



Together

The Newsletter of St Michael's Community Services

Issue 1

2024

Dear esteemed readers of **Together**,

Welcome to this special issue of **Together** for 2024, our community newsletter, dedicated to uplifting and supporting the homeless, seniors, and youth among us. This edition is packed with updates on our recent activities and heartfelt stories, spanning from the bustling streets of China to the charming corners of Paris, and back to our local volunteers who form the backbone of our charity.

Our journey over the past months has been remarkable. In China we witnessed incredible acts of camaraderie among the travellers, while in Paris, our mission brought us closer to individuals whose stories touched our hearts deeply. Back home, our dedicated volunteers have continued to make a profound impact, embodying a spirit of 'togetherness' through their tireless efforts and unwavering compassion.

As you read through these pages, you will find inspiring stories, significant updates on our programs, and a glimpse into the lives of those we serve and those who serve. This issue is a testament to the extraordinary difference we can make in our community.

Thank you for being a part of this journey with us. Your support and involvement are what keep us moving forward, spreading hope and kindness wherever we go. Happy reading!

Editorial Board

A MESSAGE OF THANKS TO OUR WONDERFUL VOLUNTEERS

We, at SMCS, would like to express our heartfelt gratitude for the incredible work you do in cooking and other services for the homeless. Your selfless dedication and kindness shine brightly, making a significant impact on the lives of those who are less fortunate.



A SNAPSHOT FROM THE ST MICHAEL'S KITCHEN
— PREPARING MEALS FOR THE HOMELESS.



OUR WONDERFUL SMCS VOLUNTEERS, EXHIBITING AN INFECTIOUS SPIRIT OF
TEAMWORK AND GENUINE RAPPORT, AT CENTRAL STATION FOR CHRISTMAS 2023.

IN THIS ISSUE

- 1.-2. Welcome; A Message of Thanks to our Wonderful Volunteers
2. From Faded Glory to Radiant Splendour
3. Antique Book Review; Wednesdays of Compassion
4. My Trip to China: an eye-opening experience; On Giving
5. Balancing Freedom and Respect; Spiritual Corner
6. Journey of Faith: My visit to Chapelle Ste Rita and St Julien-Le-Pauvre Melkite Church in Paris
7. Getting to Know One Another: Johnny El-Kassis
- 8.-9. Events in the SMCS Calendar
9. A Story from Central Station
10. Kitchen Corner: Rose Sorial and Maha Tayar
11. In Loving Memory ...
12. Ripples of Good; Our Mission Statement; Our Vision; Our Story; Contact Us



Together

A message of thanks to our wonderful volunteers (cont.)

Your efforts go beyond providing a warm meal; you are offering a ray of hope, comfort, and a sense of belonging to those who often feel marginalised. Your willingness to give your time and energy to prepare and serve meals is an inspiration to us all.

In a world that can sometimes seem disconnected, your acts of compassion create a bridge of understanding and empathy. You are a beacon of light, reminding us that small actions can have profound effects on the lives of others. Through your work, you are not only nourishing bodies but also uplifting spirits.

Thank you for embodying the spirit of generosity and community. Your dedication to helping those in need is a testament to the goodness that exists in humanity.

FROM FADED GLORY TO RADIANT SPLENDOUR



A CLOSE-UP OF THE ICON OF ST NICHOLAS (1925).

One of the most significant and distinctive features of an Eastern-Rite Church is the iconostasis (icon screen). This is a wall separating the sanctuary (where the altar is housed) from the nave, and typically consists of both icons and religious symbolism. The iconostasis at St Michael's dates to 1923 and is constructed of marble imported from Italy. When installed in Waterloo, it was blessed in a special ceremony by the Archbishop of Sydney, Dr. Michael Kelly. It had been commissioned by then-Rev. Frs. Sylvanus Mansour and Sophronius Khoury back in 1921, and was properly completed in 1927, when the final icons arrived from Jerusalem, thanks to the petitioning of Archim. Nicholas Caba. It is certainly true that any new visitor to the Cathedral is immediately captivated by this liturgical and architectural feature. Consequently, it is of utmost importance that it be conserved for future generations, so that they may appreciate and understand this shared heritage.



SOLESTE, AN ART CONSERVATOR FROM DAVID STEIN & CO, CAREFULLY WRAPS THE ICON OF ST ELIAS FOR TRANSPORTATION.

During the Parish's transition from the original Waterloo premises to Darlington, between 1977-79, the iconostasis, being structurally fragile, had to be fixed to the back wall of the Cathedral – although, it still provides a dramatic backdrop in the sanctuary. Under the guidance of Archim. Aftimos Haddad, two icons from the iconostasis were replaced with contemporary portrayals of Archangel Michael and St John the Baptist. Archim. Haddad's vision for the assemblage of icons on the iconostasis sought to comply more with the Byzantine tradition, which strictly stipulates where Saints are to be placed. Thankfully, those original works were moved to the Baptistry and constitute the oldest icons in the Cathedral's extant collection. They represent the Holy Prophet Elijah (St Elias) and St Nicholas, dating to 1925. Their exact provenance and writer have not yet been properly determined, yet the icons feature Arabic calligraphy inscriptions on their bases

indicating their donors as Elias Dadour and Michael Sakr.

Recently, it came to the Parish Council's attention that these two icons were in a state of disrepair, following years of neglect. They featured serious wax, grime, and resin accretions, along with stains which covered many areas. This accumulated from nearly a century of using the icons in ritual processions and lighting oil lamps and candles. Further, parts of the paint had completely come off the canvas leading to flaking and areas requiring filling. Finally, retouching to areas of paint loss and drying cracks is needed. Churches often house sacred art pieces which are integral to the cultural and historical legacy of a community, region, or even a nation. St Michael's, being the first non-Anglo-Celtic Church in all of Australia is no exception. These icons are most precious, and it is great that they are here in Australia, part of our nation's art collections.

In the Byzantine rite, an icon is not merely a work of art. It is a living medium for prayer to be treated with reverence – scripture in a visual form and a mirror for our souls. Icons are written, not painted, which makes them distinct from non-iconic religious art, including Michelangelo's *The Last Judgement* and da Vinci's *Last Supper*. They are optimistic, even affirmative, visions of the material creation in an unfallen state. Noting these aspects, the Cathedral has partnered with David Stein & Co, fine art conservators in Alexandria. This company is the largest private art conservation practice in the Asia-Pacific region and has more than 30 years of experience in the field. David has also visited the Cathedral on numerous occasions, kindly providing his professional advice as to the best ways to proceed with conservation. We look forward to welcoming the icons back to the Cathedral in several weeks' time.

