

(The following article details the working relationship and philosophy of volunteer Ministers of a homeless program at St. Francis of Assisi Parish in Sacramento, California. Originally, a ministry was formed by Sr. Claire Graham to allow a limited number of people to sleep on the front steps of the church. Volunteers became known as the “Step Ministry.” After several years, a patio structure was erected in the Parish Center courtyard to allow privacy and safety for the church’s overnight guests. This is an example of how a “Ministry of Presence” is defined.)

An Overview of a “Ministry of Presence”
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Following are a few gems and jewels that I have collected from various sources each of which, to some degree, relates to what I believe to be the core philosophy of our ministry. I hope you will also find a deep resonance with the principles and sentiments expressed below and that they will call forth a fruitful discussion of how we are bound together by our mutual devotion to and guardianship of the delicate charism of our Step Ministry. (Texts in blue print are my personal opinions and statements.)

First of all, let’s talk about “charism.”

Often times you may have heard the expression “the charism of the Step Ministry.” This was most probably followed by much fumbling and bumping as some poor soul struggled to describe to you our particular charism. I confess that I found it somewhat comforting when I went searching for information on the different forms of “charism” and it seemed everyone else was having a dreadful time just defining the word let alone defining their particular charism. Following are bits and pieces of others’ attempts:

- ☉ We must face the fact that the charism, properly speaking, cannot be defined. Rather, it must be described by gathering up those traits through which it gradually appeared in those who first lived it, as well as in the successive generations who received it. It is not something that can be expressed in a few words.

By their nature, charisms are communicative and give rise to that “spiritual affinity among persons” and to that friendship in Christ which is the origin of ministries. When people are attracted to a certain ministry, it is usually because there is some kind of spiritual resonance in their hearts with the spirit of that particular ministry. It is this spirit that binds them together in a specific way.

- ☉ Vatican Council II described “charism” as “a distinctive way of being.”
- ☉ Charism is a gift from God and enriched by all who are called to live it. It can be described as the Spirit acting through an individual to make the presence of our living God more real in a suffering world.

*There are many different gifts but it is always the same Spirit;
there are many different ways of serving but it is always the same Lord.
There are many different forms of activity,
but in everybody it is the same God who works in them all.”*
(1 Cor. 12, 4-6)

- ☉ A “charism” is a mission or purpose.

Each religious community has a charism, which means a purpose or mission, and a spirit. For example, a religious order might exist to serve the poor (charism) in a spirit of humility. Some communities have an apostolic charism, which is an active ministry in the world.

I believe the charism of the Step Ministry is, at its core, relational. We strive to create an atmosphere in which relationships can grow and thrive. In such an atmosphere, all can experience respect and care for their dignity as children of God. We are called to understand and live our role as ministers of the Gospel by our attitudes, actions and manner of relating to our guests and each other. And in so doing we experience a profound mutual transformation.

Letter to a young activist

"Do not depend on the hope of results. When you are doing the sort of work you have taken on, you may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no worth at all, if not perhaps, results opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results, but in the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself. And there, too, a great deal has to be gone through, as gradually you struggle less and less for an ideal, and more and more for specific people. The range tends to narrow down, and it gets more real. In the end, it is the reality of personal relationships that saves everything."

Thomas Merton

I believe our goal is to follow the example of Jesus and thereby serve our guests with an attitude of humility. Christian humility creates harmony by affirming both the giftedness and limitations of all members. This frees us to learn from each other and to seek the truth together. Humility inspires a sense of connectedness, not only within the ministry, but beyond. Humility is not a passive attitude, but an attitude leading to action, and that action is service.

Through faith they see Christ in the poor and the poor in Christ. They endeavor to serve him in his suffering members with compassion, mildness, cordiality, respect and devotion."

As stated previously, “charism, properly speaking, cannot be defined. Rather, it must be described . . .” Here are a few tidbits that I believe describe ideas and principles related to the charism of our Step Ministry.

