



Human Warmth, Spiritual Warmth

February 3, 2021: As extreme cold sets in on Winnipeg, volunteers from Holy Cross Parish and staff at St. Boniface Street Links set out to establish a temporary shelter for the homeless. As early as February 7, the team was able to welcome them and house them in the basement of the church. In the middle of the deep freeze – a difficult time for Winnipeg's homeless – we spoke to Sheila Cornick, Bertrand and Luke Savard, Robert Grant and Marion Willis. Here is their testimony.

Interview by Daniel Bahuaud, Communications Coordinator at the Archdiocese of St. Boniface

Photos courtesy Marion Willis, St. Boniface Street Links & Sheila Cornick, Parish life director at Holy Cross

Sheila Cornick, Parish life director at Holy Cross:

Homeless people spend the night in the church basement to warm up, eat a good meal, sleep and have breakfast the next day. They are then driven by Street Links to several shelters in the city, where they can keep warm. Our parishioners mobilized to prepare meals and provide food, and their generosity was sometimes overwhelming. On top of food, we also received mittens, boots,



sleeping bags, coats and lots and lots of coffee! It warmed my heart to see such a welcoming attitude.

Bertrand Savard, parishioner:

I helped serve lunch. For me, it's an opportunity to meet people in need, and to get to know them as people. I am retired, so I have time spare. So *why not* volunteer? I'm also helping at parish the food bank. It's my way of giving back to my parish, which has given me so much spiritually.

Luke Savard, parishioner:

My mother is one of the food bank managers in Holy Cross. Since the older volunteers could no longer help, because of COVID-19, I immediately said yes, and contacted some of my friends, because we are all in our early twenties.

I drive one of the Street Links vans. We bring food to the homeless and take them to Holy Cross. Some find it difficult to meet the homeless. They're even a bit afraid of the experience. Personally, I think it's important to meet them. When you talk to a homeless person, you can the pain and suffering, but also the beauty and the dignity of *that* person. There are people who have been homeless for a very



long time. Others have recently lost their jobs because of the pandemic. Suddenly, and for the first time, they find themselves on the street. What happened to them could easily have happened to me too. *There but for the grace of God, go I...* This thought keeps me humble in the face of their unfortunate situation.

I did not expect to be transformed by these encounters, but each of these conversations is an encounter with the Lord. This volunteering has become a very personal experience, and a rich one.



Sheila Cornick, Parish life director at Holy Cross:

The idea of creating a temporary shelter really goes back to the fall, during discussions with Street Links. In Winnipeg, it's a pretty foregone conclusion that at some point a mass of arctic air will settle over the city for an extended period

of time, and that the homeless will be at risk. We are happy to be able to accommodate a good ten people every night. Street Links provides staff accustomed to dealing with the homeless, and we prepare and serve meals, provide clothing and ensure that everyone is safe and properly welcomed. This experience has really opened my eyes. I am glad that the parish has this opportunity to live the gospel in a practical and very human way. I'm convinced that lives have been saved.

Robert Grant, volunteer:

My friend Luke Savard recruited me for this, and I'm grateful. Because at 21, my eyes are now open. I've become aware of what is really happening on the streets of Winnipeg. Every time I drive across a bridge, I remember that there are people *living underneath*. I also appreciate more what I have received in my life. And I am happy to be able to live my Christian faith every time I welcome a homeless person in the church basement.



Marion Willis, Founder and Director of St. Boniface Street Links:

Doors in Holy Cross are open from 8 PM to 8 AM. In the morning, we drive our guests to various warming sites in the city, including Morberg House. We

converted the garage into a heated day shelter. At Morberg House, people can eat, shower, wash their clothes and relax while watching some TV. We are so pleased to have the support of Holy Cross Parish in this initiative. Because of its food bank, the parish is a natural partner of Street Links, which is working to end homelessness. As soon as the cold weather hit us, Holy Cross volunteers got cracking. Everyone was very so generous.

The volunteers really get it. They understand that we are all part of the human family, created by God. I'm grateful. Of course, a temporary shelter is only a very short-term solution. What we need in St. Boniface is a permanent refuge.