

Organic bakery gives dignity to those in need

By Mags Storey | Ontario Correspondent

TORONTO, ON—One of Toronto's top-rated organic bakeries started some 20 years ago when a homeless baker named Joe brought his bread mixer into St. John the Compassionate Mission.

"When people come into the mission they bring with them all that they are—their whole self," says Hilda Tzavaras, director of social enterprise. "It doesn't matter if they sleep in a box under a bridge or are the president of a company. We receive every single person exactly where they are in their life."

Joe began baking again from the mission's basement, selling his bread door-to-door. He died shortly afterwards, but the bakery continued to grow, eventually moving into its current storefront location on Broadview Avenue.

Today, St John's Bakery specializes in organic sourdough breads and sweets, handmade from scratch in the traditional French method. It is owned and operated by St. John the Compassionate Mission, a Russian Orthodox mission which offers daily meals, a thrift store, a tutoring academy and St. Silouan Orthodox Church.

Bakery workers are a mixture of volunteers and employees. These have included people on disability support or social assistance and those struggling with poverty, mental illness, substance abuse and addictions.

According to Father Roberto Ubertino, priest of the mission and St. Silouan Orthodox Church, their goal is always to produce food of the highest possible quality.

"People shouldn't buy our bread because they feel sorry for us," he says. "They should buy our bread because it is the best in Toronto. Our philosophy is that people do not want charity—they want work. At the end of the day they are there to bake bread. It's not a touchy-feely therapy session. It is a real job.

"Success is really important in the healing continuum. There are a lot of people who need a chance to succeed."

Tzavaras says: "One of our morning bakers, Gordon Brown, was a 25-year crack cocaine and heroin addict. He's been completely clean for about four years now. At one point he fell back, and we had to fire him. We said, 'Get your life together, because we're here, and we want you back.' And, by golly, didn't he do that! We hired him back and he's been highly successful. He's become a speaker for the United Way. He's been out in the hallowed halls of the corporate world, telling his story and taking the bakery with him."

Father Ubertino adds: "If people fail they do not get dropped off. They can come back here and heal. The wisdom is finding what is the measure for success in each person. As a church, we see people as on a continuum. Even the person standing in the corner, even the person just looking in the door—are not, for us, outside the circle."

The bakery receives funding from the Toronto Enterprise Fund, the United Way and other organisations. Their tutoring program, St John's Academy, runs a monthly workshop in the bakery teaching local children how to cook healthy organic meals as a pilot program in partnership with World Vision.

Recipes for the bread were a gift from sister community Pain de Vie in France. Several parishioners have visited the community to learn their methods. Father Ubertino spent time there on sabbatical and learned how to bake bread using 200-year-old wood ovens. "The only thing I had to do was look at the birds, bake bread and pray," Father Ubertino says. "The work itself is therapeutic because the product itself is sacred. Bread is a basic symbol—it is how God gives Himself to us.

"Baking bread is not the same as typing words or stuffing envelopes. It is not just giving people work to keep them busy. There is something healing about transforming matter—water and the flour—into bread.

"In our sociality we've become so disconnected—we don't touch anything; we don't smell anything. We've become virtual. There is nothing virtual about bread. We are transforming matter and transforming people."