- ☉ It is one thing to offer people a handout and quite another to say I will be there for you as a friend. This friendship must be a commitment; they need to know that we will continue to be there for them and that our friendship will be a home base they

can return to. This is how we rebuild the confidence they need to take positive steps forward.

In Christ's love we strive to:
Accept their individuality,
Believe in their worth,
Hope for their future, and
Love them where they are.

- ☉ We are not there to fix them or change them or mainstream homeless people... just to meet the person and take time to hear about how their day was and share our lives with them.
- ☉ Catholic Archbishop of Sydney, **Cardinal George Pell**: "Like Jesus, we have to give the homeless food and shelter, but we also have to heal their hearts. This can only be done through love, which means through relationships. The poor are not just people we 'do good' to: they must also become our friends."
- ☉ Following are some definitions of homelessness which take into account the need for connectedness:
Define Homeless: An inadequate experience of connectedness with family and or community.
Homelessness is not a purely housing based concept but has significant emotional, social and psychological dimensions (Somerville, 1992)
Homelessness carries implications of belonging nowhere rather than simply having nowhere to sleep.
Homelessness is a condition of detachment from society characterized by the absence or attenuation of the affiliative bonds that link settled persons to a network of interconnected social structures (Caplow, Bahr and Sternberg, 1968: 494).
Homelessness - an inadequate experience of connectedness with family and/or community (Dominic Mapstone, Director - Rebecas Community).
Homelessness - an inadequate experience of shelter, ranging from a complete lack of shelter at one end of the continuum to severely inadequate housing conditions at the other.

What you do for the least of my brethren, you do for me.”

“When I was hungry, you fed me”.

Not only hungry for bread, but hungry for love

“When I was naked, you clothed me”.

Not only naked for a piece of cloth, but naked for human dignity and respect

“When I was homeless, you gave me shelter”.

Homeless not only for a room made of bricks but homeless from being rejected, unwanted, completely torn out of society as somebody unworthy to live

- ☉ The underlying approach that early Franciscans had for the conversion, renewal, and restoration of people who had lost self-respect and social status was simply being a “presence,” a visible tangible sign that the errant person was worthwhile and considered “redeemable.”
- ☉ As Dr. Martin Luther King so eloquently reminds us: “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied by a single garment of destiny. Whatever effects one of us directly, effects all of us indirectly.” Homelessness is indeed our affliction.
- ☉ This ministry of presence - "loitering with intent" - is our unique means of accompanying.
- ☉ **It is a ministry of presence**, in that the gift brought is one of companionship to the hurting person, honoring how much value there is in “being” with another since so often there is nothing we can really “do.”
It is a ministry of mutuality, in that each person giving to another bears the gifts of a wounded healer, knowing in richly intuitive ways what it means to experience need. The one giving and the one receiving are each blessed and can be transformed by the experience of being together—human to human, heart to heart.
- ☉ Compassionate living grows out of contemplative living. Contemplation is not, as people often mistakenly believe, chiefly a matter of advanced techniques in prayer. It is primarily a way of looking and listening, of beholding, marveling, considering. Compassionate living is founded on listening to God. It grows from listening to and responding towards others. Jesus saw the crowds and was moved with compassion. He turned aside in the midst of a journey, stopped, attended to two men clamoring for his attention, had compassion on them and restored their sight.
- ☉ All people, regardless of their economic condition or residential status, are children of God and equally deserving of respect, friendship, compassion and care; God commands us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Our neighbors include residents, merchants, other religious communities and homeless people in our neighborhood; We are called to seek harmony among all neighbors as well as dignity for all; It is our Christian responsibility to help the poor and those most in need, which include our homeless neighbors.

