

Lavoie introduced people to wide variety of programs

By Ed and Angie Mihalicz, Beauval, Sask.

We first met Father Sylvain Lavoie in 1975. It was a hot day in July, and we were driving to the lake with our family of five girls. As we were crossing the Beaver River Valley we saw a young man on the road.

We assumed he was a tourist out for a walk, dressed in T-shirt, shorts and a ball cap. We stopped to see if he wanted a ride, and he hopped in the back seat with the kids. After the usual questioning about where he was from and if he was enjoying his visit here, he replied: No, he wasn't just visiting; in fact, he was our new priest.

After my own momentary shock, I looked around at the reaction of the kids, and they mouthed to me, in obvious disbelief, "He's a Father??" Our kids were well accustomed to older Oblates in their cassocks and formal clerical attire.

As it turned out, Father Sylvain was the priest our kids were lucky to have in their lives for the next 15 years. For our youngest, Michelle, six, this meant all of her school life. To her, he was a blessing. Whenever he called, she would say, light-heartedly, "We've had our blessing for the day."

One of Father Sylvain's strong beliefs is that the Holy Spirit works in all kinds of ways. The Spirit will not be confined to one particular program, or even culture, for that matter. So, over the 15 years he served in the Beauval area, he introduced people to a wide variety of programs and workshops that helped them grow in their lives as members of families, churches, and communities. Among them would be the Christopher Leadership Course, Catholic Core Group, Search program for youth, Christian Ethics, Teen-Aid, Marriage Encounter, Engaged Encounter, Alcoholics Anonymous, national Summer Institutes on Amerindian Christian Leadership, Faith-Family-Festivals, and various parish renewal programs.

The most rewarding part of many of these initiatives was that they developed local leaders who, in many instances, were able to continue working in their communities to spread the benefits.

Very soon after meeting him, anyone can tell that one of Father Sylvain's gifts is his down-to-earth humour. He loosens people up and gets them laughing. Before they know it, they are telling their own funny stories, sharing their lives and growing. He is as comfortable playing the guitar and singing with people as he is talking with them. A group meeting will almost always begin and end with an appropriate song.

Why are Catholics like bananas? Because they grow in bunches! This is a lead-in question Father Sylvain has used many times, and it demonstrates one of his basic beliefs about life in the church. His deepest joy in life is to help people grow into their full God-given potential. He believes that this growth always happens best in a group setting. If we are, as the Scriptures say, the Body of Christ, then God works best through the people around us.

Father Sylvain is well-known for his rendition of "Rindeceller," a mixed-up version of the "Cinderella" story, told while accompanying himself on the guitar. We always remarked at how well he could remember to transpose and interchange syllables to come up with the right mistakes every time so that "Rindeceller" would always "slop her dripper" at the precise moment that the "click strock mudnight."

Early in his life as a priest, he became aware of the very deep shyness and lack of confidence in many of the people he was serving. He also knew of a way to help them overcome that shyness. One day in early September 1975, just weeks after arriving himself, he dropped in to see two of the teachers who were also new to Beauval. Both teachers were single, and probably finding life rather slow in this relatively isolated northern community.

When Father Sylvain asked if they would like to go to Edmonton for the weekend, they jumped at the opportunity, only to find out shortly after that it meant attending the Christopher Leadership Course Instructor's Training Seminar. This training Seminar is challenging, even for people who have taken the Christopher Course, but nobody told this to Gary Vermette and Paul Boudreau, or to Father Sylvain either.

We happened to be part of the first class they instructed upon their return from Edmonton, and it was a memorable one. In a matter of a year or two, there were new instruction teams formed and since then, many hundreds of people in the Keewatin-Le Pas Diocese thank this course for their growth in self-confidence. They point to it as an important factor in their becoming active members of their communities.

When one of his parishioners shared his difficulty with addictions and the need to find help for others, Father Sylvain sought out and initiated the first AA group in the area. The group is still active today, and that same parishioner, Alex C., recently returned from his fifth world AA Conference, held every five years. This year's conference took place in Toronto, where 50,000 members gathered from all over the world. Alex was able to share this powerful experience with the whole parish at Sunday liturgies. Again, Father Sylvain had succeeded in introducing something that proved to be a lifeline for people with addictions.

