

Father Andrew Cuschieri, 70: Mud huts changed his life

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Three years ago, Father Andrew Cuschieri struck a deal with God. Give this caustic, cigarette-smoking, coffee-swilling priest some more time on this Earth and he would erect a couple of churches, finish up a school and fine-tune a vibrant community hospital.

He asked for three months. He got more than three years.

And when Father Andrew died of cancer June 12 at age 70, he left behind a fully equipped 24-bed hospital, two schools and three new churches in the Bolivian province of Cochabamba. He also left The Human Family in Christ, a registered charitable organization run by volunteers out of Streetsville's St. Joseph's Parish who are determined Father Andrew's work won't stop with his death.

Hundreds came to that church on June 15 to celebrate his funeral mass, which was led by the Archbishop of Toronto, Cardinal Aloysius Ambrozic, two bishops and 54 priests. Solemn and regal, it was an appropriate tribute to a man who had been made a Knight of Malta and a member of the Legion of the Condors of the Andes, Bolivia's highest civilian award.

But what he would have really appreciated were the simple services held by the villagers of Colcapirhua, Quillacollo, Sumumpaya and Capacachi on the same day — because, since the summer of 1986, that was where his heart was.

"He saw people living in a series of mud huts," said Tal Akermanis, a friend, parishioner and member of the Human Family in Christ charity. "This thing had gripped his soul. It ruled his life."

His brother, Hamilton educator Tony Cuschieri, describes it as an "obsession." After Father Andrew's first trip to Bolivia, he came back to Canada a changed man. "He was visibly touched by the poverty of those people."

The eldest son in a Maltese family of eight, Joseph Cuschieri joined the Franciscan order of the priesthood when he was 16. He became Father Andrew when he was ordained at age 25. A scholar, he gained a doctorate in canon law and wrote several texts that are still used in seminaries. For years, he taught at St. Michael's College at University of Toronto, retreating to his book-filled room at the St. Augustine Seminary on Kingston Rd. in Scarborough where he would plow through dense texts written in Latin.

Even when he left the Franciscan order for the Archdiocese of Toronto and the university to take up the duties of a parish priest, his sermons could be somewhat "obscure," according to Akermanis.

"His homily used to be like a university lecture, with the hypothesis or postulus first, then he would develop the evidence or proof, then the conclusion," he recalled.

Father Andrew was a character, a man who loved to debate — anything — as well as a man with a sly wit. He'd make a point of assuming refills were free at the Second Cup, just to get a reaction from Akermanis, if not from the coffee shop staff.

But about 20 years ago, he was restless. His brother remembers being asked to go in as a partner with Father Andrew to buy a Piper airplane. The priest needed his brother because his eyesight was limited. He had worn thick glasses from an early age, so he decided Tony would take the flying lessons. Tony Cuschieri said he thought about his own young family and declined.

"He just wanted to go somewhere. He wanted a new challenge," he said.

Father Andrew found it when a letter arrived at the seminary. Written by a nun in Bolivia and addressed to all the seminarians, it asked for help building a school in Bolivia.

"My brother was generous but no fool. He wanted to see for himself," said Tony Cuschieri.

‘This thing had gripped his soul ... He must have raised \$8 million (in goods), and at least \$247,000 in cash.

Friend Tal Akermanis

That's when his life changed. He had saved \$50,000, intending it to be the down payment on a retirement cottage. It went towards the school, Collegio San Lorenzo. Then he went to Malta to ask his parents for money and to England to ask for a donation from another brother, Sir Alfred Cuschieri, one of the pioneers of keyhole surgery.

Tony Cuschieri said he never knew how much money his family gave his brother "but this may be the reason why the hospital is known as Cuschieri Hospital."

Certainly, Father Andrew would never have allowed it to be named after himself.

He gave 90 per cent of his \$24,000 annual pension to pay the staff at the hospital and 100 per cent of any money Tony gave him at Christmas. Over the years he filled up 10 40-cubic-foot containers packed with medical supplies, furniture and school supplies that all went to the Bolivians. He was relentless, a "tormentor," his friends agree, until he got what he wanted for the Bolivian villages.

He was so frugal he wrote on used paper. When Ontario was closing some of its hospitals, he made sure he got some of the discarded equipment and hospital furnishings. Whenever he'd receive a commemorative pin or plaque, he'd hand it to Akermanis with the instructions to "see what you can get for it" to turn over to the charity.

He hounded Tony to find flutes, clarinets and trombones for the schools. "Tony," he said to his brother in Maltese, "they have nothing. *M'ghandham vign.*"

But they now had him. He oversaw the building of the hospital with its emergency ward, dental and eye care departments, operating theatre, palliative care and maternity wards. He set up a hospital board, whose members he picked carefully. During his final three years, he instigated and oversaw the building of the churches as well as the addition to the hospital of a water purification facility, passive solar heating systems and an incinerator. A shy man, nevertheless he would not brook shoddy workmanship nor any unfair business practices.

He was a shrewd negotiator — he deeded the land for the hospital, schools and churches in perpetuity to the archdioceses of Cochabamba so it would never be expropriated and he was a demanding taskmaster. He was also revered in the four villages.

When he arrived in Bolivia for his twice-a-year month-long visits, the television cameras would be there. Local dignitaries filled the airport.

He endured them, along with the pomp and official greeting ceremonies, because he needed to work with the bureaucracy to ensure things were done properly.

The two schools operate — smoothly — as primary schools in the morning and secondary schools in the afternoon. There are 1,500 students at each. Father Andrew started a \$180-a-year child sponsorship program to assist the poorest community, administered by the Human Family of Christ.

Although the charity has only about 40 active members, it has 400 contributors. Few could say no to Father Andrew.

"It was his intensity," said Brian Morrison, who has sponsored a child for the last six years. He is president of the Human Family in Christ and his wife heads up the sponsorship program. Like everyone else with the organization, they are volunteers.

There's no overhead, but it is a registered charitable organization, nonetheless. Father Andrew saw it as a way to encourage donations.

"He must have raised \$8 million (in goods), and at least \$247,000 in cash," said Akermanis.

On his deathbed, when a visitor asked if he wanted anything, Father Andrew laughed. "A blank cheque."

What he got might be the next best thing: the satisfaction of knowing that what he started will go on without him.