In offering hospitality, we invite the possibility of encounter with Christ incarnate (Matthew 25:36-36 and Hebrews 12:28-13:4,5-6 referring to Gen 18:1-8 and 19:1-8). Such incarnation calls us to treat people as sisters and brothers, and to engage them as individuals. We explored the difficult question of, in the face of great need and great scarcity, how do we welcome all the Christs in a way that honors each of them? As Christine Pohl writes, “...if you're going to let Christ in, you don't want to have Christ sleep under the sink, and you don't want Christ to crowd out all the other Christs that are already in there.”

Conversely, in offering hospitality, we risk that our guests will not be Christ-like. We have to agree as a community to what we are willing to risk. If we never invite the stranger, we may never encounter Christ. If we never lock the door, we may open

ourselves to evil. It is in this tension that hospitality becomes a spiritual practice. Vitale suggested that we "live with one foot in the world as it is, and the other in the world as it should be" (the Kingdom of God).

Pohl writes, "Offering hospitality in a world distorted by sin, injustice, and brokenness will rarely be easy. We need a combination of grace and wisdom. Substantial hospitality to strangers involves spiritual and moral intuition, prayer and dependence on the Holy Spirit, the accumulated wisdom of a tradition, and a pragmatic assessment of each situation. But grace is always primary...our first priority must always be one of welcome, embrace, hospitality."

And Monica Hellwig writes, "To preach that the salvation of God has come into the world in the person of Jesus, the one and only thing that is necessary is that a community that lives the new life of the Resurrection should touch the lives of the hungry of the world with authentic and generous compassion, drawing on the bread of life that is Jesus, to become themselves bread of life for the needy with their whole heart and their whole mind and their whole substance."

During his life, Jesus not only proclaimed the good news of God's favor to all but also demonstrated God's love through his ministry and obedience. His ministry of healing very often touched those seriously troubled in mind and spirit. We are called into communion with our Creator as members of the body of Christ. By God's grace, this community of believers heals, nourishes, and enables wholeness just as by God's grace each of us helps to heal, nourish and make whole the community of believers. We deny the healing God when we overlook or turn away from persons suffering from mental illness and their families, failing to recognize the fullness of their grace, to acknowledge them as ones for whom God also wills abundant life.

Though the biblical understanding of life unites body, mind, and spirit, it is often easier for us to see and accept afflictions of the body than of the mind and to support, nourish and heal those whose illness is physical rather than mental. Our thoughts, language and actions serve to define these persons by their disability, thus denying their dignity and identity as persons created and loved by God. Rather than healers of isolation, we often become part of the barrier experienced by those struggling to live with mental illness insofar as we continue to accept their social isolation as inevitable. We often thus miss the possibilities of being ministered to by the gifts which they bring to the community.

It is important to recognize, possibly to the surprise of those considered "normals," that those who are "sorely afflicted" have special and needed contributions which cannot be made from any other source. There is a need to move from a mentality of "charity" to one of mutuality (or solidarity). Underlying both of these statements is the understanding that the relationship between those who suffer from mental illness and those who don't is reciprocity and that, to empower those who suffer means giving grace—opportunity for them to make their contributions and to receive these contributions. "The parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable." (Corinthians 12:22.)

One Body with Many Parts

¹² The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up only one body. So it is with the body of Christ. ¹³ Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles, some are slaves, and some are free. But we have all been baptized into Christ's body by one Spirit, and we have all received the same Spirit.

¹⁴ Yes, the body has many different parts, not just one part. ¹⁵ If the foot says, "I am not a part of the body because I am not a hand," that does not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear says, "I am not part of the body because I am only an ear and not an eye," would that make it any less a part of the body? ¹⁷ Suppose the whole body were an eye—then how would you hear? Or if your whole body were just one big ear, how could you smell anything?

¹⁸ But God made our bodies with many parts, and he has put each part just where he wants it. ¹⁹ What a strange thing a body would be if it had only one part! ²⁰ Yes, there are many parts, but only one body. ²¹ The eye can never say to the hand, "I don't need you." The head can't say to the feet, "I don't need you."