Jack Bettar

ANTIQUE BOOK REVIEW

Sister Mary of Jesus Crucified, by the Rev. D Buzy, S.C.J., Sands & Co, London, 1923.

Saint Mariam Baouardy (1846 – 1878), was initially known, in the Catholic world, by the Anglicised version of her name – Sister Mary of Jesus Crucified. This biography, translated from the French, is a well-bound, illustrated volume. A stamp on the inside cover shows that it was once in the Sister of Charity Information Centre, at Lewisham, Sydney.

This early biography is not as well sourced as recent studies of the life of St Mariam, but it connects us directly to the French Carmelite culture in which she lived as a religieuse. This book also gives us a glimpse into how she was understood by English speaking people in the interwar years of the twentieth century. It has many charming and informative aspects, such as photographs of the Carmelite Convent of Bethlehem, when it was first built.

At the time this book was written, Europeans recognised Palestine as a distinct territory. For example, when the foundation at Bethlehem was planned: '... it was necessary to obtain

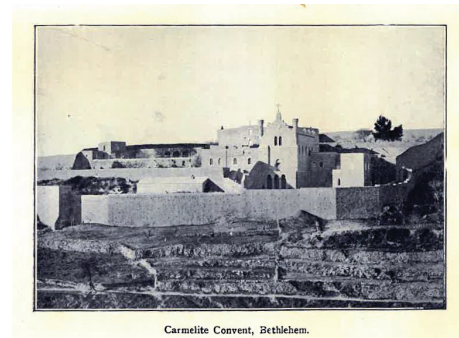
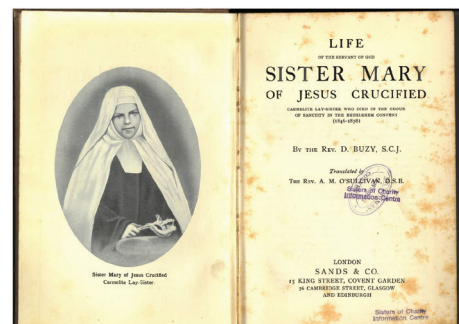
the authorisation of the Holy See for its establishment in Palestine.' (p 102) The people were termed 'Arabians' - a linguistic rather than national category. St Mariam herself was born in the village of Abellin, as a subject of the Ottoman Sultan.

It is noticeable that St Mariam showed a commitment to religious foundation in her homeland, and that she never wavered despite poor health and many reversals - apparent failures - by which Providence made her an instrument of holy designs.

In 1919, in the foreword to this edition, Rev. Buzy wrote: 'She, many times during life, warded off by her prayers black clouds that her prophetic vision saw gathering over Jerusalem and Bethlehem. May she dispel them again, and cause to re-appear over the Holy Places an intensely clear sky as a token of re-acquired peace and consolidated Faith.' Amen.

Dr. Thérèse Taylor

Thérèse was a lecturer at Charles Sturt University and the author of a scholarly



Carmelite Convent, Bethlehem.

biography on Bernadette of Lourdes (Bloomsbury Press, London, 2008). She is now a full-time writer and works in the fields of Life Writing and Religious Studies.

WEDNESDAYS OF COMPASSION: NURTURING HEARTS AND SOULS

In the hectic rhythm of our lives, Wednesdays often blend into the ordinary canvas of the week. However, for some, Wednesdays are imbued with a unique, life-enriching quality. For those who have chosen to devote their Wednesdays to a cause close to their hearts, these midweek days hold a special place. It is a day that brings together love, compassion, and a strong sense of community, where the act of giving becomes an opportunity for personal growth and fulfillment.

Our Wednesdays unfold with a sense of purpose. We kickstart our day by visiting the Food Bank. There we carefully select items that will not only sustain but also nourish those who are less fortunate. The simple act of choosing these essentials feels like we are picking up fragments of kindness and compassion, ready to piece them together into something meaningful.

But the day does not end there. With boxes of food in tow, we embark on a journey to collect contributions from different volunteers. Their willingness to partake in our shared mission serves as a reminder that compassion is a

bond that transcends individual lives. It is heart-warming to witness the generosity of people who understand the significance of their contribution, no matter how small it might seem.

Arriving at church, we find ourselves amidst a sea of provisions – a tangible representation of the collective efforts of many compassionate souls. As we organise the food, arrange the items neatly, and prepare for the next phase of our mission, a sense of purpose engulfs us. We are united in a cause that is greater than ourselves, a cause that reminds us of the beauty in giving without expecting anything in return.

And then comes the most rewarding part of our day – the distribution. The volunteers move in unison, some head to Martin Place and others to Central Station where the food hampers, carefully assembled earlier in the day, are now in the hands of our friends the needy. The joy that emanates from these encounters is palpable. It is not just the food that matters; it is the act of compassion, the acknowledgment of another's humanity, and the simple yet profound gesture of caring that fills the



THE FIRST STOP EACH WEDNESDAY: COLLECTING FRESH PRODUCE FROM THE FOODBANK, GLENDENNING, NSW.

hearts of both giver and receiver. In a world that often seems to be moving too fast, the beauty of a Wednesday spent in the service of others reminds us of the innate kindness and compassion within us all. It is a day where love is shared, compassion is extended, community is built, and souls are nourished. These Wednesdays of compassion serve as a shining example of how a single day, devoted to a worthy cause, can elevate our lives and the lives of those we touch. They teach us that the most precious gift we can give is our time, our kindness, and our love.

