

Father J.R. Brown
Port Chaplain, Pier
21 1968 to 1986



Excerpt taken from "Pier 21:
The Gateway that Changed
Canada" courtesy of
Lancelot Press and co-authors J.P. LeBlanc and Trudy Mitic.

Father J.R. Brown
Volunteer

In 1968 Father J.R Brown accepted the post of Port Chaplain, a post he maintained until his retirement in 1986.



Father Brown assumed his duties with compassion and enthusiasm. Armed as well with an observing eye and a keen sense of humor, the chaplain stood ready to help any newcomer in need, regardless of denomination.

Routinely, the chaplain visited the seamen and refugees in detention, offering them socks, underwear and toiletries. Maintaining that the refugees, especially, had to be shown signs of love and welcome, he often took new arrivals for a leisurely drive through the city. Father Brown recalls a Cuban refugee on one such excursion who showed a special interest in a men's shoe store. Realizing that the young man's own shoes were in tatters, the chaplain invited him to select a new pair. "As it turned out, he chose the most expensive pair! Fortunately, I had enough money to pay for them," Father Brown chuckled.

On another occasion, Father Brown was waiting at Pier 21 for three seamen in detention, for whom he had requested a day pass. He turned to a nearby RCMP officer to ask what he should do in the event that his charges attempted to escape.

"Father," the officer replied without humour, "if they run, you'll save yourself a lot of trouble if you run with them."

One of Father Brown's most challenging cases involved his legal defense of three Polish seamen for whom legal aid could not be procured. At the initial hearing in Halifax, each of the refugee's requests for asylum was briskly denied and was ordered deported. Father Brown immediately initiated an appeal, for which he and his charged were summoned to Ottawa. Against all odds, he won the appeal. The three jubilant seamen were allowed to remain in Canada. Today they are successful businessmen residing in the Toronto area.

During his term as Port Chaplain, Father Brown conducted many services for seamen either aboard the ships or on the waterfront. By and large, the

seamen relied on the chaplain for spiritual and emotional guidance. Many were plagued with homesickness, mental depression, and general feelings of hopelessness, complex ailments that Father Brown attempted to alleviate during their short stay in Halifax.



The services provided a challenge to the chaplain, who has only a smattering of foreign languages himself. However, his ingenuity helped him design a unique system that would enable people of many languages to worship together. Using his extensive collection of Bibles in foreign languages, he translated each component of the Roman Catholic Mass into nine different languages. The components were numbered and transcripts of the service were copied on colored paper, using a different color for each of the languages.

When conducting a service, Father Brown made available these transcripts as well as his Bibles. It was not unusual, he recalls, to hear

the Creed recited in five different languages as worshippers were directed to number four on their sheets of paper.

When the large groups of Cuban and Czechoslovakian refugees arrived in the 1960s, many were temporarily housed at Pier 21. Most eventually moved to the boarding houses of Halifax. Father Brown estimates that he has been in every boarding house in the city. He recalls visiting a young Czechoslovakian couple and their newborn child. Asking the couple what name they had chosen for their son, he was surprised to hear the reply, "Robert."

"Robert? After whom is he being named?" the chaplain asked, well aware of the European custom to name the first born after his paternal grandfather.

"After Robert Kennedy," the young man responded.

He was astonished, the chaplain recalls, to hear that these people had heard of Robert Kennedy through their underground sources, and that they had secretly heralded his anti-discrimination policies, even in the midst of the stringent censorship and loss of freedom in their country. Not even Robert Kennedy himself could have been aware of the far-reaching effects of his outspokenness.

On another occasion, a Cuban refugee was asked by the chaplain if there was anything he needed. His response was not the usual request for toiletries or cigarettes.

"Yes," the young man replied, "a piano."

Father Brown was so surprised that he recalls asking, "what color?"

The Cuban explained that he was a professional pianist and greatly missed being able to play. The chaplain took him to Mount St Vincent University where he played beautifully for hours.

Such was the dedication of the Port Chaplain who walked through the halls of the Pier and who roamed along the windy waterfront looking for hearts and souls to touch. His concern was genuine and his kindness sincere. In time he grew to be loved by the refugees.

Looking back on a career that spanned two decades, Father Brown fondly recalls the many people who became a part of his life, who inadvertently shaped his attitudes and who reinforced his basic belief in the goodness of mankind. He chuckles as he reminisces about the four weddings he conducted at Pier 21, and about the funeral for a sea

captain at which he was asked to officiate. At the conclusion of the



funeral services, the good captain was soundly toasted by his survivors with a stiff nip of rum.

The chaplain acknowledges the valued support received from the knights of Columbus, the Sisters of Charity and the Sisters of Service, the Red Cross Society and many of the Halifax

merchants. He also received many private donations, gifts of money and supplies that essentially provided him with an operating budget.

With regard to his work at the Pier, Father Brown concluded thoughtfully, "I'm very grateful I was assigned to do this work. Because what you get, you couldn't get in books; you get it through exposure, meeting these people of different nationalities, whether it's on ships or through refugees or immigration - their culture, music, everything."

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