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## Dundalk, Ontario: My beautiful, quiet, sleepy, country parish

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# My beautiful, quiet, sleepy country parish

Peter Wayow CSSp

In the early 1970's, while in Paraguay, I and fellow Trinidadian, Fr. Neil Rodriguez of very happy memory, made plans for our life's spiritual journey, so to speak. First, we would give the best of ourselves to Paraguay — we would stay in Paraguay for most of our younger years.

Secondly, we planned to ask permission to move to the southern United States, maybe Texas, where the Spanish we had acquired in Paraguay would serve us in good stead. We took for granted that life in the U.S. would be less onerous than on the Paraguayan missions. And this would suit us just fine, (since our bodies would be more fragile) as we left middle age and headed toward the home stretch.

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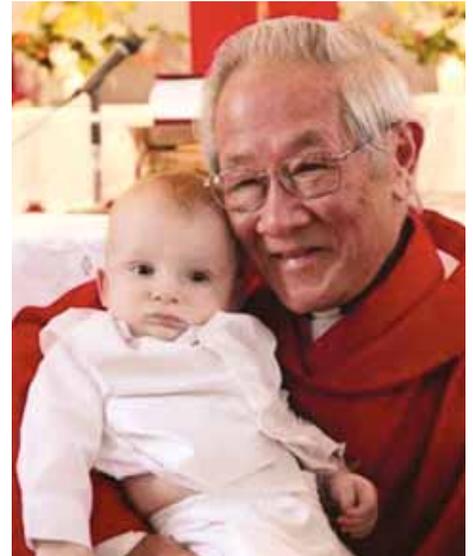
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Thirdly, I personally thought that it would be nice to spend my final years in a small rural parish, where there would be much less work to do and where I could wither away, quietly and gracefully, into oblivion.

As divine providence would have it, when I finished my stint in Paraguay, I never did go to Texas, although plans were so advanced that the bishop of Brownsville was actually awaiting my arrival there. Why I didn't go to Brownsville, but instead was appointed to a parish in Toronto, is another long story, for another time. To make that long story very short, I spent about 12 or 13 years as pastor at Our Lady of Good Counsel, the Caribbean Catholic Church in Toronto.

When plans were made for me to leave there I visited a confrere in Hamilton who said that I could perhaps help him out with a Sunday Mass in English in his Portuguese parish. But then he paused and seemed a bit concerned and wondered aloud: "The people might not want you." "Why not?" I asked



him. "They are mostly Caucasian," he said, "and you're Chinese." So I moved to Dundalk.

## One year stretched out to seventeen

I'm now in my final months in the beautiful, quiet, sleepy country Parish of St. John's, Dundalk, Ontario. At age 75, I am quickly approaching the end of that third and final stage in my faith journey.

I started my ministry here in May 1998. After about two weeks, I went to Hamilton to meet Bishop Tonnos for the first time. It was a very cordial encounter during which we both agreed that I would stay in Dundalk for one year — a one-year probation of sorts. This would give me sufficient time to see if I liked the diocese of Hamilton and just as important, to see if the diocese of Hamilton liked me. Well, that one year stretched out a bit. I am now in my 17th year in St. John's.

When I was about to enter Dundalk, a thought flashed briefly across my mind. "How will the parishioners react? Will they accept me as I am?" Any misgivings of that ilk were unfounded. After a very short time not only did the parishioners accept me as their own, their love for me was manifest and palpable. Of course, that love was mutual. The people of St. John's were just as beautiful and cooperative and attentive and loving as people everywhere else.

You know, we priests often take it for granted, but we do not operate on a level playing field. That field is greatly tilted in our favour. People look up to us and help us and love us, just for being priests.

As time went on and we got to know each other in greater depth, the parishioners opened up their hearts and their homes even more. They brought me produce from their farms and delicious meals from their kitchens, and would from time to time, invite me over for meals in their homes. And they still do.

I was often invited to birthday parties and to the receptions that usually followed the sacraments. And I always tried my best to attend those functions even when I was feeling unwell or tired.

We even reached a point where some little old ladies and their husbands would defend me against any criticism that was hurled my way. In their eyes, I was right, even when *I knew* I was wrong. How can you not love people like that?

For the first 12 years or so, I really fell in love with Dundalk and its people. In addition, although I always refer to my stay in Paraguay as “being on the missions,” there is no doubt in my mind that Dundalk too *is* mission territory. So there I was, “on the missions in Dundalk,” while enjoying an easy and beautiful life in Canada.

