

**The Stories Not Told**  
**By Rev. Donald McEachin, C.S.Sp.**

Spiritans can sometimes feel unappreciated, that our accomplishments are unsung and unnoticed by confreres. Several reasons for this come to mind. The first reason may be our geographical separation; that for some of us, out of sight means out of mind. A second reason may be our hectic lifestyle, which allows us little leisure time to be in touch with one another and to notice one another's accomplishments. A third reason may be that for many of us, our personalities are such that we don't think community first (we are rugged individualists). The net effect of this is that on occasion, we may feel over-worked and under-appreciated in our ministries. This is a common feeling expressed among priests today, and we are certainly no exception.

I just returned from Our Lady of Lourdes in Monroe, NC and the farewell of Fr. Edward Vilkauskas as he leaves OLL after 12 years. I would like to tell you a bit of the story of what I experienced this weekend. In doing so, I invite you to rejoice with me, and give thanks for the marvelous story of Ed's - and the Spiritans' - 12 years in Monroe, and let it be your story as well, perhaps a "stand-in" for the marvelous work that you do that is not heralded.

At Our Lady of Lourdes, there are three English-language Masses each weekend, and two in Spanish. After each one this weekend there was a reception for Fr. Ed, with either delicious Mexican or delicious Southern home cooking. The two Sunday morning Masses were combined into one outdoor Mass for the occasion, under the pine trees where the new church is to be built. During the Sunday Mass, there were people weeping openly during the whole Mass. The cantor stopped half way through the opening hymn and turned away in tears. Ed had asked me to speak after the Gospel and he would speak after communion, afraid that if he spoke at the homily, he would be unable to finish the Mass. There were people everywhere. They had run out of chairs and people were standing in the grass in the back. Ed told me that people would come up with their hands across their chest, who were unable to receive communion for one reason or another, and they expected a blessing instead of the host. Ed had started this tradition a few years earlier, when he noticed people in church who were not coming up for communion. Some were in need of annulments, or other situations that prevented them from receiving the Eucharist. He told them to come up to the altar anyway, for a blessing. Today, almost everyone there lined up behind Fr. Ed, many who could have received communion but chose to fold their hands across their chest, in order to receive his blessing. It left the rest of us Eucharistic ministers with

nothing to do but watch. When Ed spoke after communion, it was as a pastor addressing his flock. His words were so inspired that we have included them with this newsletter.

Ten years ago, the first Spanish-speaking family showed up in the church, and were warmly welcomed by Fr. Ed. Now, only ten years later, there are two Spanish language Masses every weekend, both filled and way overflowing. There are Spanish choirs and folk music groups, youth and retreat groups, and Mexican food served after each of the Spanish Masses, every weekend.

OLL is a phenomenal success story. It is true that Catholics are moving into the Charlotte diocese as a whole; it is one of the fastest growing Catholic populations the country. However, OLL is an older town parish, with defined borders. The large influx of Catholics is into new neighboring parishes in the outlying area of Monroe. The increased participation of especially the Spanish-speaking population can be attributed to the Spiritan presence, and mostly to Fr. Ed. This is a population that has been around for a long while, and it just took the right approach to make them feel welcome and at home. I heard numerous stories of how people were brought back to the faith as I sat eating beef enchiladas and beans, in the parish hall Saturday night. The youth group has its own Mexican band, which played for us that evening.

As Ed departs for a well-deserved sabbatical, he can leave with a feeling of deep satisfaction at a job well done. But it must be incredibly difficult for him to leave this community; which has become such a part of his life's story; I came away with a feeling that I wished I could have been there throughout the years to see the parish come alive with the Spiritans who served at Our Lady of Lourdes with Ed. These other Spiritans who served at OLL (in alphabetical order) were: Fr. Vincent Donovan, Fr. Egbert Figaro, Fr. Robert Graves, Fr. William Joyce, Br. Luke Kneiper, Fr. Frank Malinowski, Fr. John McAndrew, and Br. George McLaughlin. I knew that Ed had served as Director of the Office for Evangelization in the Diocese of Charlotte, but I didn't know until this weekend how much he has put the theory into practice, and not just "talked the talk" but has "walked the walk" at Our Lady of Lourdes. I want to say a very special thanks to Ed, for an incredibly uplifting weekend, and especially for his dedicated pastoral-missionary presence in the Diocese of Charlotte.