

Horace McKenna, SJ

The poor can't lift themselves up by their own bootstraps because they have no boots. - Horace McKenna, SJ

For the poor and homeless throughout Washington, D.C., he was the one person they could always count on. Horace McKenna, the Jesuit priest and friend of the poor, was a living saint, a true witness to the gospel. He offered the good news of God's peace and justice. For you and me, struggling to live the Gospel, he showed us what it meant to be a Christian and in so doing he showed us how to be human.



Horace was born on January 2, 1899 in New York City and his parents had difficulty winning the approval of the parish priest for the new baby's name. Horace's father explained that everyone is named "John James" or "James John." He wanted to go against the grain. "But there is no Saint Horace!" the priest pleaded. "He'll be the first!" retorted Mr. McKenna.

Horace entered the Jesuits on July 30, 1916. Between 1921 and 1923, he taught in a Jesuit school in the Philippines. There, he discovered the desperate needs of the poor and oppressed. After theological studies, he was ordained a [presbyter](#), in 1929. His first assignment was a small parish in southern Maryland, among the poor blacks of the region. He stayed for twenty years, from 1931 until 1953, pastoring [St. Peter Claver Church](#), St. James' Church and [St. Ignatius Church](#).

Southern Maryland, like most of United States, was segregated - including the churches. Horace began the work of racial justice and reconciliation which [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#) later advocated in the civil rights movement. With his friend, [Richard McSorley, S.J.](#) Horace continued to push for integration and better relations between blacks and whites into the early 50's. In the midst of death threats, violent accusations and much anger, he helped to bring about reconciliation through his compassionate and loving presence.

From 1953 to 1958, he served at [St. Aloysius Gonzaga](#) parish, a Jesuit church a few blocks from the U.S. Capitol. After a few years as assistant pastor at the [Church of the Gesu](#) in Philadelphia from 1958 to 1964, he returned to St. Al's and remained there for the rest of his life, serving the poor. "There were plenty of poor people around in those days," Horace recalled, "but of course there always are, if you keep your eyes open."

Through his years serving and defending the poor of Washington, D.C., Horace helped found such works as "[Sursum Corda](#)" (a housing project located near the U.S. Capitol), [Martha's Table](#) (a soup kitchen and center for homeless women), and perhaps most famously [S.O.M.E.](#) (So Others Might Eat), a soup kitchen, clinic, housing and job

program). The first meals were served out of the basement of St. Aloysius Church on North Capitol Street in Northwest Washington, DC. When the number of homeless and poor coming to this soup kitchen grew, the operation moved to 71 'O' Street, NW, where it still remains. Food is still what S.O.M.E. is best known for, and, indeed, more than 900 meals are served each day by a large network of community volunteers from local churches, synagogues, and civic organizations. However SOME has evolved into a comprehensive social service agency with a twofold mission: to meet people's immediate needs and to help them overcome the barriers that keeps them homeless and destitute.

But Horace's life was not without difficulty. His religious superiors refused to allow him to be part of the famous March on Washington in 1963, where Dr. King proclaimed his dream for a just society. Because he refused to support [Humanae Vitae](#), the papal encyclical dealing with birth control, his priestly faculties were temporarily suspended. He refused to criticize church leaders, but held his ground citing the day-to-day encounters with the poor, and the realities of their struggle.

In his late 70's, Horace started to study liberation theology, supported the ordination of women and attended a workshop on ministry to the gay community. Horace had a truly Christian attitude of mind in his dealings with everybody - even people with whom he disagreed. He was always very kind and patient. He disagreed with people, but he was just a very charitable man.

Horace left an example to all of us how to serve those in need, how to share our lives with those in need. He was faithful to the Gospel mission of loving others, reconciling people, making peace and following Jesus. He saw Christ present in the homeless and the poor. Indeed, he saw every human being as his very own sister and brother, a child of God. His life is a testament of service and commitment, of love and peacemaking, of speaking the truth and working for justice. He served the poor, said his prayers, laughed with his friends, and died with a deep belief in God at the age of 83 in May of 1982.

Since then in any given year between 2.5 and 3.5 million people experience homelessness in the United States of America for a few nights to a few months. On any given night 750,000 people are homeless in our country and 150,000 are chronically homeless. Horace would be appalled at this and would surely be working hard to reverse the situation. He would take up where he left off: to stand in solidarity with the poor and homeless; to demand money for adequate housing and food for the poor; and to work for the creation of a nonviolent, just society. May we continue to be enriched by the life and witness of Horace McKenna and may he help us to see Christ in the poor.