As far as I can tell, Dundalk is not very attractive to many priests in the diocese of Hamilton, if to any at all. Some of them even call it Dum-dalk. But, “Go where no one else wants to go,” was the constant indoctrination during our formation. So I went.

### A weekly circuit of 100 kms

The geographical area of St. John’s parish is huge, although the population is not. Its boundaries include a bit of two counties: Grey and Dufferin. I’ve never gone around it but I imagine it would take about two hours or more to drive around its periphery. Even when I do the weekly circuit for Sunday masses, I have to drive about a hundred kilometres. Going to deanery meetings or visiting the sick often means travelling an hour or two. Fortunately I don’t mind driving, especially in

sunny, summer weather. In winter, it’s a bit of a different story.

St. John’s parish consists of three small churches — one in Dundalk, one in Melancthon, and one in Proton. When I first visited Melancthon and Proton, I was surprised to find the two churches in the middle of nowhere in open fields. St. John’s in Dundalk is the only church built in a town. It took me quite a while to get used to this strange situation.

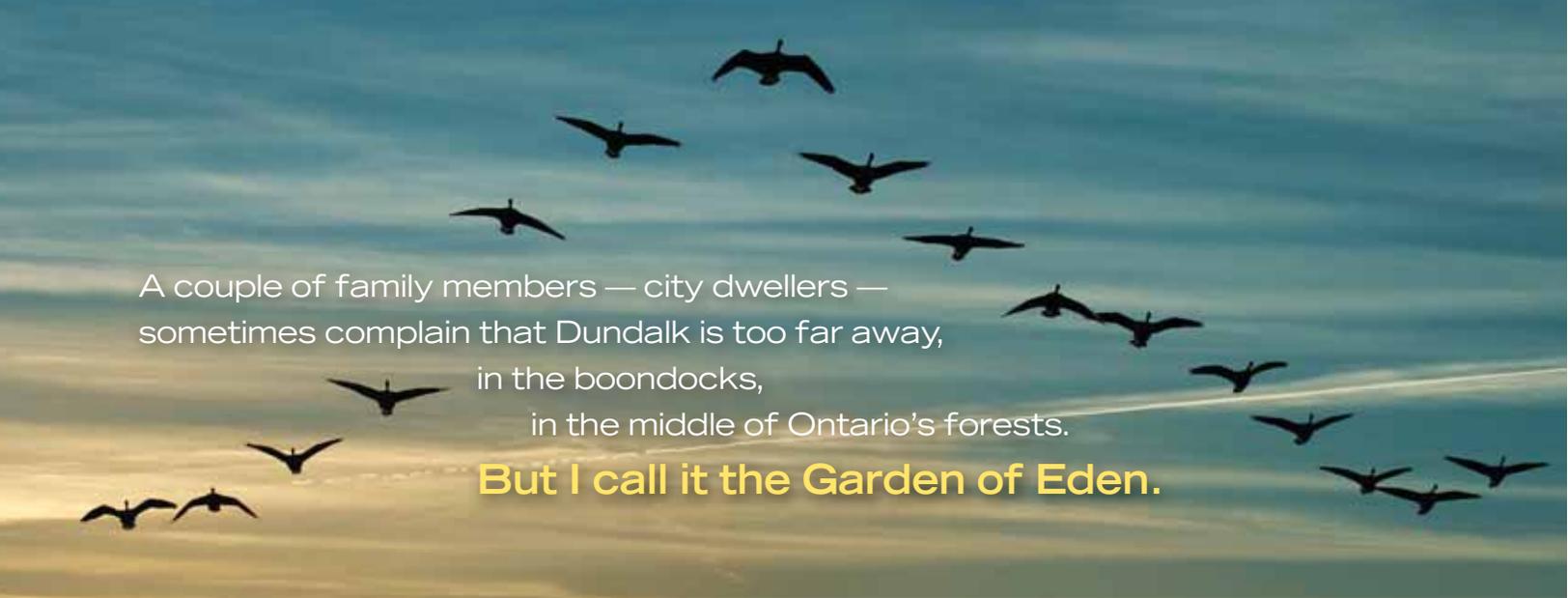
St. John’s is the official parish, although it’s the smallest. The rectory is in Dundalk, a short distance from the church. I celebrate Mass there twice during the week and once on Saturdays at 5:00 p.m. Only 20 to 40 people, almost all senior citizens, attend Mass on Saturday evenings. One visiting priest described the church community as being “on life support.” But it has been on life support since I got there some 16 years ago. It hasn’t died yet and still shows no sign of really dying. In Melancthon, where Mass is celebrated at 9:30 a.m. on Sundays, attendance is better: between 60 and 100 people.

