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“Our Lord has wed me to the poor and I’m overjoyed”

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Fr. José Manuel Horcajo has been in charge of the parish of Saint

Raymond Nonnato for nine years. Located in Puente de Vallecas, in Madrid, it is open all day. The parish seeks to help the people in the neighborhood to find God, as they struggle to escape from the ravages of poverty. It is also the site of the Alvaro del Portillo Social and Family Work. Men and women destroyed by hunger, mistreatment, drugs, alcohol, and homes riven by domestic conflict, have found a new life here.

Puente de Vallecas. It is spring, but here the clouds of poverty, hunger, ill-treatment, sad lives and bitterly broken families continually darken the atmosphere.

Since Fr. José Manuel arrived here nine years ago, so many Masses, prayers, weddings, baptisms and communions have taken place. And much more, since this church is also a source of great hope for many people, through the efforts of the

Alvaro del Portillo Social and Family Work.

Sacraments and lentils

When José Manuel Horcajo was ordained as a priest in 2001, he never thought that this would be his ministry, combining baptizing babies with offering containers of lentils to hungry people. His days are spent evangelizing and running a soup kitchen on no budget, where 300 people are fed each day.

When asked whether he found it hard to sleep in peace with so many people's problems weighing on him, he answered: "That's what my mother asked me. How do you bear up with all this, my son? Well, I bear up cheerfully. I am a witness to constant miracles: people who change, people who smile once again, people who bury their worries and start over. God solves so many problems." Fr. Horcajo, with the help

of many generous volunteers who give of their time without asking for anything in return, is little by little helping to change many people's lives.

Nine years ago, when Fr. José Manuel first came to this church located on Madrid's "dark side," he decided to keep it open during the whole day. The neighbors came in, prayed, and asked for catechism classes, baptisms, a lot of confessions. "We realized that there was so much poverty around us that couldn't be solved simply by offering a sack of food from time to time."

A clothes bank. A soup kitchen. A center for family orientation, "since we saw that, for many of them, their material misery often went hand in hand with deep family problems." The goal was to help those assisted by the social work at the parish to feel truly loved and wanted. And the

parish's reputation quickly began to spread. In this parish they give out not only food, or teach you to fill out a report. Here they really help you!

It is a sunny spring afternoon here. In the parish, you see people praying in the church and small rooms filled with busy people. In the building across the street, a dining room is preparing supper, while in the library 20 children are receiving tutoring, and a talk is being given for families with incapacitated persons.

“God has increased my patience”

During these nine years, the social work carried out at the parish has produced so many beautiful stories.

The pastor remembers being asked to visit a depressed woman who needed help. He told her: “Why don't you come and cook in our dining room? We need help!” Although hesitant, she decided to give it a try.

She turned out to be a good cook. Afterwards, the people thanked her and applauded her culinary talents. She wept with joy, because “I feel useful.”

Asked to sum up his experience in the parish, Fr. José Manuel says: “It may sound like a poetic phrase, but I truly believe it. Our Lord has wed me to the poor and I’m overjoyed. I could never have imagined this.”

Obviously, this social undertaking comes at a price. Many people who have not found a reply in the state’s social services come here. Holding out a tin cup, their needs are rent, light, water, food. Solidarity is free, but these things cost money.

Specifically, every month of social work at the parish costs Fr. Horcajo 5,000 euros. Donations recently have been lessening and the refrigerator never seems to be full. At this point in the adventure, the pastor covers

60% of the costs, but he also needs the checks of generous people in order to continue going ahead in a sea of red figures that are ever more threatening.

Fr. Horcajo says he is amazed at how “God has increased my patience, because to serve others you need a great deal of patience. One person tells you something ten times, while another person needs to have something simple explained six times. Someone gets angry and goes away, but later returns, even if they don’t ask for forgiveness.”

Coffee on the terrace

One morning Fr. José Manuel is drinking coffee on a café terrace. He is speaking with two people from the neocatechumenal way about their efforts in his parish. Several tables over, three tough looking young people covered with tattoos decide to

have some fun with the priest. One of them shouts out:

“Hey priest, invite us to have a beer!”

José Manuel gets up to see who is shouting at him.

“Invite you to a beer? You invite me. I have to feed 200 people from your neighborhood! Let’s see if you help me a bit!”

“Come on, Father, the Church is lying. They don’t help the poor.”

One of the three at the table is a girl, who silences the person speaking:

“Be quiet! It’s true that this priest gives meals to the poor; one of my neighbors goes there, to their dining hall.’

But the young fellow refuses to be quiet and insists: “Then those two friends you’re with, who must be in Opus, should invite us to to a beer!”

Fr. Horcajo replies: “I’m the one in Opus Dei.”

Everyone laughs, and the three young people with tattoos stop pestering him.

An anchor for everyone

This is the neighborhood where the priest’s life is now spent. He says that “when you are ordained a priest you realize that your job is to give your life for everyone and dedicate yourself to helping the people God puts near you. The people around you determine your style as a priest.”

Fr. José Manuel opens his parish at dawn and closes it about the time most bars are shutting down for the night. Each day is filled with new voices asking for help. “Come in, what do you need, how can we help you?” A warm meal. A job. A roof to sleep under. Here, anyone who knocks finds a welcoming answer.

More than in giving, Fr. Horcajo sees the need to try to understand everyone. To not judge the single mother, the drug addict, the alcoholic without hope, the prostitute, the beggar.

Over the years he has seen so many people who had reached the dregs of despair, and who have been helped to find new hope and to begin leading a new life, a more truly human and Christian one.

Álvaro Sánchez León

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