

## Montreal's 'street priest' offers comfort to the people who need it most.

How Montreal's 'street priest' offers comfort to the less fortunate | Montreal Gazette  
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By Jesse Feith July 9, 2025, 5:30 AM

Father Claude Paradis steps into a downtown Montreal square, bringing with him a basket of assorted clothing and a crate containing two dozen lunch bags. Each one includes a juice box, a sandwich, a piece of fruit and a dessert. It's an early July evening, and the sun is beating down on the area. As he does every week, Paradis is out searching for those in need. He's wearing a Roman collar and a long-sleeved shirt covering his heavily tattooed arms. In his bag are prayer beads, should anyone ask for some, and a naloxone kit, used to reverse opioid overdoses. Paradis, 69, first checks on a shirtless man bent over on a concrete slab, ensuring he's safe. After leaving a lunch and shirt by his side, others begin to approach. A man tries on a leather jacket from the basket, surprised he fits into a medium size. A woman asks for something to keep warm. Even in the summer heat, she says, it gets surprisingly cold at night. Another man approaches Paradis and timidly asks for a cigarette. He obliges, pulling one from the two packs he purchased for the outing. "Aren't you the priest from the church on Ste-Catherine St.?" the man asks, recognizing him. Paradis politely shakes his head. He leads a funeral service there each fall for Montreal's unclaimed dead, he says, but does not consider it his church. "The streets are my church," he tells the man. \*\*\* Known as Montreal's "street priest" for his work with the unhoused over the years, Paradis was born in a small village in Quebec's Gaspésie region during the mid-1950s. After moving to Montreal in his late 20s, he fell on hard times. Addicted to hard drugs and alcohol, he spent several years living on the street before finding his footing through religion. Inspired by his work with another pillar of Montreal's unhoused community, Father Emmett Johns — known as Pops by the street kids he cared for — Paradis felt motivated to look after the less fortunate. When ordained in 1997, he chose to work directly with the city's unhoused population rather than being assigned to a parish. Nearly 30 years later, his guiding principle remains unchanged. "I want to give back what people gave to me," Paradis says. "I believe in the dignity of the human person. And that no matter what someone has been through, they are human beings first and foremost." Today, Paradis spends two nights a week heading out across the city with a handful of volunteers from the organization he founded, Notre-Dame-de-la-rue, which is overseen by the Montreal diocese. He learns people's needs and aspirations and remembers where they are likely to be found. He knows many of them by name and relies on his own past challenges with drug use and poverty to forge connections. In addition to his weekly rounds, Paradis regularly visits local

detention centres, lending an ear to anyone who needs it. Each December, he conducts a Christmas mass for the city's unhoused community. In March, he spent two weeks sleeping in a tent outside a busy downtown hotel to raise awareness about the housing crisis. "You can always tell that what he does comes from his heart, not out of obligation," says François Gilbert, a retired doctor and permanent deacon who has volunteered alongside Paradis for over a decade. "He is a fine example not only of courage but of charity in a world where everyone is out for themselves," he adds. One of the biggest changes Paradis has noticed during the last three decades is the increase in opioid use among the unhoused. Having witnessed the rise in fatal overdoses firsthand, he now also focuses on drug prevention efforts. He is often invited to share his journey through addiction with high school students and tries to speak with them as openly as possible about his struggles. Despite his faith and connection to the church, he does not believe in imposing religion on those he helps. When interacting with the unhoused, he is rarely the first to bring it up — he understands the complicated relationship some have with the church, he says, and wants to meet people where they are. "For me, spirituality isn't about kneeling in a corner with your arms wide open," Paradis says. "It's about who you are, where you come from and finding meaning in life." \*\*\* On his way to distribute food at the square, Paradis stops in a nearby alley where he knows people have been sleeping in recent weeks. Around a bend and graffiti-covered walls, he meets Éric. It's a few days after Moving Day and the 56-year-old just lost his apartment. "I looked for three months, there's nothing," he tells Paradis, agitated. "One bedroom was going for \$1,000, can you imagine?" Éric is near tears as he explains how difficult it's been. He's spent the last several nights sleeping outside and is desperate for a shower. He isn't sure what to do next or who to turn to. Paradis takes time to explain some of the options available to him, but he mostly listens. Sensing the man's despair, he offers him a hug and a blessing. "Are you going to be OK?" Paradis asks. It's a small gesture, and just one of thousands of similar interactions Paradis has had on the city's streets. But it reveals much of what has made him a key figure in Montreal's unhoused community. As he nears his 70th birthday in August, Paradis has questioned how much longer he can continue his work. Mounting health problems and a recent bout with lung cancer heightened those thoughts, yet he still felt drawn back to the streets. He's not one to reflect on the difference he's made through the years, although he admits that some stories, both sad and positive, are never far from his mind. Rather, he simply hopes he has been a comforting presence for people when they needed it most. He draws a comparison to how the unhoused have often experienced abandonment in their life, either by family or society. He can't bear the thought they might see his retirement as the same. "It's about being there for them," he says.