

Post-Experience Theological Reflection

Street Retreat with Mobile Loaves & Fishes, Austin, TX, June 19-21, 2009

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"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat (or drink), or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing " (Matthew 6:25)

As we left the truck and arrived at Wooldridge Park we were greeted by a young man who wore a t-shirt that read "Pain is inevitable; Suffering is optional" and had a huge smile on his face. That thought stuck with me all weekend like a mantra. I met the homeless, fellow retreatants and the rest of the world. I found a sense of community that I somewhat expected among the people on the street. They were no different than the people in my neighborhood and respected and looked out for each other. I even experienced the "hospitality" of the homeless. They were for the most part willing to share their knowledge and story with us. Kim, even became a guide for a group of younger people on the retreat. I witnessed very little conflict, but none above what we see among each other in our daily lives. I did experience, at times, the "invisibility of the homeless". The feelings that people would just look through you and pretend you are not there. I felt somewhat guilty because I am sure I have done the same thing in the past.

I had difficulty "letting go and letting God" on that first day. I was still dependent on man, in this case, Alan Graham, who was our shepherd on the street. Everyone on the retreat was from Austin and knew at least someone else in the group except for me. I was very anxious about not knowing where I was or where I was going. As we wandered around Austin until close to midnight, walking the alleys in search of cardboard and finally seeking rest in the parking lot across the street from the Travis County Jail, I was still anxious about the next meal and my own comfort.

There was some liberation without the gadgets of modern life. I found less distractions and more quiet time than I am used to having. Time for prayer. I attended the Central Texas Men's Fellowship Mass and was struck by the readings as they applied to my life. The first reading was the Call of Samuel – *Speak Lord your servant is listening* – seemed appropriate to my discernment (1 Sam 3:1-13). I probably would not have attended that Mass if I was not on the retreat. The Epistle was from the second chapter of James – faith and works – certainly appropriate to the service of the diaconate (James 2:14-24). The story of the Rich Young Man in the Gospel of Matthew was certainly appropriate to the Street Retreat (Mt 19:16-23). It seemed God was talking directly to me through those scriptures and I re-read them in the shade of some trees after Mass.

I only saw one person I knew prior to the weekend and that was my brother Aspirant, Mike Hannon, who also attended the Mass. I cannot say I was not welcome at the Cathedral or reception, but showing up in jeans with a back pack after sleeping in a parking lot and with Andrew in shorts we were not greeted with open arms. For the most

part we were ignored. Reading the parish policy on Feeding the Homeless was somewhat disconcerting. The first line reads:

We are called to feed the hungry. We are also called to protect our parishioners, especially our children.

It went on to talk about unescorted homeless would be given a meal and asked to eat it outside. Surely we can be more open to those in need than was reflected in that policy. What are we protecting ourselves from? If I were homeless and showed up with my EIM certificate would I be welcome without an escort and allowed to eat my meal in Bishops Hall? As Christians we are called to love, not to judge. I must admit this was also a lesson I re-learned this weekend.

After Mass I spent time on the street alone, just God and I. I had accepted the loss of control and not knowing my surroundings. There was a realization that following Christ makes us vulnerable, something we fear. But it is only then the Holy Spirit can come in to our hearts which have been humbled. Then we can rely on God and not on man. Stripping ourselves of the comforts of modern life can open us to better hear and serve our Lord.

I saw God at work through the MLF program and the other Churches providing meals and clothing throughout the city. I see God working through Alan and the Habitat on Wheels and his fire to take these people off the street. I saw God in “Church Under the Bridge”. I saw God working through people from all walks of life, all races, all religions – caring, sharing and concerned about their brothers and sisters in Christ. But unfortunately they are among the minority of the population. Cooperation, caring and concern of more people could quickly alleviate many of the problems of homelessness.

I am more aware of my own shortcomings after this weekend. I should be slower to judge others and more patient. I learned that there is a story behind every person on the street. They are all the sons or daughters, brothers or sisters, relatives of people just like me and they are all my brothers and sisters through Christ. We are all created in the image and likeness of God and deserve respect for that reason alone. I feel compelled to take a more active role in my own community. How can I help? How can our parish help? How can the Church of Central Texas do a better job on this issue in Austin and across the Diocese? I want to learn more and see how we can do a better job helping these people get back on their feet, restoring their dignity and allowing them to re-enter society on their terms.

But seek first the kingdom (of God) and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides. Do not worry about tomorrow; tomorrow will take care of itself.
(Matthew 6:33-34)

Allowing myself to become vulnerable and uncomfortable allowed the Spirit to show me new things. They were always there but I was blind to them. I moved closer to God by losing myself for 48 hours on the streets of Austin. Not a typical religious retreat by any means, but a very effective experience and encounter with God and my brothers and sisters.