moved by the words in Fr Gerry’s obituary about his relationship with the Irish community here in Toronto: “He was always ready to assist any members of that community in both times of joy and celebration, grief and farewell.”

Thus far, perhaps you may think this homily is tending to be a canonization of Fr Gerry. No it is not. I lived with Gerry in four different Spiritan communities in Quebec, Papua New Guinea and Toronto. When you live at close quarters, you get to know people’s faults. I knew some of Gerry’s and he certainly knew mine. Knowing your own faults and accepting them is God’s way of making us compassionate human beings.

Gerry knew his faults, failings and limitations and because he did, he was the compassionate, caring, empathetic person whose life we celebrate today. St. Paul speaks of his faults — his “thorn in the flesh”. He did not like it, but it kept him grounded and kept him from boasting in himself rather than boasting in Christ. Gerry knew his fears, failures and limitations — they made him the compassionate person we knew.

I probably would have been kicked out of the Spiritans were it not for Fr Gerry. He saw me fail, he knew my weaknesses — maybe that I was not cut out to be a Spiritan priest. But then he looked on his own life and prayed upon it and decided to give me another chance. If it were not for Gerry, I would not be standing up here today in St. Joseph’s as a priest at his funeral.

Pope Francis has said: “The thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity.”

Gerry knew himself, knew people and had an understanding of our imperfections — the messy but beautiful business of being human. He brought all of that into his church ministry.

Gerry loved sports
I know that the members of the Gaelic Athletic Association (the GAA) who provide the honour guard for Fr Gerry, might be wondering if there is going to be reference to sports in this homily.

Yes, being a people person and fully engaged in life, Gerry loved sports. It was as natural to him as breathing. He grew up playing sports, he came to Canada and got into hockey here, but he always loved Gaelic football, rugby and hurling.

Many years ago, there was an important Gaelic football match being played in Ireland — only televised live in specific pay-per-view locations. Some of the Irish Spiritans from our Laval House on Victoria Park Avenue wanted to see it. Gerry asked me if I would like to join them. So we set out early on a Sunday morning to go to an Irish pub … I think it was Allens’s on Danforth.

I remember our late Fr Jimmy Dunne being with us. I thoroughly enjoyed the event, though I did not know what was going on. Every few minutes, after there was a loud cheer or an anguished groan, I would have to nudge Fr Jimmy or Fr Gerry and whisper, “Did something important just happen?”

Gerry, in spite of our time together in different places and ministries, I still don’t understand Gaelic football, rugby or hurling, but since I am a fisherman, I do have a sports prayer for you:

Loving God, when my final cast is made I then most humbly pray, When nestled in your landing net As I lay peacefully asleep, You’ll smile at me and judge That I’m good enough to keep!

Yes, Gerry, we are here today to remember you, your faith, your passion for life and for people. God will surely say, “You’re good enough to keep.”

So, until we meet again in our Father’s house, goodbye — our teacher, our brother, our friend.
Deacon Doyle Brought a Smile to One and All

Mickey Conlon, The Catholic Register

If there’s one thing Deacon Peter Doyle always loved to do, it was put a smile on your face. And the earlier in the day the better.

It’s one thing of many that will be missed about the man. Deacon Doyle passed away suddenly April 18. He was 78.

“Peter may have been the office accountant but he was more about people than numbers,” said Jim O’Leary, Publisher/Editor of The Catholic Register, where the Dublin-born deacon took care of the books for the past dozen years. “His self-appointed mission each day was to coax at least one smile out of everyone in the office before it was time to go home.”

Early morning traveller

It usually began early. Deacon Doyle was first into the office each day, making the trek by GO train and subway from his Scarborough home to The Register’s midtown office and settling in by 6:30 each morning without fail.

Deacon Doyle’s family knew only too well about his early morning habits. His youngest daughter Sunniva Lake said her father had usually done more in the early hours than most people would do all day. And he was quick to let his kids know, playfully of course.

“He used to tell us as kids, ‘I’ve done a full day’s work before you’ve gotten up’” she said with a laugh.

Little has changed. Lake and her family relocated to Saskatoon, where the sun rises later than Toronto. That gave her father the time to scour the headlines and current events and let her know what was going on in Saskatoon.

It was Deacon Doyle’s humour that set him apart though. He was quick with a joke and not afraid to share it with others. It was a family tradition. He was one of seven boys, all cut from the same cloth.

“All the Doyles were jokers,” said Lake. “They were so corny.”

A loving father

Family was of the utmost importance to Deacon Doyle, a native of Ireland who moved to Canada shortly after marrying Joan in Dublin in 1964. A loving father to Lake, son David and daughter Monique Parenteau, and grandfather of four, they were all near and dear to his heart. Lake says that when she and her siblings were away at school her father would send along care packages. He would always include an article to read, to teach a valuable lesson. It was something he continued with his grandchildren.

“He had a good heart. He would always give someone the benefit of the doubt,” she said.

A man who loved his Church

Aside from the jokes and the positivity that he always had on display, Deacon Doyle was a man who loved his Church. For years he served the Archdiocese of Toronto, first in the development office before taking on the role at The Register. He was ordained to the permanent diaconate in 1994 and served at St Joseph’s Parish, Highland Creek.