When parishioners and teachers were concerned about the youth, they talked to Father Sylvain, and he suggested checking out a weekend program for youth

entitled Search for Christian Maturity taking place in one of the Catholic schools in Prince Albert. He arranged for a small group from Beauval to experience the weekend in Prince Albert. They liked what they saw; before long the Prince Albert Search Team was booked to put on a weekend in Beauval.

It wasn't long before Beauval had its own youth Search team, and young people from all over Northern Saskatchewan, and even into Manitoba, were sharing the enthusiasm and benefiting from this program of "youth ministering to youth."

Experiencing pre-Vatican attitudes was a big challenge in his early ministry, and he soon found that communication had to be uncluttered and clear in order to bring about effective change. On one occasion, he loaded up the old brown mission van with as many people from the region as he could to attend a workshop on church renewal in Saskatoon. The theme was The Role of Laity in the Church. One of the men, after listening to this new approach for three days, was brave enough to comment on the way home, "It was good, Father, but why were they always talking about the ladies (laity) and not the men?"

His early desire to learn the Cree language was finally fulfilled when years later, he was given leave from pastoral duties to allow him to dedicate a year concentrating on language learning. Although this was very difficult and at times seemed impossible, he "stuck to it" with determination and has added Cree to his French and English vocabulary. Good communication and respect for other cultural values are high on his priority list.

Sylvain lived a simple lifestyle and learned that his desire for change often challenged his patience with people. His honesty and sincerity led him to the realization that sometimes there were changes that needed to happen within himself as well. He was open and honest enough to share this with his parishioners and together, in an atmosphere of mutual respect, changes were able to happen on both sides. This process served to endear him even more to the people he served.

Prayer is definitely a source of energy for Father Sylvain. Up as late as anyone in the house at night, he would be the first one up in the morning, outside if possible, for an hour of prayer. He enjoys reading and meditating on Scripture in the outdoors. He had a favourite prayer spot along the river in Beauval, facing the rising sun.

Father Sylvain loves to pray with people. When we travelled with him he would often suggest stopping beside a lake or river for morning or evening prayer or, on special days, a small outdoor mass. These were special experiences for us. We learned that the teachings of Jesus fit perfectly into outdoor settings.

Father Sylvain also likes to pray with people for healing. He believes in the power of the Spirit to heal on many levels. He often commented how his prayers were

answered so differently than expected. He also believes in the power of the Body of Christ and people's responsibility to heal each other. He would use the story of Lazarus to teach the community's role in the "unbinding and setting free" element of healing, while the words of new life are spoken by Jesus, "Lazarus (or each of us), come out," and be healed.

Father Sylvain has a special talent for making liturgies meaningful. He is able to blend real life experience with theology and Scripture and make it inspiring. After one of his homilies, Sister Gabrielle Simard, his good friend, would often say, "That was surely the Holy Spirit speaking; I could feel it!"

Father Sylvain has a special knack for asking and encouraging people to come forth with their talents. It's hard to say, "no" when confronted with his sincerity and honesty. As a result, parish councils were begun in many of the parishes he served. Music began to include guitars and young people pitched in as well. More people participated as readers and helped with sacramental preparation. The sisters gradually began showing people how to lead Bible Study and parish ladies' groups instead of leading it themselves. A youth group named CCG (Catholic Core Group) was also begun in Beauval. Laity began to assume responsibility and leadership.

Our experience of working with Father Sylvain on the Keewatin Renewal Team (KRT) must include mention of his extraordinary organizational skills. Five minutes down the road after leaving a town upon the completion of a one-week Parish Renewal program, he would have the energy to whip out his laptop computer and begin revising the presentation to improve it for the next community down the road.

Revisions, as well as write-ups of stories as he remembered people sharing them, would all be completed by the time we reached the next stop. While the two of us would still be caught up with remembering the people we had just been with, Father Sylvain was already focused on the next program.

Father Sylvain published a small book entitled Northern Nuggets made up of stories of miracles witnessed during those wonderful KRT years.