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40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

March 17, 2009

Dear Friends of Unity Acres,

Today, Saint Patrick's Day, we are two short weeks past the date of Unity Acres' 40th anniversary, Tuesday, March 3rd. The weather in early March being so unpredictable, our celebration of the day was a modest one. Father Jones and Peg McCarthy arrived from Bernhards Bay, Tuesday afternoon, in time for the celebration of the Eucharist at 4:00PM: the Gospel reading for the day being Matthew 6: 7-15 [Jesus teaches the disciples to pray, 'Our Father...Give us this day our daily bread...'] Mass having been celebrated, the community gathered in the Dining Hall for the evening meal: Spaghetti, salad and cake, Italian bread. We will be celebrating again, and remembering, dreaming and hoping, on April 23rd at the State Fairgrounds.

1969. A snowy, a bleak March day. Father Raymond McVey, accompanied by five very trusting men, travel north from Syracuse, to take possession of a disused Tuberculosis Sanatorium in rural Orwell, New York, and to make for themselves a home there, and a place of refuge and sanctuary. Shortly after arriving at the abandoned hospital complex, the New York State Troopers are called; five men from the streets of Syracuse and the unlikely looking priest – no doubt his clericals and Roman collar long since abandoned in favor of green sweatshirt and a workman's green twill pants – are evicted from the unheated basement of the former Nurse's residents. They will have to find other accommodations until the formalities of deeds and titles can be negotiated and set to order. Bud and Judy Adams have a camp on Millsite Lake which they are willing to lend until the legalities can be sorted out.

1969. March 3. It is snowing and cold. An abandoned TB Sanatorium in Orwell, New York. How is it that this priest and these men have left behind the familiar surroundings of the Near-Westside and the comforts of rectory life? Pat Waelder recalls a celebration of the Eucharist during the mid-1960s after which Father McVey, then a newly ordained priest assigned to Saint James' Church in Syracuse's Valley section, wondered out loud: "What would it mean if I lived the Gospel literally?" Carol Berrigan tells of Father McVey's making a sort of retreat to Benedict Labre House, a soup kitchen and house of hospitality intended for the very poor of Montreal's Griffintown. It was during this time that Father McVey first learned of the Catholic Worker movement, of Peter Maurin, of Dorothy Day. Soon enough, he requested to be transferred to Saint Lucy's on Gifford Street; he carried within himself the spirit of Saint Lucy's ever afterward.

Soon enough, Father McVey began a career, as it were, of irritating his bishop as, critic of the powers-that-be of Church and State, as advocate for peace and for the very poor, as dreamer of dreams. Shortly after arriving at Gifford Street, he requested and obtained permission to leave the rectory, and 'the service of the saved,' and conventional parish duties, in favor of the establishment of the houses of hospitality in which he would henceforth live, and in which he would divest himself more and more of security, comfort and ease, and make himself available more and more to the hurt, the broken, the very needy.

Kate Stanton's involvement began before the idea of Unity Acres had begun to take shape. Kate assisted in the operations of Unity Corner at West and Seymour Streets, a parish center begun at Saint Lucy's and originally intended for the children of the poor of the surrounding neighborhoods. Eventually, Kate's total devotion would lead her to take on the task of full-time beggar in service to the many needs of the Acres and the men who would live there.

Father McVey and Kate Stanton remained at the 'helm' of Unity Acres until their deaths in 1995.

The first Unity House was established on Chester Street; there was sufficient room for Father McVey to invite seven men to live with him. When room at Chester Street was exhausted, a second house of hospitality was opened on Huron Street. Rosemary Heaney organized the first food-teams: eventually three hundred families were involved in providing food for the men. Even so, the needs of the men who came to the houses at Chester and Huron Street exceeded what could be given.



A dream took shape: having experienced the frustrations of the poor of the inner-city neighborhoods, and with only faith as collateral, money was borrowed in order to purchase the abandoned and derelict property that had once housed the Oswego County TB Sanatorium. By March 1969, the time to leave behind the troubles and the temptations and the lonely desperation of the city streets had arrived. Twenty years later, on the occasion of Unity Acres twentieth anniversary, Father McVey suggested that the move to Orwell was something like a modern-day Exodus: *"On March 3, 1969, we arrived in Northern Oswego County, in the unheard-of hamlet of Orwell. Five very trusting men accompanied me on the journey. ... This was something like the Israelites leaving Egypt. The city was slavery. The streets, depression, alcohol, drugs, jail and the endless cycle would start again. A trap, a web from which there was no escape for so many hurting people."*

Leaving the city was flight from the mortal trap. Hundreds, thousands of hurting men since that late winter day in March 1969 have taken first faltering steps toward inner healing, toward a sense of community and belonging and solidarity. During forty years, Unity Acres has become for some a temporary refuge and for others a permanent home, and has offered to all who come here an opportunity to live in peace and dignity as an alternative to lives of destitution and sickness on the streets.

For forty years, the needs of the body – the need for ‘our daily bread’ – have been met, by the constant generosity of our donors, of you who are reading this letter. We thank you, as always, for that constant generosity upon which we so heavily rely. “God will provide” – so we do believe: it is through you that He is providing. Thank you. Amen.

Stephen Dickhout

## March-April Prayer

### Lenten Journey to the Cross and Resurrection

“Do not take away Your mercy from us for we are brought low... because of our sins. We have no place... to find favor with You... But with contrite hearts and humble spirit let us be received... as we follow You unreservedly; for those who trust in You cannot be put to shame.”

– Daniel 3, Tuesday of the Third Week of Lent.

Gracious God, You give us each year forty days of Lent – an ‘acceptable time’ to turn back to You. An opportunity to find our redemption through Your saving death on the Cross.

“Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed His last. The sanctuary veil was torn in two... When the centurion saw (this) he said, ‘Truly, this man was the Son of God.’”

– Mark 15, 37-39, Mass of Palm Sunday

We adore You, O Christ, and we praise You,  
because by Your holy cross, You have redeemed the world!

“This man God raised on the third day and granted that He be visible... to us...  
who ate and drank with Him after He rose from the dead.”

– Acts 10, 40-41, Mass of Easter Sunday

Glory to You, risen Lord Jesus! Your forty days in the desert prompts us to fast, pray and give alms through forty days of Lent. After You rose from the dead, many ate and drank with You. For forty days You appeared. You are risen indeed, and so will we also rise. Alleluia.

Here at Unity Acres, we have known times of ‘dying and rising’. We have experience for forty years the need for Lenten repentance, the saving grace of Your Cross, and the gift of Easter joy.

May we here, and all others, rejoice in the risen Christ, giving thanks to the Father through Him. Amen. Alleluia.

Father Bob Jones