

Egan: Chaplain has change of heart

Ottawa Mission's Donohue once fed only his wallet, but now feeds souls by ministering to the homeless

By Kelly Egan, The Ottawa Citizen March 8, 2011



Tom Donohue, chaplain at the Ottawa Mission on Waller Street, traded his high-paying Telus job for the chance to work at the mission.

Photograph by: Chris Mikula, The Ottawa Citizen

OTTAWA — It is Shrove Tuesday at the Ottawa Mission, where men are men and lunch is pancakes.

Father Mark Slatter, a theologian on regular weekly loan, is saying Roman Catholic mass in the chapel, wearing an Eddie Bauer sweatshirt and a priestly stole.

The 30-strong congregation shouts the hymn choices (“number 49!”) to be played by a visiting pianist in a big overcoat, never to be removed; the scripture reading is a slice of John the Baptist,

“a voice shouting in the wilderness,” and the message is Lenten, on themes of human weakness and reconciliation.

Mass, all in, is 20 minutes. Some hats even stay on, there being no high-churchiness in tending to the spiritual side of those scraping by in a downtown shelter. There is no collection.

When they leave, everyone gets a meal ticket, for some of the 800 pancakes served up with a side of bacon.

We come upon the official chaplain, Tom Donohue, a Catholic deacon since 2003. He has an office right by the front door on Waller Street, where he keeps a row of model cars — GM muscle machines, mostly — and a picture on his computer of his baby, a 1971 Pontiac LeMans, two-door, mid-blue. One sweet ride.

The cars are a great icebreaker, he says. Many is the conversation that has started with a story about the old '57 Chev sitting on the bookcase, above the Bibles. He also wears a leather Ottawa Senators jacket, an immediate talking point, and rides a motorcycle.

Donohue, 57, was an executive in the telecom business, including Telus, overseeing a large staff and multimillion-dollar contracts with the federal government.

After 34 years, he traded it all in a couple of years ago: his salary is now less than the taxes he paid on his six-figure income.

But no regrets.

“I wanted to start feeding my soul instead of my wallet,” says Donohue, a father of three grown children. “That’s my line.”

Donohue keeps regular hours and an open-door policy. The homeless don’t make appointments, he has learned. They just show up when they’re ready.

“It’s not about me fixing their life,” he says. “Often, they have no one who will listen to them.”

He is a remarkably upbeat character, with a loud laugh that explodes from some deep, happy well. A good thing, too, as his visitors are enduring tough times.

“They may believe that God loves them and forgives them, but they can’t forgive themselves,” says Donohue. “Shame is the biggest challenge. There’s tons of shame.”

His is not to judge, he says, a lesson he learned soon after he started, when “in walked me”: a former architect who had it all — career, big house, wife, children — and lost it to addiction, finally finding himself, literally, on the street.

“I tell you straight up,” he says, using one of his favourite expressions. “There’s no ‘bums’ out there. There’s nobody who wants this life.”

It may sound odd to think of the Lenten season having any meaning in a homeless setting but the clerics believe it does. Lent is a 40-day period of fasting and abstinence that precedes Easter. What, it is to wonder, do the destitute have to give up?

Today is Ash Wednesday, and at churches across the city, including the Mission, ash will ceremoniously be smudged on foreheads. It is a visible sign of mortality and sin.

(In this regard, says Father Slatter, the wearing of the ash on the exterior — in your face, as it were — is the great equalizer. The middle class is merely better at hiding its weaknesses, he says, whereas poverty tends to be transparent.)

The Mission holds a chapel service every day. It is meant to be non-denominational but tends to be Christian in its leanings. Some are known to read newspapers during the service or simply show up for the hymns. Some are not Christians at all.

No matter, says Donohue. “There’s no privacy in a shelter. This may be the only place they can go to find any peace.”

Donohue believes many at the Mission still retain some vestige of faith.

“You watch at mass today. Watch them put their hand out to receive the eucharist,” he said. “Their hands are filthy, their nails are filthy, their hands are shaking, but watch their faces, there is something there.”

Indeed, the chapel is the site of funerals, sometimes baptisms, sometimes weddings. The Mission, meanwhile, provides shelter to 230 residents every night; runs addiction programs, supportive housing, a hospice for the dying.

Yes, Chaplain Tom, there is something there.

To contact Kelly Egan, please call 613-726-5896, or email kegan@ottawacitizen.com