Roda Kanawati

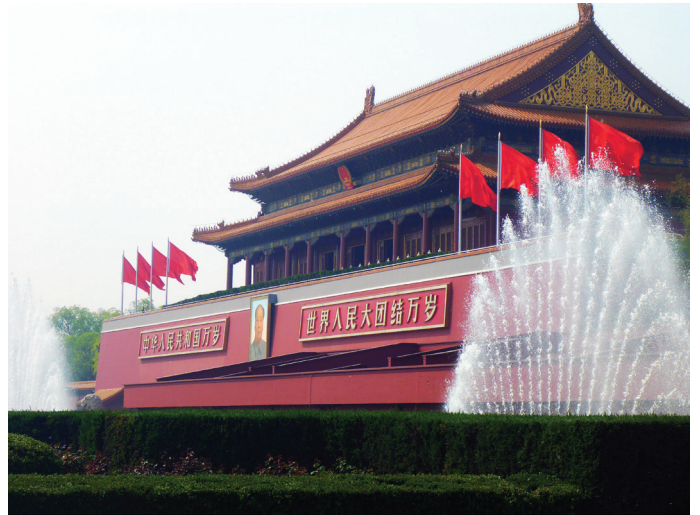
MY TRIP TO CHINA: AN EYE-OPENING EXPERIENCE

Visiting China has always been on my mind; it is a country with most fascinating and indeed intriguing past, present and certainly future. China is one of the oldest civilizations, with huge natural resources and varied industries. I grew up when China was closed to the world and visits were not easily approved. When St Michael's Cathedral announced that a tour was being planned to China, I was one of the first to subscribe. The tour was led by Fr Gerges Al Butros and included 44 participants from St Michael as well as other churches. Yet despite their relatively large number, all members of the group felt like we were one big family. Simultaneously with ours, another larger Melkite tour was led by Fr Tony Abouchaaya of The Lady of Dormition Church, and our paths crossed on a number of occasions, where we were able to intermingle.

The tour was very busy, packed with things to see and do. Some of the highlights were the visit to Tiananmen Square in Beijing, famous as the largest square in the world, but also for the students' demonstration in 1989, where armed forces were used to clear them, resulting in hundreds of deaths. From the Square we moved into the Forbidden City, which was built from 1406 to 1420 by the Emperor of the Ming Dynasty as the imperial palace. Formed of 9999 rooms, the Forbidden City is a massive and wonderful piece of architecture, but at the time was barred to most of the subjects. The group visited other cities, particularly Hangzhou and Suzhou, where we spent some hours at a centre for the manufacturing of objects of jade stone, and others for Chinese natural medicine, growing the silkworm and manufacturing silk objects, and growing and packing green tea. Shanghai was left to last, and it was just stunning as a city. Far more grandiose and organised than I expected. The beautifully built high rising blocks, the spaces left between them, and the broad streets are astounding. However, one cannot also fail to notice the perfect asphalt paving of the roads and the well-prepared curbs. Both streets and buildings are absolutely clean, and the whole city is full of green trees, with boxes containing flowerpots lining most of the streets.

The program included night activities. We attended two shows, artistic and acrobatic, both were spectacular and memorable. Finally, we had a water cruise to see Shanghai by night, and the view of the magnificent buildings, covered with colourful lights was simply breathtaking.

The tour showed us a different China than what we knew. The beauty, the cleanness, the good manners, and standard of living, at least in the main cities, made a lasting impression on me. It certainly exceeded all expectations. Naguib Kanawati



ENTRANCE TO THE FORBIDDEN CITY IN TIANANMEN SQUARE, BEIJING.



THE ICONIC WORLD HERITAGE SITE OF THE GREAT WALL OF MUTIANYU.

ON GIVING

Kahlil Gibran is one of the most well-known and loved Middle Eastern poets internationally. His timeless work, *The Prophet*, published in 1923, has sold tens of millions of copies and pioneered a new movement in Arabic literature of poetic prose. The following short excerpt from this text directly connects to our spirit of 'giving' at SMCS:

Then said a rich man, speak to us of Giving.

And he answered:

You give but little when you give of your possessions.

It is when you give of yourself that you truly give.

For what are your possessions but things you keep and guard for fear you may need them tomorrow?

—
There are those who give little of the much which they have – and they give it for recognition and their hidden desire makes their gifts unwholesome.

And there are those who have little and give it all.

These are the believers in life and the bounty of life, and their coffer is never empty.

There are those who give with joy, and that joy is their reward.

And there are those who give with pain, and that pain is their baptism.

—
You often say, "I would give, but only to the deserving."

The trees in your orchard say not so, nor the flocks in your pasture.

They give that they may live, for to withhold is to perish.



KAHLIL GIBRAN

BALANCING FREEDOM AND RESPECT: A CALL FOR THOUGHTFUL EXPRESSION

In today's world, we often find ourselves walking a tightrope between freedom of speech and respect for others' beliefs. The recent controversies surrounding the Paris Olympics Opening Ceremony have sparked a heated debate about the larger issue of where this line should be drawn. While artistic expression is a cornerstone of free societies, it is crucial to reflect on how our actions might affect others. When public performances or displays seem to parody religious/cultural figures or sacred moments, they can deeply hurt those who hold these beliefs dear. This issue is not about censorship, but about simply being mindful of the diverse faiths and societies that make up our global community. We should strive to create art and events which unite people, not drive them apart. Boycotting, for example, may feel like a strong step, but this is one way in which individuals can peacefully act on their concerns.

The renowned 20th century French Islamist, Louis Massingon, was a strong

advocate of mutual understanding and interfaith dialogue. He wrote that when we study or interpret faith, we must cultivate a "science of compassion". In a world where vicious tides of rhetoric continue to circulate from both secular and religious sources, Massingon encourages us not to pity other people, but to feel with them. There are many instances where we are confronted with material which is alien to us. Our response should be to ask ourselves "Why?" – continuing to ponder this question until we can visualise the historical and social environments in which they were created and appreciate that, if you were in those or equivalent circumstances, you may have felt the same. To see things from another person's perspective, you do not need to agree with them, just appreciate their context. Therefore, instead of incessantly promoting our own ideas and sentiments, we consider others in our communities who have different persuasions.

As we move forward, let us aim for a world where freedom of expression goes hand in hand with reciprocal respect and comprehension. This balance is key to building a society where everyone feels valued and heard.

Aboutna Gerges and Jack Bettar



THE FRENCH SCHOLAR OF ISLAM, LOUIS MASSINGON, C. 1909, DRESSED IN A TRADITIONAL EGYPTIAN 'GALABEYA' FOR A STUDIO PORTRAIT AT AL-AZHAR UNIVERSITY, CAIRO.

SPIRITUAL CORNER

The Old Testament: A Cornerstone of Christian Faith and Practice

The Old Testament, despite its stylistic differences from the New Testament, remains an indispensable part of the Christian canon and plays a crucial role in the life of the Church. This ancient collection of texts provides the historical, theological, and moral foundations upon which Christianity is built.