²² In fact, some of the parts that seem weakest and least important are really the most necessary. ²³ And the parts we regard as less honorable are those we clothe with the greatest care. So we carefully protect from the eyes of others those parts that should not be seen, ²⁴ while other parts do not require this special care. So God has put the body together in such a way that extra honor and care are given to those parts that have less dignity. ²⁵ This makes for harmony among the members, so that all the members care for each other equally. ²⁶ If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it, and if one part is honored, all the parts are glad.

²⁷ Now all of you together are Christ's body, and each one of you is a separate and necessary part of it.

A favorite image of mine is that each evening at 6:00PM an amazing Biblical re-enactment takes place in the courtyard of the St. Francis of Assisi Church. At the striking of the church bell, as if drawn by some magical force, the many disparate “parts of the body” gather together once again — a gathering unchanged since before consciousness — a mythical reunion. We delight in welcoming home each of our brothers and sisters. We pay no mind to the tattered hems of their garments, but are instead drawn in by the light of God we find in their eyes. Once again we feel the slow-burn of God’s love in our hearts. The tightly drawn circle of the self is unlocked to include another whose happiness becomes our happiness, and whose suffering becomes our suffering.

Free from the tacky diversions of the material world which serve only to divide and separate us, we experience something akin to the harmony and unity of the Garden. The Garden in which there was no concept of separateness or duality. In the courtyard of St. Francis we are able to once again “walk with God in the cool of the evening,” much as it was before Mr. Serpent opened the first roadside fruit stand; before he succeeded in marketing the apple from the tree of knowledge to Eve; before that moment which resulted in the first recognition of a “Me”; before the split from perfect union with God into the dualism of “Me” and the “Other.”

In the courtyard the guests find respite from their feelings of isolation, of being society’s outcasts and not belonging, of the soul-murdering experience of being invisible. I believe that when Adam stood in the Garden, holding the fruit his wife had just handed

him, he was torn. She had eaten, should he? If he eats, he violates God's trust, and he will die. If he doesn't eat, he betrays his mate. She will die and he will live in loneliness. He chooses to eat. "Better death," teaches the Talmud, "than a life without others." There is a big loneliness at the center of every person. It is universal. There's a reason for the loneliness. It is meant to lead you somewhere. Even if you are unconscious of it, the big lonely is driving you homeward.

In the courtyard we are called out of our customary temporal concerns and obsessions to be fully present, fully in the moment to each other and to our guests. To my way of understanding such things, it is in this immediate moment that one experiences the eternal. This is the sacrament of the present moment. To be fully present to someone is to offer to them the opportunity to divine the transcendent act.

My dear fellow Step Ministers, may I suggest that you never underestimate the value of your presence to our guests, nor their presence in your life. I believe that therein lays our salvation. It is a step on the path toward the reunion with our Creator – the ultimate “coming home.”

I believe another core component of the Step Ministry is the concept of “sacred hospitality.” The following is from a writing by Christopher Bamford.

- ☉ Hospitality, welcoming the stranger, and by extension, the other (any other) and the unknown, lies at the heart of the Abrahamic traditions. Hospitality always awaits and expects the stranger—every stranger—with open heart. It extends home, hearth and ultimately even life itself to the other, whether invited or not.
- ☉ “Sacred” hospitality may be defined as “the experiential discovery of the sacred in others and, in response, of holiness in oneself.” It puts hospitality at the center of our spiritual lives. Louis Massignon, whose phrase it is, writes: “This experiential knowledge is not a ready-made science; it is an understanding, an interiorization, which cannot be communicated by external means, but by acceptance through the transfer to ourselves of the sufferings of others.” Sacred hospitality is a call to go out of ourselves toward others, to love outside our own milieu and relationships.

