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VIEWPOINT

A one-man institution in India

A Canadian priest's tireless quest to help the poor has endeared him to everyone in the small town of Darjeeling

By JIM ROBB

Darjeeling, West Bengal, India

THERE'S A GOOD reason why Canadians are especially welcome in this town, perched on a 7,000-foot hill in northern India.

His name is Edgar Burns. The 73-year-old Jesuit priest is revered by the people of this town, once a hill station for British civil servants and their families escaping the searing and debilitating summer heat of New Delhi and Calcutta in the glory days of the Raj.

Burns arrived in India in January 1951, alone. In the Jesuit way, he's spent his entire career in the Darjeeling district of one million people, first as a teacher at schools run by his order, then as a Good Samaritan ministering to the poor and destitute in the town and its surrounding enclave of villages and tea stages on the slopes below.

He's earned respect and trust and love.

Growing up in a middle-class home in Montreal's Notre-Dame-de-Grâce neighbourhood, Burns was only vaguely aware of what poverty and destitution meant.

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He moved into a dilapidated building in the slums with three young lay professors from the college and "tried to make a contribution in the lives of the poor."

"We felt the urgency of doing something for the many lying wounded and dying on the roadside," Burns recalls.

He says his formal education had hardly equipped him to work in the streets of Darjeeling, "but something had to be done."

"The great fear was not that we would do the wrong thing, but that we would do nothing because we were so often paralysed, even destroyed, by what we saw and heard."

"We lived with them, talked with them, suffered and struggled with them."

What emerged from those hesitant first steps to help the poor is Hayden Hall, named after an Irish Jesuit who taught for years at St. Joseph's College.

Hayden Hall is a social agency that recognizes no religious boundaries, only need.

It offers self-help programs to the rural poor, runs literacy classes, promotes rural co-operatives and better housing, and provides paramedic care.

The poverty Burns lives with still troubles him deeply.

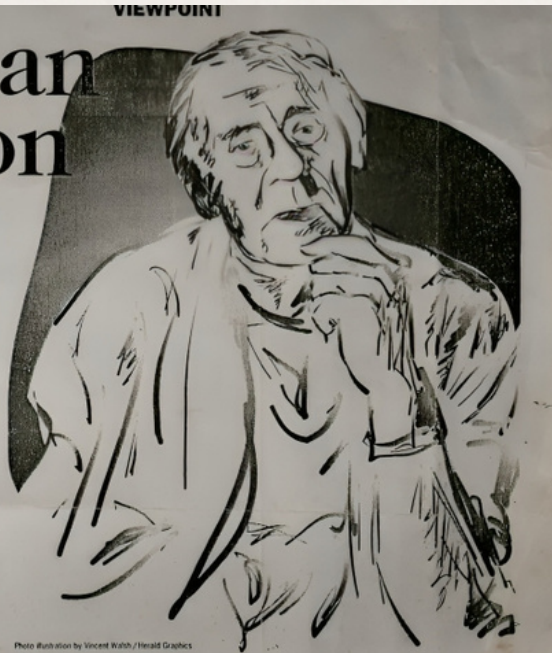


Photo illustration by Vincent Webb / Herald Graphics

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When the Darjeeling Rotary Club (almost all its members are Hindus) staged a free eye clinic for the poor last year, the man they called on to pray for the clinic's success and offer his blessing was Father Burns.

Burns is often asked to attend

qualities of the East will remain. "Burns still finds "wonderful people" in Canada on his infrequent visits but laments the obvious materialism and impersonal nature of Canadian society.

He describes Christians in Darjeeling as "very ecumenical." He is invited to preach in Protestant churches and attends their church functions, and they are invited to his.

Hayden House's staff is 90 per cent Hindu, Burns says, but each day Christians and Hindus alike gather for prayers and to share spiritual thoughts before starting work.

Burns gave up a promising

"He gave his life for his country. I had the feeling that maybe I should do the same," Burns says.

He was trying to make up his mind when a priest friend suggested he go on a retreat to think things over.

Burns followed the advice and decided to enter the Jesuit novitiate.

"I gave it a try and found that I took to this type of life," he says. Studies at Jesuit institutions in Guelph, Ont., and Toronto followed. He was finally ordained in 1958 at St. Mary's Theological in Karsens near Darjeeling.

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A ONE-MAN INSTITUTION IN INDIA

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He has earned respect, trust, and love.

Growing up in a middle-class home in Montreal's Notre-Dame-de-Grâce neighbourhood, Burns was only vaguely aware of what poverty and destitution meant.

“When I hit India and saw people sleeping in the streets, it threw me,” he says, “but that’s the way the Lord works.”

In 1960, while teaching English at St. Joseph’s College, Burns became involved in development projects to help poor villagers.

It was an introduction to the life’s work he has been involved in ever since. In 1969, his superior suggested he forsake teaching and live among the poor and homeless in Darjeeling’s bazaar.

He moved into a dilapidated building in the slums with three young lay professors from the college and “tried to make a contribution in the lives of the poor.”

“We felt the urgency of doing something for the many lying wounded and dying on the roadside,” Burns recalls.

He says his formal education had hardly equipped him to work in the streets of Darjeeling, “but something had to be done.”

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The poverty Burns lives with still troubles him deeply.

“I find it very hard,” he says. “I can’t get used to seeing people hungry, homeless and sick. It rips my guts out.”

The priest’s tireless quest to help the poor has endeared him to everyone in Darjeeling.

Amar Rai, a Hindu who is vice-principal of Loretto College, a girl’s school run by Irish nuns of the Institute of Mary (Loretto sisters), calls Burns “an institu-tion here. Darjeeling worships him, he’s done so much.”

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When the Darjeeling Rotary Club (almost all its members are Hindu) staged a free eye clinic for the poor last year, the man they called on to pray for the clinic’s success and offer his blessing was Father Burns.

Burns is often asked to attend Hindu funerals to bless the dead. “When there is suffering and pain, I’m expected to go,” he says.

“It’s taken for granted that I will pray for the sick, and those around ask for my blessing.”

He explains it this way: “The East very much recognizes the spiritual, and we represent the spiritual.

“I hope and pray that as materialism becomes more of a reality here that the spiritual qualities of the East will remain.”

Burns still finds “wonderful people” in Canada on his infrequent visits but laments the obvious materialism and impersonal nature of Canadian society.

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Hayden House's staff is 90 per cent Hindu, Burns says, but each day Christians and Hindus alike gather for prayers and to share spiritual thoughts before starting work.

Burns gave up a promising hockey career – he starred with the Loyola College high school team in the '40s and then played for the Junior B Montreal Royals when he entered the priesthood, but he's never regretted the decision, or his 47 years of self-exile.

He had no thought of entering the priesthood – he wanted to be a doctor – until a close friend was killed in action during the Second World War.

"He gave his life for his country. I had the feeling that maybe I should do the same", Burns says.

He was trying to make up his mind when a priest friend suggested he go on a retreat to think things over.

Burns followed the advice and decided to enter the Jesuit novitiate.

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India is Burns's home now. The culture and the people are embedded in his life. His friends, the poor, are here.

"This has been my life," he says. "I have no regrets. I will die here. I have no ambition to return to Canada.

"I would never go back and live in the West. Never, never."

Jim Robb is a freelance journalist who lives in Ottawa.