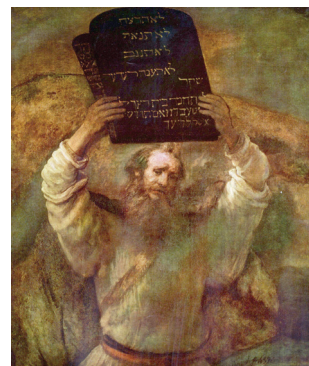
At its core, the Old Testament narrates the creation of the world, the fall of humanity, and God's covenant with His chosen people. These accounts establish the context for understanding humanity's need for redemption, a central tenet of the Christian faith. The Old Testament's portrayal of God's interactions with humanity reveals His character - holy, just, merciful, and loving - attributes that remain fundamental to Christian theology.

Theologically, the Old Testament introduces key concepts essential to Christianity. The idea of monotheism, God's sovereignty, and divine law are all rooted in Old Testament teachings. These foundations are crucial for comprehending the New Testament's messages and the person and work of Jesus Christ. The prophetic content of the Old Testament is particularly significant to the Church. Numerous

prophecies, especially those concerning the coming Messiah, find their fulfillment in the New Testament. This continuity reinforces the Christian belief in God's overarching plan of salvation and the divine inspiration of Scripture.

Moreover, the Old Testament is a rich source of moral and ethical teachings. The Ten Commandments, wisdom literature, and prophetic exhortations provide timeless guidance on personal conduct, social justice, and righteous living. These teachings continue to inform Christian ethics and are frequently referenced in sermons and Christian education. While the Old Testament's style differs from the New Testament, encompassing various genres such as historical narratives, poetry, prophecy, and law codes, its enduring relevance is widely recognised.

Many churches incorporate Old Testament readings into their liturgies, and preachers often draw upon these texts for their sermons. The Psalms, in particular, remain central to Christian worship, providing a vocabulary for praise, lament, and spiritual reflection. Furthermore, the Old Testament provides essential context for understanding



Jesus' teachings and actions. Jesus himself frequently quoted and alluded to Old Testament scriptures, demonstrating their continued authority and relevance. The apostles and early church leaders also relied heavily on the Old Testament to explain and defend the gospel message.

In conclusion, the Old Testament's importance in the Church cannot be overstated. It provides the historical, theological, and prophetic groundwork for the Christian faith, offers timeless moral guidance, and continues to shape Christian worship and teaching. By embracing both testaments, the Church maintains a holistic understanding of God's revelation and His redemptive plan for humanity.

Aboutna Gerges

JOURNEY OF FAITH: MY VISIT TO CHAPELLE STE RITA AND ST JULIEN-LE-PAUVRE MELKITE CHURCH IN PARIS

My last visit to Paris, though marked by illness, turned into a deeply spiritual pilgrimage that left a lasting impression on my heart. Despite the challenges, I found solace and strength in visiting two churches that meant a lot to me. The first is Ste Rita, in the heart of Pigalle, and the second is St Julien-le-Pauvre, at the back of Notre Dame. I was blessed to attend a beautiful Sunday Service in both churches and chat with Fr Ramzi from Ste Rita and Johnny El-Kassis from St Julien.

Chapelle Ste Rita

In the vibrant and historic Pigalle area of Paris, lies the Chapelle Ste Rita, a sanctuary that radiates warmth and spirituality. The chapel, with its elegant simplicity, offers a serene escape from the bustling streets of Pigalle. The soft lighting, the gentle hum of prayers, and the serene ambiance created an environment of peace and reflection. The Chapel was filled with parishioners, all gathered to bid farewell to their beloved priest, who was being transferred to another parish. The sense of community and unity was palpable, as people exchanged warm greetings and shared memories of the priest's time at Ste Rita. It was evident that he had touched many lives and had been a guiding light for the parish.

The Mass was a beautiful and moving service, filled with heartfelt prayers, hymns, and reflections. The parish priest, Fr Ramzi, whose gentle and compassionate nature had endeared him to his congregation, led the service with a mix of solemnity and joy. His homily was a poignant reflection on his time at Ste Rita, expressing gratitude for the love and support he had received from the parish community. The choir's melodious voices filled the chapel, enhancing the spiritual experience. The music, combined with the rituals of the Mass, created an atmosphere of deep reverence and thanksgiving. It was a service that celebrated not only the priest's contributions but also the enduring spirit of the parish community.

During the service I took a moment to pray for my family and friends back in Sydney and I lit a candle at all their intentions. In the quiet sanctity of Chapelle Ste Rita, I felt a deep connection to my loved ones, despite the physical distance. It was a comforting and uplifting experience, knowing that my prayers were lifted up in such a sacred space. As the Mass concluded, the congregation gathered to express their gratitude and bid farewell the priest. There were tears, smiles, and heartfelt words exchanged, reflecting the deep bond that had been formed over the years. It was a testament to the power of community and faith, and the significant role that Fr Ramzi had played in the lives of his parishioners.

La Chapelle de Ste Rita, with its welcoming ambiance and strong sense of community, is a true gem in the heart of Pigalle. For anyone visiting Paris, a visit to this chapel offers a chance to experience the rich spiritual heritage of the city. Whether you attend Mass or simply spend a few moments in reflection, Ste Rita provides a sanctuary of peace and solace. As I left the chapel, I carried with me the memories of the beautiful service and the sense of belonging that I felt. It was a reminder that no matter where we are in the world, our faith and connections to others can provide comfort and strength. .

St Julien-le-Pauvre: A Melkite Treasure

Nestled in the heart of Paris, amid the hustle and bustle of le Quartier Latin, stands a hidden haven of spiritual serenity – the Melkite Church of St Julien-le-Pauvre. As I approached this church, I was immediately struck by its historic charm. Built in the 12th century, it is one of the oldest places of worship in Paris, and its architecture reflects a rich tapestry of history and faith. The exterior, with its weathered stone walls and intricate carvings, invites visitors to step back in time and explore the spiritual heritage of the city.

Entering the church, I was enveloped by a sense of sacred stillness. The interior, though modest in size, exudes a quiet grandeur. The soft light filtering through the stained-glass windows cast a gentle glow on the icons and frescoes that adorned the walls, each telling a story of faith and devotion. The aroma of incense filled the air, adding to the atmosphere of sanctity. The Sunday service here was equally beautiful, filled with the enchanting sounds of liturgical hymns and prayers. The priest, Fr Nadim, in ornate vestments, led the congregation with grace and solemnity. The liturgy, celebrated in Arabic, French, and Greek, was a beautiful blend of Eastern and Western Christian traditions. His homily, in French, conveyed a universal message of love, hope, and faith.