Fully engaged in parish ministries

Spiritan Fr Oliver Iwuchukwu said he was devastated when he heard the news of Deacon Doyle’s death. “Peter had been so much part of this community. He was fully engaged in ministries of this parish and was always available. He took his vocation to the diaconate very seriously.”

Like others, Fr Iwuchukwu was struck by Deacon Doyle’s positive persona. “He was very easy to get along with, always full of smiles, hardly ever said no to any request to do something,” he said. “We already miss him ... his death has already left a gap that is not going to be easy to fill.”

The same sentiment runs through The Register. “We’re going to miss him. But he leaves a lot of happy memories and lessons about how to go about our lives in a generous, caring manner,” said O’Leary.

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Food for Thought

In the global south, I speak about Argentina, there is a much greater emphasis on how things touch our hearts and not just our heads. In order to really persuade, in order to motivate, you have to somehow reach the heart ... Popular religion is imaginative. It knows how to engage, motivate and fascinate. It brings joy into people’s lives.

Pope Francis

This is a prayer we need to pray every day:

“Holy Spirit, may my heart be open to the Word of God, may my heart be open to good, may my heart be open to the beauty of God — every day.”

Pope Francis

When God comes among us, he doesn’t first of all clear humanity out of the way so that he can take over. He becomes a human being. He announces his arrival in the sharp, hungry cry of a newborn baby.

Rowan Edwards, Archbishop of Canterbury

In the global south, I speak about Argentina, there is a much greater emphasis on how things touch our hearts and not just our heads. In order to really persuade, in order to motivate, you have to somehow reach the heart ... Popular religion is imaginative. It knows how to engage, motivate and fascinate. It brings joy into people’s lives.

Pope Francis

Apostles: “Send them away to be fed.”

Jesus: “Give them something to eat yourselves.”

Apostles: “All we have is five loaves and two fish.”

Jesus: “Bring them here to me.”
Forty-seven years ago, after Vatican II, the Spiritans started VICS with the idea of giving lay people the opportunity for mission work. Who knew, that from a philosophy of listening, presence and service, volunteers would learn about community, justice, new cultures, and even more importantly, themselves.

Many volunteers have maintained contact and a kinship with those we served. Someone shared that they have family in three different countries — a place where they are unconditionally given rest and food to eat.

This made me think of how many places and people have opened their lives to VICS volunteers — they welcomed us when we were weary, fed us when we were physically and spiritually hungry and treated us as family. We may have gone overseas with the thought of befriending others, but ultimately it was us who were befriended.

We were welcomed into many communities: school and medical communities, remote villages, refugee camps, and families. By being present and listening we learned about those we served, and to the best of our ability we walked in their steps. As the bond of kinship grew stronger and we began to understand their lives, we may have been invited to walk with them. In an interesting and unique way, these kinships have played a significant role in the evolution of how VICS serves.
Responding in a new way

About 10 years ago, an interesting phenomenon began to unfold. Our kinship with others led to a rich, diverse opportunity for serving in many parts of the world. Through this service, we learned about dreams, desires and needs. While VICS was seeing a decrease in the number of Canadian volunteers we were meeting skilled, gifted indigenous people who were unemployed or had no opportunity for formal education. Responding to needs in a new way, the concept of in-country volunteers was born.

Rather than sending someone from Canada to volunteer, VICS began supporting trained indigenous people to do the job. People in-country continue to define their needs, and when possible VICS responds to those needs through financially supporting them. Rather than “forever funding”, VICS makes two-year financial commitments, supporting in-country volunteers with the hope of eventual self-sufficiency.

VICS is currently connected with 40 in-country volunteers in Mexico, Nicaragua, Tanzania, Gambia and Sierra Leone.

One volunteer

Meet Fatima, a degree nurse working as coordinator for Hogar Luceros del Amanecer’s “One Life at a Time” program. This program identifies young pregnant girls living in extreme poverty who do not have access to health care. One girl in the program is on her own, abandoned by her mother and living without her father who is working in Costa Rica, trying to improve the family’s economic situation.

VICS in-country volunteers aren’t any different from former VICS volunteers: they are teachers, administrators, health-care providers and trades people.

New look, same organization

Though VICS may have a slightly new look, we are the same organization as we always have been, serving people of the world though pastoral work, education, vocational training and socio-economic development projects. As Ann Johnson says, “Each step along the way we clear stones and obstacles, healing and refreshing each other. We listen openly to each tale of travel and hear proposals for the time ahead.”

And move ahead we do, slightly revamped, with continued hopes for Canadian volunteers, while at the same time building on the power of kinship and the in-country volunteers we serve.
No one can serve two masters
... We either serve God or we serve money

Families quarrel and sometimes plates fly
... I won’t speak about mothers-in-law

In the family there are difficulties
... But those difficulties are
overcome with love

Tenderness is not weakness
... It is strength

Differences always scare us
... Because they make us grow

We need to learn to listen

We have so much to do
... And we must
do it together