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MISSION STATEMENT

Today's American Catholic, an independent Catholic periodical, seeks to discern, express and advance Christ's message. Often provocative, but faithful to the Spirit, TAC provides a forum for lay as well as clerical voices on issues vital to our faith community.

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Passionist Fr. Jim Unites Faith and Family

By John Blessington

It is good to have some special people in your life, and I have a priest in Portland, Ore., on my short list. Two of our three children live in Portland so visits there are, at a minimum, an annual routine. We count it a good year when we are in Portland more than once and we count their East Coast visits for Christmas and other gatherings as happy pluses.

Of late I have compared my life as in part similar to my Irish roots. Today it takes five hours to fly from New York City to Dublin, but it takes six hours to fly to Portland. "Ah, Sean dear, if ye go to America we will hardly ever see ye." I grew up with such phrases as family stories reported the scenes when the native Irish announced that they were going to live here. So today we American-born are always happy to be traveling west to be with our children, grandchildren and a wonderful Paulist priest who have warmly anchored us to far-away Oregon.

Sunday Mass in Portland brings us into the world of Fr. Jim. When it is time for the final blessing, he pauses and reaches out to welcome any visitors at the Mass, and it is always a very warm welcome. In addition to being pastor of this parish, he is the Catholic chaplain for a major Portland medical facility. People visiting family members who are patients at that hospital often attend Mass at this parish, St. Elizabeth of Hungary. Fr. Jim always offers to pray for family or friends in the hospital, and it is always a touching exchange.

Others, like us, are visiting family or friends. Some are tourists. Over the years our youngest grandchild usually announced our pres-

self. We have become friends with the pastor and I have written about him and about the Paulist Fathers whose ministry I have admired since childhood.

Our Portland visits have also brought me closer to the Paulist community in New York in recent years. During my teen years and my decades of working at CBS television, St. Paul's Church was my venue in the city for Mass on holy days that fell during the work week. St. Paul's is the headquarters for the Paulist community. This religious order has a rich history of service across America and to know them is to be filled with admiration as you learn their history.

A few years ago I offered the Paulists a proposal to be the subject of CBS's midnight Christmas pro-

gram. They enthusiastically accepted and "Christmas at St. Paul's" was a wonderful mix of Scripture readings, prayers, performances by adult and youth choirs and a Christmas liturgy. It was carried on the network by almost 100 percent of stations and some repeated it during Christmas Day. This rich Christmas service drew much praise across the country.

While my visits to Portland and St. Elizabeth of Hungary center on family, Fr. Jim and I always find time for some chats at his office where an assistant joins in the laughter. We follow the office visit with at least one lunch to catch up on life, the world, the Roman Catholic Church and each other.

Life sometimes has unexpected moments. At one of my first visits to Fr. Jim's parish, I discovered that Eileen Walsh, my secretarial assistant when I was a new headmaster at Whitby School in Greenwich, Conn., and her daughters moved west, and for many years have been helpful members of St. Elizabeth's. Eileen and I delighted in our accidental reunion, as did her daughters. She died some months ago at age 100.

Aside: Whitby School was founded in 1958 as a Roman Catholic lay-run elementary school using the Montessori method of education. Whitby triggered an American revival of that method developed by Dr. Maria Montessori, one of the first woman

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medical doctors in Italy. Over time she became an internationally renowned educator and her insights and methods are still honored and growing worldwide to this day. China is the latest country to use her approaches to education.

Dr. Montessori's insights were first used with children in a poverty-stricken area in Rome in the early 20th century and over decades her method spread around the world. In America it was championed by major political and social personalities in the early 1900's. Over time, because of the Depression and World War II, the method faded until the establishment of Whitby and a connection to the Kennedy family resulted in a

To continue with our family, our younger grandchildren are in or about to enter college. We know this is the way life moves on, but we miss the ease of visiting when they were all living at home. Traveling to be with family is often a habit for many of us elders today.

While we adjust to this next phase of a life enriched by family and friends, aging brings change. I do *not* look forward to Fr. Jim's eventual retirement, albeit very well earned. I am hoping he will stay in the Portland area, and I hope my son and his family will stay there as well. We have come to regard Portland and Oregon as one of our homes. We have lived in Greenwich since 1960, with a few detour years in Massachusetts.

There are not many Fr. Jims in anyone's life. Recently a parishioner doing some work attended all three Sunday morning Masses and with a smile she delighted in reporting the following as a casual aside about the pastor: "Father gave three very different sermons and each was on the Gospel and each was wonderful."

This comment makes me aware of how lucky I have been in having priests and nuns in my support circle. I have taken most of them for granted, so I am writing this article to acknowledge their role in my life. I am reminding myself to express gratitude to clergy, religious and others to whom many of us turn for guidance and support. They have taught us in our youth and helped us in our mature years and ... I'll stop—I feel my eyes welling up to remind me of my heart's gratitude.