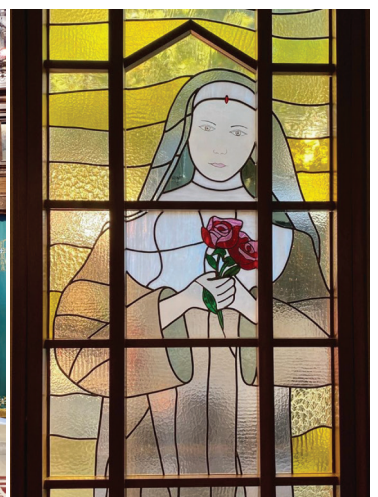
After the service, I had the opportunity to speak to one of the youth leaders, Johnny El-Kassis, who shared insights into the church's history and the vibrant community that gathers there. More interesting information about St Julien can be found in the interview with Johnny that we conducted for **Together**. As I reflect on my visit, I am grateful for the blessings I received at Ste Rita and St Julien-le-Pauvre. These churches, each with its unique charm and community, provided me with a sense of peace and hope. My conversations with Fr Ramzi and Johnny El-Kassis were not only enlightening but also a reminder of the universal nature of faith that transcends cultural and geographical boundaries.

For anyone visiting Paris, I highly recommend taking the time to visit Ste Rita and St Julien-le-Pauvre. Whether you attend a Mass or simply spend a few moments in quiet reflection, these two historic churches offer a profound and moving encounter with the divine.

Roda Kanawati



THE AUTHOR IN FRONT OF THE 19TH C. ICONOSTASIS OF ST JULIEN-LE-PAUVRE IN PARIS, JULY 2024.



STAINED GLASS WINDOW DEPICTING STE RITA, PIGALLE, PARIS.

GETTING TO KNOW ONE ANOTHER

A heart-to-heart conversation with Johnny El-Kassis

It is always a pleasure to interview people for **Together** and expand our knowledge of the way others live around the world. Meet Johnny, a dedicated and passionate member of the Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre Melkite Parish in Paris. Of Lebanese origin, Johnny is in Paris to pursue post-graduate studies. Johnny teaches us how, even living far away from the country of one's birth, you can find a spiritual home and foster personal growth and a deeper connection to your heritage.

- Can you tell us a bit about yourself and how you came to be involved with this Parish?

I am a Lebanese Melkite Christian, originally from the city of Sidon, in the south of Lebanon. I am currently a lawyer in training with the Beirut Bar Association and pursuing a PhD in law. Before coming to Paris to study, I knew of there being a Melkite parish. So, when I arrived, I immediately attended Saint Julien-le-Pauvre.

- What are some of the activities or groups you participate in within the Parish?

I am involved in the Choir as well as in the Youth Group.

- How has your involvement in Saint Julien-le-Pauvre influenced your personal and spiritual growth?

Growing up in Lebanon, I was already heavily involved in church activities. It felt natural for me to do the same in Paris. The church is a spiritual centre, allowing us to lead a rich and prayerful life as well as to actively participate in the Divine Liturgy. More specifically, the Melkite Parish keeps me close to my heritage and roots, through our Arabic language and rite.

- How did you become a member of the Choir?

The Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre choir has a rich history. Fr Maximos (Joseph) Fahme had led the choir since 1955. In 2020, Fr Fahme decided to step down. As a result, together with the Parish Priest, Fr Nadim Haddad, it was decided to get the youth involved in the Choir. We met regularly to practice together. Having some familiarity with the Byzantine chants and liturgy, I was eager to share this experience with my fellow young parishioners. The experience was a success and is still going on now. The Choir is formed of talented members of the Parish, of all ages. The Youth are of course especially encouraged to join, to learn more about our liturgy and tradition, but all are welcome.

- What is your most memorable experience with the Youth Choir?

One of my memorable experiences with the Choir was participating in public concerts across various churches in Paris. Our own church, Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre, hosted a Paschal Concert in 2023, and we also participated more than once in the inter-ecclesial concerts organised by the EEChO Association.

- What is your favourite hymn?

It is a difficult question because I like them all! My top three would be the Great Doxology, the Axion Estin, and Psalm 141 (which we chant during Vespers – “I cry to you o’ Lord”).

- When did you arrive in Paris? Did you find it challenging adapting to a new city and finding a community?

I arrived in 2020 to continue my studies. I was enrolled in a master's degree in the Paris II Panthéon-Assas University. Moving to a new country can be challenging, but, as I said, I already knew there was a Melkite community in Paris. This allowed me to immediately feel part of the Parish and become involved in various ways. This involvement has helped me in overcoming the challenge of being in a country that is not mine.

- What advice would you give to other young people looking to get involved in their Parish?

We cannot live our lives properly if we do not know Christ, our identity as Christians, and our traditions as Melkites. We have to strengthen our spiritual lives through attending the Divine Liturgy, personal and communal prayer, staying close to the Holy Mysteries, as well as reading the Gospel and the Church Fathers. As far as getting involved, I would say: simply make yourself known, reach out to your Parish Priest or Youth Group and offer your help. There is always something to be done and each one of us has a special gift God has given. We are all called to use them for the glory of God and His Church.

- Tell us what makes Saint Julien-le-Pauvre a special parish.

Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre is a beautiful symbol of how God's love can unite us despite our differences. Here, all of us worship the one true God together. We are from Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, all over the Middle East, as well as France and other countries. We form special friendships that are bonded by our common discipleship to Christ. Here, we create sincere friendships and worship together despite our different political views and origins. We also all have the opportunity to get involved and live a rich spiritual life and be part of a vibrant community.

Interview conducted by Roda Kanawati and Jack Bettar.



JOHNNY CHANTING IN ONE OF PARIS' GRAND CATHEDRALS.



JOHNNY (L) WITH OTHER MEMBERS OF THE YOUTH CHOIR AT ST JULIEN.

EVENTS IN THE SMCS CALENDAR

How vibrant is our community!

