

# A Viatorian Pastor in Today's Church

Each pastor answers in his own unique way the question of what constitutes a pastor today. Although each person is unique, the characteristics common to all pastors include showing concern for the welfare of individual parishioners and empowering them to assume their rightful role in ministry.

Fr. John N. Peeters, CSV, recently became pastor of St. Patrick Parish in Kankakee, Illinois, at the young age of 66. He arrived with a wealth of experience, which included being associate pastor in Belize and serving at Viatorian administrative centers in the United States and in Rome.

With this background, he traveled to Kankakee, a city of approximately 20,000 located about 50 miles south of Chicago. The city has a long historical relationship with the Viatorians, who arrived there in 1865 to begin the American foundation.

Fr. John sees his role as that of an animator wherein he works with other leaders as co-equals. Viatorian associates Kenneth and Michelle Barrie, Mary Finks, and Marilyn Mulcahy assist him in youth, music, and pastoral ministries. He stated that he came into a "well-oiled operation" that is continuing and growing because of the dedication of the ministers.

Vatican II stated that liturgy is the summit and the source of community, and that value is certainly reflected at St. Patrick's. Last October and November, the parish undertook a survey asking the parishioners to state the ten greatest strengths and weaknesses of the parish. After the results were collated, the parish leadership hosted a town hall meeting to discuss the results. The number one strength was the welcoming spirit of the parish, followed by the quality of its liturgies. Other areas included youth ministry, quality of the school, and the parish's service to the community. The list of weaknesses chiefly centered on the need for capital improvements, which are being addressed as finances permit.

Besides celebrating liturgy, Fr. John helps provide the structure in which Ken and Michelle Barrie coordinated the fifth trip by the youth group to Mexico, where they planned to build two houses at Ciudad Juarez. Unfortunately, because of increasing social and political unrest in Ciudad Juarez, this trip had to be cancelled at the last minute. The two houses, however, will still be built by local volunteers, who will use the materials supplied through donations made over the past several years by parishioners at St. Patrick and St. Teresa Parishes in Kankakee.

Within his schedule, Fr. John manages to represent the parish in the local community. He serves as a member of the board of directors for the Gateway Coalition. Approximately twenty-five local parishes participate in this ecumenical project, whereby they contribute money and expertise so that, when people come to the parishes for help, they are referred there. A staff person sits down with them and together they work at resolving the problem. Recently, Fr. John applied to the Viatorian Social Justice Fund and secured a \$2,500 grant for the organization.



Fr. John has also worked with local civic organizations. Among the many groups he is affiliated with is a group of local businessmen who annually sponsor a golf tournament to provide Christmas dinners. What is unique about the dinners is that they are held in seven locations and they serve between 700 and 800 meals. The camaraderie of the meal is as important as the nutrition and for that reason it is offered only on a dine-in basis.

As in all Viatorian institutions, the educational component is vital. Recently, three local parish schools merged to form Aquinas Catholic Academy, which holds classes in the school buildings at St. Patrick Parish. The parish is attuned to the quality of the education provided for the 220 students. Fr. John occasionally visits the school and often celebrates the students' weekly Mass. He says that he enjoys the interaction with the students and that they always present interesting questions and perspectives about life and faith.

Fr. John went to St. Patrick Parish in August, 2007, and the dedication of the ministers made his transition there a very easy one. Working closely with the leadership, he strives to act in a collaborative manner so as to continue to enrich the spirit of the parish and to make it an increasingly welcoming place where all people – older and younger alike – can deepen their lives of faith.