



Archbishop of Detroit, Allen Vigneron, poses for a photo opportunity with Fr. Giancarlo Ghezzi, PIME, and volunteers during a service opportunity at the All Saints Soup Kitchen.

THE USA TOO, IS A MISSION LAND

By Fr. Giorgio Licini, PIME

Beginning at around 11:00 am, they come one by one or with a friend or two. Their presence is orderly and silent as if they were gathered for a familiar ritual that takes place often and always follows the same script: they tell their name to the volunteer at the desk, they get the usual yellow stub with their assigned number, they eat their meal, and they go back to their home or to a makeshift shelter somewhere under an overpass...

These are the poor of the greater Detroit metropolitan area. Three times a week the All Saints parish in the southwest part of Detroit opens the doors of its church's

basement so that they can have a wholesome hot meal and, if necessary, even a medical checkup. This charitable operation is run by Catholic Charities of Southeast Michigan. David Allen, its coordinator, says: "We welcome an average of about 120 guests every time. They are mostly Afro-Americans and Hispanics, but also many Whites...We welcome the aged but also the young, adults and, once in a while, even children." In one of the poorest cities in the United States, problems tend to pile up and worsen the situation for individuals and for the whole community. Many stare into the void of a distant world. Are they marred by a past of drug abuse? That would significantly reduce



All Saints Parish has had its roots in Detroit for over 100 years.

their chances of getting a real job. At any rate, job offers are few and far between around here. Detroit's auto industry has overcome the crisis of the market crash and has returned to its production levels prior to the year 2009. Yet, so many other companies, which are not connected to the auto industry, have opened new factories in foreign countries where the production cost is much lower and salaries are a fraction of what they are in the States. Other jobs, such as construction and landscaping, are seasonal. In winter, when the temperature turns brutally cold, everything seems to come to a standstill. Many Hispanics, Mexicans in particular, could be hired as drivers, but are here illegally; they have no documents and cannot risk to be driving long distances on a regular basis. The parish of All Saints

stands as a symbol of the deterioration incurred in the last few decades around the city of Detroit. While the downtown area of the city is bustling with activities of all kinds and in full-recovery mode, there are large pockets of painful blights and disturbing eyesores. If run-down houses are not abandoned, they are inhabited mostly by poor Afro-Americans or other minorities, while, those with the financial capability to do so, have moved farther and farther away from Detroit and into the suburbia surrounding the city.

The historical booklet published in 1996 for the centennial anniversary of the parish of All Saints, narrates the story of a typical Catholic community: they were German, Hungarian and Italian immigrants who would

send their children to the parochial school run by nuns. It even mentions its Catholic Theater Troupe and the parish Basketball Team. At that time, over a century ago, the pastor was Fr. Henry Sullivan, who left his indelible imprint on the shaping and organization of the thriving parish. The shock of the country being dragged into World War II in 1942 is also recorded. The young men of the parish went to the European or to the Pacific warfront. The local factories were hastily retooled to meet the growing and urgent demands for war-related weapons such as tanks and airplanes. The pride for the significant contribution given by the parish to the country was quite evident. Now, a century later, of that unified and proud community very few are left. They gather for the 9:30 am Sunday Mass

celebrated in English. Only a handful of them still living in the old neighborhood, most come from afar due to a nostalgic attachment to their church and their friends. All of them have white hair and some walk with the help

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of a cane. Their children and grandchildren, however, assemble where they live or where they study.

Squeezed between a huge vegetable and fruit distribution outlet and a shipping container company, in the squalor of urban periphery, All Saints has become a mission land in its own right. The Archdiocese of Detroit, that closed down All Saints School a long time ago, would have closed down the church as well because it had been all but abandoned by its original parishioners who had moved out. However, about ten years ago, PIME, whose headquarters have been in Detroit since they were invited to this country in 1947, volunteered to care for the parish because it was frequented by Spanish-speaking immigrants from Mexico. Fr. Giancarlo Ghezzi, PIME, who has been its administrator since three years back, points out that it was Fr. Christopher Snyder, PIME

who revitalized the parish until he left for his mission in the Amazonas. However, Curt Joslin, a man with an imposing physique, who was the reader of the 9:30 am English Mass, puts all his weight behind this statement: “The

credit for the revitalization of the parish must be attributed also to Fr. Giancarlo. Had he not stepped in to take Fr. Christopher’s place, the Archdiocese would have closed us down in a heartbeat. Actually that decision is still hanging menacingly over our heads. The Archdiocese cannot afford to keep open parishes that are far from being solvent.”

Fr. Giancarlo, who was recently appointed its pastor, adds that “in our pastoral ministry with the Hispanics we apply a flexible approach: we put forth a sincere effort to keep alive their traditions as much as possible. And, until two years ago, we were requiring of them only a one-year preparation for First Communion and Confirmation; however, we are now in full compliance with the two-year preparation that is the policy across the Archdiocese. These are poor people who emigrated from countries south of the border, but they are breathing new life into this old

parish community. Sunday Mass in Spanish is at noon and the differences with the 9:30 Mass in English are striking. The number of attendees is fourfold and whole families with people of all ages participate. Its length is also considerable: it lasts an hour and the half, but time seems to fly because of the joy of being a vibrant Christian community and of praying and singing together is evident.

All Saints is a little beacon in the haze of the city’s periphery. It doesn’t show impressive figures; it cannot pride itself in grandiose liturgies; no diocesan priest aspires to run it.

However, it naturally displays down-to-earth, concrete charity, warm welcoming and a door wide-open to all those in need. In addition to the hot meals, about 500 poor families receive care packages each month.

The number of PIME missionaries working in Detroit is small, yet, with their commitment to care for the All Saints parish they prove that they can do missionary work also in the city of Detroit. This, too, is evidence that “mission fields” where the Gospel has to be preached and lived are not found only in distant lands but also in places much closer to home.



All Saints has a rich heritage since the opening of its doors. Many of the parishioners are from the local Hispanic community.



The All Saints Soup Kitchen serves around 120 hungry people each day of operation.



Fr. Licini is the Director of the PIME Mission Center in Milan, Italy, and editor of the magazine produced there, Mondo e Missione. He was ordained as a PIME missionary priest in 1986 and then joined the Mondo e Missione staff as an editor-in-training until 1989. Afterwards he received training in communications through a university program overseen by the Paulist fathers in Rome.

In 1991 he spent five months in the United States learning English and was then assigned to the Philippines where he would soon become PIME’s news correspondent for SE Asia. His work in that part of the world came to an end in 2002, and he would then spend more than a decade in Papua New Guinea (PNG). During that time, in addition to his pastoral work, he was asked to be the secretary for the Communications Office of the Bishop’s Conference for PNG and the Solomon Islands.

At the end of 2014, he came to his current assignment, now in Milan.