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Grassroots Ministry: Presence in Ministry & Community

Marie O'Dea rsm (Great Britain Union): 'The Homeless Jesus'

The world-famous sculpture – “The homeless Jesus” - erected by Canadian sculptor Timothy Schmalz depicting Jesus as a homeless person lying on a park bench came to Glasgow in 2017. The morning of the unveiling of the sculpture was wet and cold and as we stood there I recalled the many homeless people I have had the privilege of meeting during my time of working with this group in London and Glasgow. Pope Francis said recently in his message for the 106th World Day of Migrants and Refugees, ***“it's not about numbers, it's about people. If we meet them, we will get to know them, and if we know their stories, we will be able to understand them.”***¹

At this time each year, the plight of homeless people is usually highlighted by the media. The weather is getting colder and the rest of the world is becoming excited preparing for Christmas. This year the pandemic is affecting every person especially those living in poverty and sleeping on our streets. Believing that each of us is an image of God, we can say that Jesus continues to be homeless today in our towns and cities and we are faced with the question, ***“Can we pass them by and ignore their plight?”***

We read many stories of wonderful acts of kindness shown to individuals lying on pieces of cardboard or wrapped in old blankets in doorways or under bridges. Sadly, we also hear of homeless people being abused verbally and physically by people who consider that it is their own fault for being in that situation.

There are many causes of homelessness - addictions, mental health issues, breakup of relationships, unemployment, among others. While there are similarities in people's situations, each person's story is unique. During my time in the night shelter in London and in the day centre in Glasgow, I encountered people whose stories often brought tears to my eyes and others who could laugh amidst their sufferings.

Jean² had been a member of a religious congregation for several years. She left to marry a man who had an alcohol problem and whom she believed she could help. Sadly, she too developed a problem with alcohol, and both lost their accommodation, ending up on the streets in London until they were directed to the night shelter. Jean's story reminded me of the saying “it's easy to go down but very difficult to come up.”

Jim moved between the streets of Glasgow and the local prison, which he called his home. Each time he presented at the day centre, he regaled me with stories from the prison. He saw himself as the person, who helped to get promotions for the prison officers. Jim's

¹ Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 106th World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2020

² All names used in this article are fictitious

laughter was infectious and helped to make a difficult day less stressful.

Believing that no person is a hopeless case and inspired by Catherine McAuley saying, ***“it is better to relieve 100 imposters if there be any such than to suffer one really distressed person to be sent away empty”***, I have been fortunate to witness individuals progressing from sleeping rough to recovering from addictions and eventually securing their own accommodation and living independently. Brian who was in his mid-40s and suffering from drug abuse, was sleeping rough since he was 18. He served several prison sentences for violence. Eventually he sought help for his addiction, got into a college course and secured permanent accommodation. Today he is a support worker for people suffering with addictions.

When I began working with homeless people over 40 years ago, I dreamed of the day when homelessness would be eradicated and there would be no need for night shelters, hostels, day centres etc. Sadly, the need today is just as great, despite many improvements in services, better accommodation, more advisory and addiction services, better healthcare services targeted to the needs of the homeless and other support services. The streets of London and Glasgow are still seeing large numbers of people sleeping rough. Pope Francis’ plea to us ***“to go out into the streets”***³ and Father Gabriel Gutierrez’s OSF further request ***“and embrace these people because their faces are none other than the faces of God”***⁴ are still relevant today.

The homeless population has changed greatly from 40 years ago. Today people from different countries, who have arrived on our shores seeking asylum have ended up on our streets or in the night shelters or hostels. Some have been trafficked and have escaped their captors. Another difference is the age group. We are seeing more young people, sometimes second and third generations, who have never known a loving and secure home. While both statutory and voluntary agencies are working hard to meet their needs, “the cry of the poor is still being heard.”

Loneliness and isolation are experienced by people of all circumstances, but it is especially evident among homeless people. For many they have lost contact with family and friends. During my time in the night shelter and the day centre, I was often asked to sit and listen to someone or to talk to them - a simple request but a very important and necessary one. The words of Catherine often echoed in my ears as I sat and experienced their loneliness – ***“there are things the poor price more highly than gold though they cost the donor nothing; among these are the kind word, the gentle compassionate look and the patient hearing of their sorrows.”*** Funerals for people attending the centres were stark reminders of the aloneness and the anonymity of some people. I attended many over the years, but some were more distressing than others. On a few occasions two other members of staff and myself waited in the crematorium for somebody to at least mention the person’s name but no word was spoken. There were no family or friends to grieve, but in the silence, I knew the Lord was saying, ***“I have called you by name you are mine.”***

³ Pope Francis to Youth in Rio Cathedral July 2013

⁴ St. Anthony’s Brief – Oct/Nov 2020

Having no home is not just being without accommodation, it is much more. My wish for all homeless people, especially those known to me is summed up in John O'Donohue's poem,"

"FOR A NEW HOME."⁵

May this house shelter your life.
When you come in home here,
May all the weight of the world
Fall from your shoulders.

May your heart be tranquil here,
Blessed by peace the world cannot give.

May this home be a lucky place,
Where the graces your life desires
Always find the pathway to your door.

May nothing destructive
Ever cross your threshold.

May this be a safe place
Full of understanding and acceptance,
Where you can be as you are,
Without the need of any mask
Of pretence or image.

May this home be a place of discovery,
Where the possibilities that sleep
In the clay of your soul can emerge
To deepen and refine your vision
For all that is yet to come to birth.

May it be a house of courage,
Where healing and growth are loved,
Where dignity and forgiveness prevail;
A home where patience of spirit is prized,
And the sight of the destination is never lost
Though the journey be difficult and slow.
May there be great delight around this hearth.
May it be a house of welcome
For the broken and diminished.

May you have the eyes to see
That no visitor arrives without a gift
And no guest leaves without a blessing.

⁵ For a new home" from "To Bless the Space between us." A Book of Invocations and Blessings
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