

Daily Doses of Hope

Dispensing hope may be the most important ministry for pastors of inner city parishes. Father Bob Kelly, SVD, former rector at Divine Word College, grew up on the south side of Chicago, studied at Loyola University and found out about the SVD while student teaching at St. Anselm's, a south side parish of the Chicago Archdiocese.

The SVD has assigned priests and brothers there since the 1930s. A year after graduating, he entered SVD formation and worked at St. Anselm's as a seminarian. That was 1979. Nearly 40 years later, Fr. Bob returned to the parish and is now pastor there along with nearby St. Elizabeth's.

"We have two aging communities of faith, which struggle on a monthly basis to make ends meet," he said. "And violence surrounds us on a regular basis."

Gangs and drugs are a root cause, fueled by poverty made worse by the lack of jobs and investment. Regentrification, where old apartments are restored or torn down and replaced by new ones, drives up costs and taxes. The former St. Anselm's school is being rented as a public school system charter school while the former St. Elizabeth school building is now a job training center.



Fr. Bob Kelly, SVD, baptizing at St. Anselm's parish in Chicago

On the upside, rent from the charter school provides funds for St. Anselm's, which has opened an after school program and a food pantry at St. Elizabeth's helps to fight hunger in the local neighborhoods. There are daily Masses at St. Anselm's and one on Sunday at both parishes. Both parishes collaborate with the archdiocese, other clergy and the police to find ways to reduce violence. But it is a day-to-day struggle for the people.

"I truly believe this is where I have been called to serve," Fr. Bob said. "For me, the important thing is to serve the people in any way I can, listening to their stories, empowering them and giving them hope, daily doses of hope."

Life Among the Rag Pickers



Father Francis Rayappan, SVD

Father Francis Rayappan, SVD, is a vocation director meeting with young men in the U.S. who are interested in religious life with the SVD.

But before he was ordained in his native India, Fr. Francis lived for one year among the desperately poor "rag pickers" of Bhopal, who eke out an existence picking through roadside garbage for anything of value. What little they make goes to buy drugs and just enough food and drink to survive. Living in slums, their stone or brick, rubble-walled huts are covered by leaky roofs of wooden boards and plastic bags. A 10' x 10' dirt-floor hut may be home to six people. Fr. Francis lived among them while he was a seminarian.

"I chose to go to that place because I wanted to experience the life of a rag picker," Fr. Francis said. Their day begins around 4 a.m. when they take containers to a site where a government truck brings water. Allowed only as much as a person can carry, the supply needs to last all day for drinking, washing and cooking. Then each person gets a bag and heads to roadsides where people toss out their garbage.

Beer and alcohol bottles, newspapers, food wrappers, plastic bags, steel, iron or aluminum, anything of value is turned in for money, perhaps \$5 per day.

Fr. Francis worked in an SVD program which asked homeowners to hold onto their trash and allow the rag pickers to pick it up, at minimal cost. The money is placed in individual bank accounts for these poor to use for medical help or other emergencies. The SVDs also organized self-help groups among the rag pickers to educate their children, to encourage better hygiene and to show how to save money. As a vocation director, Fr. Francis shares such stories, a testimony of what it means to be a disciple of Christ in service to the poor.