If I allow Christ to use my heart in order to love my brothers and sisters with it,
I will soon find that Christ loving in me and through me has brought to light Christ in my brothers and sisters.
And I will find that the love of Christ in my brothers, and sisters, loving me in return,
has drawn forth the image and the reality of Christ in my own soul.
(Thomas Merton, Disputed Questions, pp. 97-127)

The following is from *Radical Hospitality* by Fr. Daniel Homan and Lonni Collins Pratt.

- ☉ Hospitality is the answer to hostility. Jesus said to love your neighbor; hospitality is how.

...if we close ourselves to the stranger, we close ourselves to the Sacred.

Acceptance is about receiving, rather than judging.

Acceptance is not about condoning; it is about embracing.

When we accept, we take an open stance to the other person. It is more than merely piously tolerating them. We stand in the same space and we appreciate who they are, right now at this moment, and affirm the Sacred in them.

Every human is sacred; every life is holy ground.

- ☹ It is a great loss if we greet every day with clenched hands stuffed with our own devices. We will never know what is out there waiting for us if we don't extend an empty hand to the world and wait for wonder to happen. Hospitality provides us with a way to offer empty hands to the world. It provides us with a way home.
- ☹ Hospitality requires not grand gestures, but open hearts. When I let a stranger into my heart, I let a new possibility approach me. When I reach past my own ideas, I begin to stretch myself open to the world, and this opening of my heart could change everything. That's pretty frightening stuff. You can't ever be the same if you start doing that kind of thing.
- ☹ Genuine spirituality is not cozy, and seldom makes you comfortable. It challenges, disturbs, unsettles, and leaves you feeling like someone is at the center of your existence on a major remodeling mission.
- ☹ Choosing against hospitality means you will eventually lock your heart away from others and grow cold and hard inside. You cannot take seriously the spiritual practice of hospitality and remain who you are.
- ☹ Hospitality, rather than being something you achieve, is something you enter. It is an adventure that takes you where you never dreamed of going. It is not something you do, as much as it is someone you become. You try and you fail. You try again. You make room for one person at a time, you give one chance at a time, and each of these choices of the heart stretches your ability to receive others. This is how we grow more hospitable—by welcoming one person when the opportunity is given to you.
- ☹ When we turn away from the poor, we lose Jesus and we lose ourselves.
- ☹ That is where it starts. You make room in your heart, room in your life, room in the moment for a person, with no strings attached.
- ☹ Part of the internal work hospitality requires is setting boundaries. You do no one a favor if you allow people to involve you in destructive behaviors. You have to figure out for yourself when this is happening. It is a matter of trusting yourself.
- ☹ The essence of hospitality is receiving the stranger while letting them remain a stranger. By letting the stranger into our "dwelling" (not necessarily a physical structure), we let them into our emotional and spiritual space. We welcome them to

be heard and understood, we accept what they choose to reveal of themselves, and we accept them if they reveal little or nothing.

- ☹ When we create a life surrounded by people just like ourselves, it is a very narrow life. We will not be challenged by such a life. We cave in on ourselves; our minds and spirits shrink to the pea-size of our world. A spirituality centered in such a life will drift into laziness and complacency. It is the kind of life that allows us to settle for easy answers based solely on personal experience.
- ☹ Hospitality means we don't tell people how to feel. We listen to them. We let them tell us how they feel.
...in relating to the person, we must offer them room to feel what they feel, rather than assuming that we know what they feel. Even if we think that we have been through exactly the same experience ourselves, we cannot know what another is feeling.
- ☹ The stranger helps us locate our favorite lies. The stranger helps us see the absurd in our culture and ourselves. The stranger opens our eyes.
- ☹ The image of preparing a table, or preparing a place, is a good overall image of hospitality. In genuine hospitality we work to make our entire existence a welcoming table, a place prepared for others to be at ease, to receive from us comfort and strength.
- ☹ Preparing a table has sacramental meaning. Every meal, like every encounter with a human being, has the potential to reveal God present in Creation. The table represents the unknown yearning of every human heart for communion with "something more" that infuses all that exists.