

# More Than a Few Good...Men and Women

By Edward J. Thompson Sr.

The United States Catholic Church today is in disarray. Few Catholics I know are satisfied with the Church as it is. Increasingly, survey data suggest that Catholics often want the Church to grant optional celibacy to priests, ordain women to the priesthood and allow the laity more decision-making authority in the running of the Church. Some conservatives, however, want priests to stay celibate, seminaries to train and ordain only heterosexual men, and all who call themselves Catholic, to follow the rules laid down by the Pope and his bishops. The sex abuse crisis, first publicized in 2002, and remaining with us still, only compounds the confusion as to who and what to believe. The latest horrors are the newly revealed Vatican letters to bishops in Ireland and Tucson that instructed the bishops in Ireland and Arizona not to report these abuses to the civil authorities. And so it continues...

Yet, despite the acrimony, the Gospel imperative to seek a preferential option for the poor continues unabated. The practical application of this gospel mandate is seen through the lives and work of Catholic religious. The aim of the Church ought to be to restore some semblance of reality by highlighting the actual lives and ministries of these devoted men and women of integrity.

The recently beatified Cardinal John Henry Newman defined courage as "grace under pressure." Most of us think of a courageous person as someone who risks his/her life for the sake of others. The New York City firefighters who ran up the burning WTC tower buildings certainly met this definition. Many of these brave people gave their lives to save others.

There were also Roman Catholic priests who ran into the conflagration when everyone was running away on 9/11/01. Father Mychael Judge gave his life that terrible day helping the injured. I interviewed several priests, including Father Jim Martin, SJ and Father James Hayes, pastor of nearby St. Andrew's. Their stories tell of not only risking their lives, but also of spending weeks at the site saying Mass for the rescuers and giving consolation to the many family members who futilely searched for their loved ones.

However, there are other less dramatic ways of serving those in need here on Long Island. Consider the selfless life and ministries of Sister Camille D'Arienzo, a Sister of Mercy for over fifty years. Her reason for helping the poor: "God's call is not sung in monotone; it is an often changing harmonious invitation to bring mercy to those who need it now." Teacher, producer, writer, scholar, public speaker, reporter, professor, president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious - all these achievements and more only partially describe the drive of Camille. Meeting her for the first time, one sees a dynamic, forceful, but friendly and compassionate Sister whose life has been a love song for the poor and disadvantaged.

There is also the extraordinary life of Sister Mary Ryan, a Sister of St. Dominic, who founded a literacy and ESL (English second language) program for poor and immigrant women now in three locations, Wyandanch, North Amityville, and Huntington Station, NY. To date it has educated more than 1,600 women assisting them not only in reading, math and social studies, but giving them a sense of self-esteem often lacking in the underprivileged. Sister Mary always had the dream to educate each person individually and structure progress around each student's needs. She was able to achieve that special kind of education with the

OPening Word outreach. She told me "The Vision Statement of the Dominican Sisters of Amityville reminds us to promote the dignity of marginalized persons. Each time I see a woman who has come to us frightened and insecure begin to change and lift her head with dignity and pride, I know that all our work is in the right direction."

There are also Long Island priests like Father Andy Connolly who walked through the racially explosive neighborhood of Wyandanch in the 1960s bringing about peaceful dialogue with authorities and reducing criminal activities. Andy, as he prefers being called, also served in missions in the Dominican Republic, after serving as pastor of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal in Wyandanch, one of the poorest Catholic parishes on affluent Long Island.

Another example of priests who serve the poor is the work of Monsignor John Cervini who today serves in the mission parish of St. Peter the Apostle, in El Cercado, Dominican Republic. Father John also served in Wyandanch as pastor.

There is also the life work of Father Bill Brisotti, who as current pastor of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, saw his Outreach buildings, his rectory and nearly the church itself go up in flames on Dec. 30th, 2008. Father Bill vowed that day his parish would continue to feed and cloth the poor and rebuild all that was lost. Today, that dream is falling into place with new construction of the Gerald Ryan Outreach Center starting this spring.

Deacon Don Zirkel served, until recently, in the Dioceses of Brooklyn and Rockville Centre, first as the Editor of the then- acclaimed Brooklyn Tablet, and later as an ordained deacon in various parishes including St. Ignatius, Hicksville, St. Kilian, Farmingdale, and Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, Wyandanch. Among the many talents of this devoted Christian, what stands out for me is his lifelong devotion to the lost, the least and the lonely. To Don, this applies equally to the poor, to women, and to the marginalized.

None of these women or men would wish to be singled out as anything special. They certainly don't consider what they do as brave or heroic. They would say that their actions are simply what most priests of this diocese would do given the chance and opportunity. We know they represent what is best about those who serve us in full-time ministry. We single them out not as individuals only, but as representatives of the many fine religious men and women today- to quote the late Bishop John R. McGann's episcopal motto- who "serve the Lord with gladness."

January 24, 2011