The most vibrant of the churches is in Proton, which is actually growing slowly. About 100 to 150 parishioners attend Mass there on Sundays. This church has a large contingent of children — babies, toddlers and teenagers. After Mass, many of the parishioners stay on to enjoy first-class coffee and cookies, and congenial company.

Strangely, Shelburne, the biggest town in the parish, with a population of 6,500 people, which in a couple years will



St. Patrick's, Melancthon



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**But I call it the Garden of Eden.**

quickly grow to 10,000, has no church of its own. The people there go to the Melancthon church or to St. Timothy's, Orangeville, which is in the archdiocese of Toronto.

### **“Too long here, get out — no way!”**

After about 12 or 13 years in Dundalk, coinciding with the arrival of the new Bishop Crosby, I began to think that maybe the parishioners needed a rest from me and a new priest, a new breath of fresh air. I was still very happy in Dundalk and from what I could tell, the parishioners seemed very happy with me. But I kept telling myself: “12 years is too long, get out.” And one year later, “13 years is too long, get out.” And one year later, “14 years is too long, get out.”

But naturally, I asked myself, if I did get out, what would I do? Where would I go? What were my viable options? With the unknown, always comes a bit of anxiety.

Those questions are still an issue, since I was told that I've got to leave Dundalk by June 2015. I guess being forced out is not such a bad idea after all. Otherwise who knows? I might be in Dundalk, beautiful Dundalk, for the next 17 years or until the day I drop dead — whichever comes first.

### **Basic Christian Communities**

Problems and difficulties in Dundalk have been few and far between. Truth to tell, major problems have been non-existent. When I first entered the parish, I faced a minor difficulty. We had a parish council which, following the wisdom of the time, consisted of three people from each church — nine council members altogether. This setup resulted in a certain amount of infighting, as each group was mainly interested in getting as many benefits as possible for their particular church.

I then tried a technique I learned in Paraguay: basic Christian communities. Each church would become a mini-parish (or basic community), and would look after its own affairs — its own upkeep and activities. Once this method was in place, the infighting ceased and the parish became even more united. I guess parishioners find it more gratifying to know that their gifts and talents are going mainly to the

church where they worship, as opposed to somewhere else.

On many occasions, during the past few years, my intention was to conduct a survey to see what the parishioners wanted: (i) Did they want me to go (ii) Did they want me to stay or (iii) Did they care at all, one way or the other. Well, that survey was never carried out.

### **The seasonal beauty of country life**

My blood family is a very close-knit one and we meet often, especially during spring, summer and autumn, to be in each other's company, to eat, drink, talk nonsense and have fun together. A couple of family members — city dwellers — sometimes complain that Dundalk is too far away, in the boondocks, in the middle of Ontario's forests. But I call it the Garden of Eden.

In early spring, I look forward to meeting deer along Southgate Road 4, on my way to Mass in Proton. Invariably there will be mama deer, papa deer and a few baby deer — all basking in the sun. I would always stop at a distance and admire these magnificent creatures.

In late spring, wild geese and ducks are everywhere. It's a thing of beauty to see them in their typical v-shape formation, making a joyful noise to the Lord, as they fly overhead; or to see them swim up the river, in single file, with mama duck at the head and papa duck bringing up the rear.

As I drive along the more rural routes, I encounter little wild animals of all sorts — beavers building their dams in early spring, turtles inching their way across the road.

And if I venture outside in May and June, protected with a lot of the famous insect repellent “Off”, I can appreciate the sounds of the myriad bird species that inhabit the area.

Dundalk and its environs are farm country: cattle farmers, sheep farmers and even goat farmers. And there are crops of all kinds — wheat, potatoes, barley, rye. It's the most beautiful scene, that of the canola fields in bloom, with acres and acres of beautiful yellow flowers, like an endless sea of yellow.

Too far away, in the boondocks, in the middle of Ontario's forests? I call it the Garden of Eden. ■