Egyptian Cultural Day

The Egyptian Cultural Day, held at St Michael's Hall on 1 October 2023, was an opportunity for people from many backgrounds to gather and share in community and cuisine. Throughout the day, activities like bingo and backgammon were commonplace, with prizes for the patrons. However, the main event was a delectable assortment of Egyptian food, featuring the well-loved koshary, molokhia, hawawshi, bamya and, of course, oum ali for dessert. The whole day reminded me so dearly of my recent trip to Egypt. The atmosphere had me feeling like I was right back in Cairo! Almost everyone contributed a dish, displaying the event's throughline of hospitality and community. Starting at lunchtime and lasting through to mid-afternoon, the event was a relaxing but enjoyably vibrant interlude in our otherwise busy lives.

Hugo Miller

Seniors and Friends' Cruise

On Saturday, 28 October 2023, we had our Seniors and Friends' outing. We met at the Sans Souci Wharf, then it was delightful to share, with good friends, three relaxing hours of river cruising while enjoying a delicious seafood lunch. We were blessed with beautiful weather in a happy and cheerful atmosphere. The staff were amazingly friendly, and the service was excellent. Everyone was having a wonderful time. We were treated to nice entertainment: singing, playing trivia, and receiving prizes from the lucky door draw and the raffles. We were even offered a gift before we left the boat! We thank Abouna Gerges and Roda for organising this cruise. We are also very grateful to the person whose great generosity made this outing possible. We sincerely hope you can all join us at our next event.

George and Claudine Ayoub

Riverwood Outing

Each year, the Board of Directors of SMCS invites all of our members and volunteers to a lunch as a small token of our deep appreciation for their outstanding dedication to selfless service. Under the inspired leadership of our 2024 President, Randa Zakarian, who organised the entire event to the finest detail, it was a joyous occasion for all who attended. The lunch was held on 20 July 2024 and hosted at Gage Dining and Co in Riverwood, with speeches given by Fr Gerges, our Charity's chaplain, and Randa. A special presentation was also made to our much-loved friend, Gaston Vitali, who has been with the Charity since its inception in 2016. We are grateful for all his support and compassion. To conclude the day, a cake was cut to commemorate the eight-year anniversary of SMCS. We pray that the next eight years will bring us continued and increased success in all of our ventures!.

Bunnings Days

This year, SMCS has held two fundraising activities at Bunnings. The first, on 16 March, was at Bunnings Alexandria. This location appears to be one of the busiest in Sydney and therefore provides us with a great flow of customers throughout the day. In addition to serving our delicious sausage sizzle, a number of our devoted volunteers prepared homemade delectable sweets for a cake stand. This ranged from pineapple upside-down cake (a sell-out crowd favourite!) to lamingtons and petit fours to coconut biscuits and sfouf (a traditional Lebanese turmeric cake). Our fundraiser collected \$5000, after expenses. The second fundraiser was on 13 July at Bunnings Kingsgrove. Once again, the loyalty and commitment of our volunteers could not be more obvious. \$2200, after expenses, was raised at this location. The Kingsgrove sausage sizzle was especially for the Sudan Mercy Project, which assists and empowers the underprivileged children of the Sudan. We thank Rania Shashati for her initiative in this regard. These are two incredible results that we are all extremely proud of. We especially thank all those who assisted on the day – whether in barbecuing, serving cakes, handling money, or offering moral support. Your unwavering selflessness and kindness not only touched our hearts but were integral to our ability to reach these impressive results!

Celebrating a Legacy of Dedication and Welcoming New Leadership

In the heart of our community, at St Michael's, lies a legacy of dedication, exemplified by individuals whose commitment and tireless efforts become the very pillars that support our collective journey. Among these remarkable figures stands Jeanette Maakrun, who served as the President of our Ladies' Fraternity (Akhawiya) for over five decades, guiding us with grace, wisdom, and boundless passion. As she retires from that position, we come together to honour her amazing contribution and warmly embrace the dawn of a new era under the leadership of our newly elected President, Laudie Nakhli.

The day began with a special Liturgy, a moment of reflection and gratitude, where Abouna Gerges eloquently conveyed our deepest thanks and appreciation on behalf of the entire congregation. Despite the challenging weather, the event was graced by the presence of fifty individuals – a testament to the profound respect and affection held for Jeanette and the significance of the occasion.

Following the prayers, we reconvened in our favourite lunch spot, the Rockdale Tennis Club, where we indulged in a delicious meal, engaged in a lively card game, and revelled in the camaraderie that unites us as one family. We extend our heartfelt thanks to all who contributed to making this day a resounding success. With enthusiasm and anticipation, we eagerly await our next gathering, where we will continue to strengthen bonds of friendship among our beloved Seniors and Friends.

Together we honour the past, embrace the present, and welcome the future with open hearts and great optimism.

The Editors



JEANETTE MAAKRUN ACCEPTING A SMALL TOKEN OF APPRECIATION FROM THE CATHEDRAL.

Events in the SMCS calendar (cont.)



A DELICIOUS SPREAD OF TRADITIONAL EGYPTIAN FOOD ON OFFER.



ABOVE: OUR VOLUNTEERS AT BUNNINGS ALEXANDRIA
BELOW: THE DELICIOUS SELECTION OF HOMEMADE CAKES AND SWEETS.



ABOUNA GERGES ADDRESSING LUNCH ATTENDEES ON THE LATEST ACTIVITIES OF THE CHARITY.



OUR SMCS PRESIDENT, RANDA ZAKARIAN, MAKING A WELL DESERVED PRESENTATION TO OUR FRIEND, GASTON VITALI.



A VISTA OF OUR SENIORS AND FRIENDS ABOARD THE BOAT.

A Story from Central Station

One of the most valuable experiences for volunteers at SMCS is the personal rapport and friendships which are formed with the underprivileged in our community whom we serve. Steve (pseudonym) is a male in his 50s who, through a series of unfortunate circumstances, including severe medical problems, lost his property and profession and ended up homeless two and a half years ago. An avid Bulldogs supporter, he enjoyed speaking with us about sport, saying it is one of the few passions which distracts him from his difficult daily realities. Isolated from family and former friends, Steve emphasised the importance of services, such as ours, especially in helping those who are hungry and ill, saying that he would have "starved to death otherwise." He reminded us that we cannot judge the circumstances of others and that, while he does not seek pity, found it difficult to be scorned by passers-by for a situation outside of his control – "Not all homeless people are drug addicts or simply lazy. We have to revise this stereotype". Steve likes most of all the fact that SMCS provides both a weekly interaction for him with people that he can talk to and a community with which he feels unconditionally welcome.

