

God Lives in a Duplex in Chelsea

A Reflection on My Long Experiment

By Joseph G. Marina, nSJ



As I was preparing to move to Providence in the summer of 2000, I decided that it was finally time to make the jump from renting an apartment to buying a home. Nothing fancy, just a decent place with more than one floor and an extra-large kitchen...those were the criteria. I found one immediately, a duplex townhouse less than half a mile from my work with a small yard and modern kitchen that could easily handle a party of ten. And I almost bought it. But something told me to hold off, that then was not the time to buy. Besides, the money I had saved for a down payment could be easily directed toward more exciting ventures like weekend jaunts to Nantucket or Key West. Three years (and some maturity) later, I applied for admission to the Society of Jesus. When the Jesuits said yes, I felt relieved not to have that duplex to unload.

Well, it's been 19 months since Entrance Day and I feel as though I have lived a lifetime since then. The many wondrous and diverse experiences of the Novitiate have taught me that I am less self-sufficient and much more dependent on grace than I ever realized. And of all the skills that novices are called upon to cultivate within themselves and each other, the task I seem to have proven most capable of is this: preparing and serving food! Consequently, that's what I do each and every Sunday at the Welcome Table of St. Francis Xavier Church on 16th Street between 5th and 6th Avenues (New York City). We don't call it a soup kitchen because "Welcome Table" sounds a lot more... welcoming. The Table welcomes between 700-900 hungry guests every Sunday of the year. The great meal goes on underneath the church in Larkin Hall, a high school cafeteria by day and homeless shelter by night. The Welcome Table is hard work, and I always go home tired, but what a grace to realize that, because of this wonderful parish, many people do not go hungry.



Without contradicting the keen observation of my friend and fellow-novice Dennis Baker – that God is “in the middle of everywhere” (see last month’s reflection from Micronesia) – I would rather stay local within this reflection. To be more direct, God is in an over-sized duplex in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan—in the magnificent church above and in Larkin Hall below. If you have the chance to worship here at the 9:00 am Sunday Mass, you won’t be able to miss the aromas of baking chicken, fresh breads, and simmering sauces as they ascend through the 120 year-old floor boards into the congregation and sanctuary. When the

scent of food for the hungry rises up to meet the descending love of God and both come together at the altar, something magnificent is bound to happen. Put another way, whether you are upstairs at Mass or downstairs at the Table, God is doing the same thing in different forms...serving good food. It doesn't get more Eucharistic than that!



On the other days of the week, I co-direct the Education Outreach Program (EOP) with a wonderful woman named Ruth. Together, we help people make the transition from homelessness and substance abuse to education, housing and hope for the future. The clients' life stories are incredibly hard and often sad. Still, they receive the grace and an inspiring strength to press on toward self-improvement. It is so edifying to watch the Church journey with them in their common pursuit.

Last month, I had the privilege of offering an evening workshop on Ignatian contemplation to about 40 of our parishioners. Having never taught the topic before, I was a bit nervous as the hours led up to the start of the event. In the main hall of the Church, about an hour before the group arrived, I prayed for the grace to be effective. I remember specifically saying to the Lord, "I want the people who come here tonight to feel as though they had spent an evening with you." I repeated that part a few times... "as though they had spent an evening with you." Well, during a guided contemplation on the gospel passage of Jesus healing the paralytic (Luke 5:17-26), I noticed tears gently streaming down one man's face, as he kept his eyes closed and prayed. At the end of the workshop, I invited the participants to ask questions and offer insights. This man, with a look of total serenity on his face, raised his hand and said "I feel as though I spent an evening with Jesus." He repeated the words of my prayer, just as I had offered them up. What a moment! In all my years of various jobs outside the Society, I don't remember a moment that comes close to being as rewarding as that one.



My other responsibilities here include the coordination of a parish census, providing spiritual direction, helping to staff the shelter, and assisting Ned Coughlin S.J., our tireless pastor, with a weekly program for returning Catholics. Later in April, I will have the opportunity to work at a retreat for gay and lesbian Catholics.



As you can read, the Church of St. Francis Xavier stands prophetic in the post-modern city of New York. We welcome those who are typically shunned in other places and we sometimes take flak for doing it. What could be more Jesuit! Beyond the Jesuits, the dedication of the lay parishioners and staff here is exemplary, from my impassioned boss Stephen Weyer to so many others who practically give their blood for this wonderful church.

All of the preceding is a long way of saying that I finally found that duplex I was looking for. The kitchen is considerably larger than I expected and so are the doors that stand open, announcing the kingdom of God to all who pass by or enter in. My duplex is on 16th Street in Chelsea. It's the Church of St. Francis Xavier...and God lives there.