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Breaking bread together in Parkdale

*St. Francis Table - an
unusual 'restaurant.'*

BY MIKE MASTROMATTEO

IT'S A GRITTY TABLEAU OF OLDER, INNER-CITY LIFE where the "Table" chose to set up shop. There are a lot of crumbling buildings and darkening brick and alleyways in Toronto's Parkdale region.

Small second-storey windows hung with dusty beige curtains invite speculation about the many lives lived silently in dark rooms. The Queen Street Mental Health Centre sits just to the east, catching little of the light reflecting off the glass and steel towers of Bay Street, just three miles - and virtual worlds away.

The Missionaries of Charity, humbly renowned through Mother Teresa's imperative to serve "the poorest of the poor", live and work not far from the Table. Indeed there are many levels of poverty, and the poor and vulnerable plying the streets of Parkdale area might seem blessed compared to those slowly dying on the roads of Calcutta.

Nonetheless in their own way both Parkdale and Calcutta offer a glimpse of what might be called a sad symbiosis - the concentration of human suffering animating those few who are eager to make a modest difference. "A drop in the bucket" some would argue. "Yes, but without that drop" Mother Teresa would have replied - "the bucket is empty."

Comparisons to the work of the Missionaries of Charity might embarrass the staff and volunteers of St. Francis Table restaurant in Parkdale. But the spirit of service is essentially the same. Since first opening its doors in 1987, St. Francis Table has been a place of nourishment, companionship, dignity and quiet comfort to the homeless, single mothers, working poor, refugees, post-psychiatric patients and other vulnerable residents of the immediate area.

Most of the clients see the bulk of their meagre income swallowed up by rent and other day-to-day expenses. Some are ex-convicts hoping for a second chance. Whatever their circumstances however, a good meal, quiet respite and an offer of help are there for the taking.

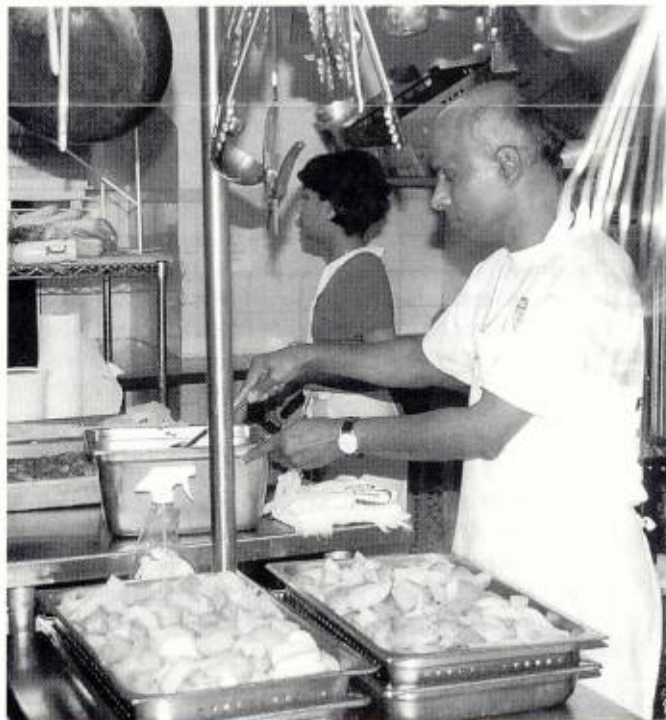
St. Francis Table, named for St. Francis of Assisi, is the response of the Capuchin Order of

Central Canada, to the need for front-line relief work in Parkdale. The restaurant is unlike a soup kitchen in that clients are asked to pay at least \$1 for their meals. In addition to defraying, however modestly, the cost of food and supplies, the \$1 charge helps clients preserve a sense of dignity in lives torn by addiction, illness, unemployment and sundry affliction.

The dignity of the person is further enhanced by what might be called the St. Francis Table ambiance. Clients receive full service at tables, including a choice of meals, soup, a hot or cold beverage and dessert. And true to Franciscan heritage, no one is turned away for want of a dollar, without at least the offer of a meal.

St. Francis Table serves an average of 250 meals each day. The weekly schedule begins with a Sunday brunch, a Monday evening dinner, followed by two meal offerings (lunch and dinner) Tuesday through Thursday. Friday is a lunch-only affair, while the restaurant shuts down on Saturdays to restock the pantry.

The Capuchins have served half
a million meals to their 'special'
clients. Photos by Mike Mastromatteo



Over its 15-year existence, the restaurant has served more than half a million meals to its special clients. If it's not in the order of the loaves and fish story, the staff and volunteers have learned to make a little go a long way.

After modest beginnings, St. Francis Table eventually captured the imagination of supporters and volunteers beyond Parkdale. It has now established a network of supporters and benefactors who donate money, food, supplies and their time.

As of July, 2002, some 1,200 names have been added to the St. Francis Table supporters' list. While a few private foundations support the Table, no one benefactor provides more than five per cent of the total operating funds. To the directors of St. Francis Table, the steady inflow of smaller gifts from ordinary individuals is key to the long-term survival of the restaurant.

Capuchin Brother Alan Gaebel, animator of St. Francis Table since 1998, says the operation's emphasis on the dignity of each client is another factor in its success. "I think it's due to the way we assist people in need, on a personal level with a focus on their dignity. We help them find the already-present God in their lives and circumstances, even though they themselves might not be aware of His presence."

In the early 1990s, the Capuchins opened the St. Clare Centre on the property adjoining the restaurant. Formerly known as the Marguerite Centre - a facility to help prostitutes rebuild their lives - the St. Clare Centre now functions as the drop-in arm of the restaurant operations. It's essentially a quiet place for patrons to gather for coffee and companionship.

Over the years, the Capuchin community has expanded on its initial mandate of providing meals, companionship and a sense of dignity. As of last fall, the Table expanded its services to include counselling, a shuttle service bringing the homeless to nearby shelters, and increased advocacy and outreach initiatives.

The restaurant employs a full-time chef and part-time kitchen assistant, but most of its manpower needs are met by volunteers, both regular and casual, who help with food preparation, clean-up or waiting on tables. One such volunteer is Mary Ann Zimmerman of north Toronto, who for the last three years has devoted one day per week to salad making and table service.

"It's my chance to give something back for all the blessings I've received," she said. "It involves some sacrifice going down there each week, but I enjoy what I'm doing and I find it interesting to get to know some of the regular customers at St. Francis."

The support and dedication of St. Francis Table's team of volunteers is gratifying to Brother



St. Francis Table is located in the Parkdale district of west Toronto, next to the Lake Ontario shore and to the very extensive parkland of High Park.

Alan and his fellow Capuchins. Brother Alan takes issue, however, with those who suggest that operations such as St. Francis Table allow government agencies to shift more of the responsibility for the poor and homeless to charitable groups.

"This always causes me to wince a little," he says. "We're all in this together. The responsibility to act lies with each individual, group, agency and level of government. This is not a political question but a human question. There will always be some complacency on the part of some, but I believe for us who call ourselves Christian, that it (service to the disadvantaged) is a call to real action and to make more deeply relevant our lived faith and church."

Brother Alan was recently asked to speculate on a best-case scenario in which a radical reduction in poverty would put St. Francis Table out of business.

"I guess that would be a wonderful sign of our society's success in caring for our less fortunate brothers and sisters," Brother Alan says. "But I suspect this need, which gives this ministry its purpose, and fulfills my vocation, will be with us forever. I prefer to think of the poor as an invitation to follow and reflect Christ to one another, rather than as a problem to be solved." ♥

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