Evangelos Papadopoulos

WHY BE A VOLUNTEER?

It's not for money, it's not for fame.
It's not for any personal gain.
It's just for the love of your fellowmen.
It's just to offer a helping hand.
It's just to give a tithe of self.
That's something you can't buy with wealth.
It's not medals won with pride.

It's for that feeling deep inside.
It's that reward down in your heart.
It's that feeling you've been a part,
Of helping others far and near,
That makes you a Volunteer!
*author unknown, adapted by
the Editorial Board of Together*

How you can be a part of St Michael's Meals

- Pray for us
- Become a member
- Prepare meals
- Join the team in distributing food and clothing
- Donate money (donations of \$2 and above are tax deductible)

KITCHEN CORNER

Each issue, we invite our readers into the kitchens of our beloved members and friends, transcribing a new recipe to add to your cookbook. This time, we present a delectable savoury dish and delicious dessert which are perfect for any family gathering.

Rose Sorial: Chicken and Potato Bake

This recipe comes from Rose Sorial, one of our beloved friends and a member of the Seniors' Group. Rose chose to present this dish in **Together** because it is a family favourite – particularly for her grandchildren!

Ingredients:

- One medium-sized chicken, boiled and cut into pieces.
- 1 kg potatoes; cleaned, washed, and cut into small square pieces.
- 200 g small mushrooms, cut in half.
- 150 g bacon, sliced into small pieces.
- 200 g sour cream.
- 250 g mozzarella cheese.
- Butter.
- Olive oil.
- 1/2 cup of milk.
- Paprika, cinnamon, salt, and pepper.

Method:

1. In a pan, put two spoons of butter (or ghee) with one spoon of olive oil on the stove.
2. Put the bacon in and fry it a little before removing it and placing the bacon bits in an oven tray.
3. In the same pan, cook the mushrooms for around 5 minutes before putting them in the oven tray with the bacon and mixing them together.
4. Finally, brown the chicken slightly on the stove before combining it with the bacon and mushrooms in the oven tray.
5. On the stovetop, lightly fry the potatoes in butter.
6. Add the potatoes to the oven tray before putting salt, pepper, paprika and cinnamon (all to taste) with all the ingredients. Ensure the potatoes form the top layer of the dish.
7. In a separate bowl, mix the sour cream with the milk.
8. Dollop the cream on top of the potatoes and spread it evenly so that it covers the whole tray. Leave it to rest for 10 minutes.
9. Add the mozzarella on top and cover the tray with oven paper and aluminium foil.
10. Cook the tray in an oven, pre-heated at 160 degrees for half an hour. Then it is ready to serve!

Bon appétit!



ROSE SORIAL

Maha Tayar: Halawet el-Jibn

A staple across Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine, Maha Tayar, one of our SMCS members, immediately suggested this dish as it is easy to make at home, requires ingredients you already have in the kitchen, and is loved by all her family and friends.

Ingredients:

- 1 ½ cups of water.
- 1 ½ cups of sugar.
- 500 g unsalted mozzarella or (haloumi/akkawi cheese – depending on what is available to you).
- 1 cup of fine semolina.

Method:

1. Bring the sugar and water to a boil before adding the cheese.
2. Keep stirring until the cheese melts.
3. Once melted, add the cup of fine semolina, and keep stirring fast until combined.
4. Once the mixture is ready, lay it on a flat bench, or tray, flattening it with a rolling pin.
5. Then fold the cheese into rolls and slice them into small portions.
6. Sprinkle crushed pistachios for an added crunch.

Maha's added tip: before rolling the cheese, you can fill them with ashta (clotted cream). To make ashta, add milk to a pot on the stove. Once it starts boiling, turn off the heat and set it aside. Once the milk starts to separate and curdle, remove the cream on the top and place it in a bowl to cool down.

Sahten!



MAHA TAYAR



IN LOVING MEMORY ...

Forever in our hearts

Lou "Elias" Bettar



The full course of Lou (Elias) Bettar's 86 years embodied the words of St John Chrysostom, his favourite Saint: "The rich man is not one who is in possession of much, but one who gives much." Lou's worldly curiosity and loyalty to those around him were fostered from a young age. Fate and luck would change his life forever when he was offered the opportunity to travel to Australia – a country at the "end of the world". Arriving in Sydney from Safita, Syria, in early 1951, aged 13, and unaccompanied by his parents or siblings, Lou adapted quickly to the Australian way of life. His first years here were centred around Waterloo, residing in the Presbytery of St Michael's Melkite Church with his great-uncle, Monsignor Chahoud, and attending school at the adjacent Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Lou had fond memories of serving the Liturgy each morning as an altar boy and among his other responsibilities were cleaning the fittings on the altar and throughout the Church. Consequently, until his late 80s, he had an instant recollection of the donors of individual icons and the craftsmen who carved and painted the iconostasis at St Michael's.

From youth, Lou was imbued with values which blossomed into a lifelong reverence and unshakable sense of duty. He never viewed material possessions or personal extravagances as indications of wealth. Rather, the cornerstones of his life were love, generosity, sense of belonging and conviction. Lou strove for excellence in his work, including at St John the Beloved Melkite Church, where he enthusiastically offered his craftsmanship and experience, notably in the assembly of the iconostasis, pews, and roof. Lou was vivacious and had a zest for life. There was no greater joy for him than to host celebratory occasions, ensuring that everyone was having a good time and overwhelmed by his hospitality. Lou also enjoyed reading and forming independent opinions on religion, history, philosophy, and politics. His home library was full of well-thumbed books littered with his handwritten notes and references. He valued the opportunity to engage with people from many different backgrounds, including tradesmen, clergy, and academics.

Lou's final months were not easy, but he continued to display with dignity the incredible fortitude, resilience and strength through faith and family for which he will be forever remembered. Lou was the adored husband of Omaira; a loving father and devoted father-in-law to Paul and Noeline, Nicholas, and Pauline and Jason; and cherished 'Jidy' to Maxwell, Elizabeth, Jack, and Grace. The principles by which he lived his life and treated others are his legacy to his family. Lou's unconditional warmth and gentility will be forever missed.

