

# Experiencing the warmth and love of the first Christmas in Manchester

**I remember the moment the doorbell rang and the quiet commotion that followed it. The pregnant pause that preceded the awkward exchange. It wasn't my rectory, so the commotion that ensued was not mine to sort, but it remains emblazoned in my mind.**

It was sometime just before Christmas, and I was passing through Manchester on my way back to the Seacoast. I decided to stop in for an unannounced visit to a priest friend of mine whose parish is in the heart of the city.

At first, our visit was quite ordinary, sharing tales of Christmas preparations and the latest comings and goings of priestly life. Somewhere in the midst of it all, the doorbell rang and my friend rose to dutifully answer it.

As he stood at the door talking with a stranger, the cold air from outside wafted in. Shifting in my discomfort, I moved out of the cold air's reach.

The stranger was asking to see the retired priest who lived in residence. Suspecting that the retired priest was taking an afternoon nap and wanting to protect the frail priest's rest, my friend offered to take a message and connect back with the stranger.

Seeing the emotion in the stranger's eyes, it became clear this wasn't going to work. Before long my friend hollered from the door and asked me to go and find the retired priest.

When I searched for him, I discovered he was missing,

nowhere to be found. His bedroom door was wide open, and he was neither in the rectory chapel nor shuffling in the hallways as was his custom.

When I returned to report his absence, my friend looked worried — I could see it on his face. The retired priest rarely left the rectory as he had grown old and frail.

As my friend stood at the door trying to figure out what to do next, the stranger at the door grew uneasy.

After pacing a bit, the man began to dig into the large bag he was carrying. I would like to say that in this moment as priests, my friend and I enjoyed true peace in our hearts.

However, I suspect that much like me, my friend was nervous, unsure of what was about to be pulled from the bag and nervous about the agitated stranger's mental state.

Before long, the stranger pulled out a familiar jacket, the jacket belonging to the elderly priest whose whereabouts were now unknown.

With that, the homeless man abruptly departed, and we stood together in the doorway, unsure of what to do next.

The suddenness of it all left us speechless, and even more so with what would soon transpire.

Who was the stranger? Why did he have the old priest's jacket? Was the priest okay?

As we retreated back into the living room with the jacket in hand, we tried to figure out what to do next. Do we call the police and launch a search party?

A few minutes later we heard a loud noise in the kitchen followed by the familiar sound of shuffling footsteps.



The elderly priest was back in the rectory, wearing only an oversized cardigan wool sweater with pockets to shield him from the winter cold.

He slowly made his way toward us. As we rushed to see him and to see if he was OK, he smiled from ear to ear as he saw us and his favorite, only and recently-returned jacket lying on the living room couch.

With a gentleness of heart that can scarcely be captured with words, Father Flo Bilodeau said, "I knew he would return it."

It turns out that a few weeks before, unbeknownst to us all, Father Flo had received the stranger, at the door of the rectory, in search of warmth.

Despite being in his mid-80s and always being cold, Father Flo had given the stranger his only winter coat with the quiet instructions, "You can take my coat; it is the only one I have. Promise me when you get another one, you will bring it back to me."

As all that had unfolded began to become clear, my friend and I just looked at each other in awe, at the faithfulness of an old priest, the warmth of love, and the power of the stranger's word.

I am not sure what it would have been like to experience the warmth and love of the first Christmas in Bethlehem, but in some way, I think both Father Flo and the stranger at the door did. ■



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