Jack Bettar

Samir Affara (1932–2024)

Samir was born on 15 August 1932, the sixth brother of eight children to Elias and Maree Affara, in Haifa, Palestine. They lived in Haifa until 1948. When the war erupted, they went as refugees to Lebanon to start a new life. There, Samir met and married Jeanette (née Shamieh) on 5 August 1960, a marriage that lasted 64 years. They had two children: a son, Samir Jr, born in March 1964; followed by a daughter, Samar Therese, in July 1965.

In 1968, the war broke out again and they made the difficult decision to leave Lebanon and immigrate to Australia, in March 1970. Samir was a member of St Michael's Cathedral in Darlington and cherished his church family and community and the unbreakable bonds with all the priests that have presided over the Melkite Church. He initiated the baking of the bread of offerings (qorban) instead of the normal pita bread. He was a cantor, with a beautiful angelic voice, who joined the choir, for years, chanting with love and dedication.

Samir was a son, brother, husband, father, grandfather, uncle, and a friend to many. Samir slept in the Lord, on 18 February 2024, aged 92 years.

Kathy Affara



Samar Therese Munoz (née Affara, 1965–2024)



Samar was born on 7 July 1965, the second child to Samir and Jeanette Affara in Lebanon. The family immigrated to Australia in March 1970, and Samar lived and studied from home at Kensington. She met and married the love of her life, Carlos Munoz, on 17 November 1991, and then became a mother to Lauren, born on 16 September 1992.

Through her 33 years of marriage, Samar was faced with countless challenges and progressively worsening health conditions. Even through all her pain, suffering and anguish, Samar always held space for others with compassion and optimism and a selflessness of making everyone around her feel loved and cared for. Samar had a deep connection with God. God's love was the foundation of her young life, and His presence always brought her immense comfort and peace. She believed in the power of prayer and turned to God for guidance and strength in difficult times.

Samar was a daughter, sister, wife, mother, aunt, and a friend to every person she met. Samar slept in the Lord on 4 June 2024, aged 58 years. Both father and daughter are united in God's loving arms for now and evermore.

Kathy Affara

RIPPLES OF GOOD: A WEEK OF REFLECTIONS ON THE BENEFIT OF VOLUNTEERING

Welcome to a week dedicated to reflecting on the transformative power of volunteering, kindness, and generosity. Each day, we will explore a thought that highlights the profound impact that even the smallest act of kindness can have on the lives of others. Through these reflections, we hope to inspire you to embrace the spirit of giving and to recognize the immense value of contributing to your community. Let's embark on this journey together and discover how our actions, no matter how small, can create ripples of positive change in the world around us.

- Monday: "Hey friends, it's a new week filled with opportunities to make a difference! Let's kick off the week by showing some love and compassion towards the needy and underprivileged. Small acts of kindness can have a big impact. Who's in?"
- Tuesday: "Tuesday is a great day to extend a helping hand. Whether it's donating warm clothing, volunteering at a local charity, or simply sharing a meal with someone in need, let's make today about compassion. Together, we can make our community stronger and more caring."
- Wednesday: "Happy Hump Day! Let's break up the midweek monotony by planning something special for our less fortunate neighbours. It could be as simple as buying a few extra groceries to donate or setting aside some time to listen to their stories. Our compassion can light up their day."
- Thursday: "Almost to the weekend, folks! Today, let's challenge ourselves to think creatively about how we can help those in need. Perhaps it's organising a fundraiser or even just spreading awareness about the plight of the homeless. Together, we can amplify our impact."
- Friday: "The weekend is almost here, but that does not mean we stop caring. Friday can be the day we pay it forward, whether it's by supporting our charity or by engaging in a random act of kindness. Let's ensure that kindness and compassion are always in season."
- Saturday: "Happy Saturday! How about making today about giving back? Let's gather some friends and visit someone sick in hospital or in a nursing home. Our shared compassion can truly transform lives."
- Sunday: "As we wrap up the week, let's reflect on the difference we have made together. But remember, our commitment to compassion does not end with Sunday. It's a continuous journey. Let's carry this spirit in the coming week, and beyond. TOGETHER, we can create a world filled with love, compassion, and hope."

www.smcs.org.au

Our Mission Statement

Members of St Michael's Community Services treat others with unconditional positive regard, listen to them with care and empathy, and are genuine in offering their services. This special care is also offered to the elderly as well as the youth in the community.

Our Story:

St Michael's Community Services is a core group of dedicated parishioners, led by Fr Gerges, Parish Priest and Dean of St Michael's Melkite Catholic Cathedral.

The group splits on Wednesday nights at 7.00 pm to feed the homeless at Central Station and Martin Place. Another team goes fortnightly, on Thursday night, to Liverpool Park. Our aim is to build a trusting relationship with our friends, the needy, so that we not only feed their bodies, but also their souls. The relief, gratitude and friendship of the people we reach is our reward. No-one chooses to be on the street, we look into their eyes and see the person inside. Each has a story, we know the regulars by name and even know their likes and dislikes. So many have an intellectual disability, who are we to

Our Vision

- Feed the Hungry with God's love.
- Offer the Homeless weekly nutritious meals and genuine friendship.
- Increase our reach by adding locations or increasing the number of days of our meal service.
- Reach out to the elderly, the sick and those with special needs.
- Involve the youth in our activities and prepare them for future leadership.
- Aim to open a centre to feed, house and clothe people on a regular basis.
- Create a mobile team to reach out and help the less fortunate.
- Extend our meal services to those in homes who are experiencing food insecurity.

judge the circumstances that pushed them onto the street? The church asks us to imitate the life of the saints: so let's listen to their words: St Mother Teresa cautions us "If you judge people, you have no time to love them." St Mary MacKillop encourages us to "Never see a need without doing something about it". It is so true that when we give, we receive so much more. Not only do we feel that we have made a difference to the lives of the people we feed, but it has also created a real affection and camaraderie between the people, who show up every week to serve, and the regular disadvantaged on the streets of Sydney.

The disadvantaged are not only our brothers and sisters who live on the street but also many of the elderly, who suffer from loneliness, isolation

and frequently experience difficulties in communication. Our aim is to establish regular contact with them and lend them a hand whenever needed.

With the youth being the future of our society, their involvement in our activities is essential in preparing them to carry the flag and build a better, happier world for everyone.

Our motivation is simple and can be found in the Gospel: Matthew 25: 35-40 "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. The righteous will ask: Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? The King will reply: Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

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