

MANNA *in The wilderness*

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The Newsletter of the Las Vegas Catholic Worker

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Sustaining the Christian Witness

Dear Friend,

Alfonso caught my smile, then shyly disappeared behind his mother. He and his parents had come to our breakfast line for a couple of days. I was watching them from a distance. They had not approached us for help yet. I hoped that they were managing all right.

Human crisis is a constant part of our life with the poor. We stretch our physical and emotional limits in attempting to respond to the perpetual litany of requests. Hospitality needs, food boxes, assistance with rent payments, utilities, transportation and health care are all part of the daily routine. Our days also feel the weight of spiritual brokenness, addictions, mental illness, violence and despair.

From the corner of my eye I continued to observe this new family. I took a deep breath only to feel my body fill up with hesitation. I was concerned. I wanted to know if they were living on the street. Perhaps we could help. But my thoughts flashed to the countless sagas of rescue and all the heartfelt gestures that backfired. There is often a weariness that follows the recognition of our powerlessness in altering the course of suffering in peoples' lives. I didn't know whether I was ready for another failure. But that morning a little boy's playful peering was drawing me out of my weariness. My reluctance seemed to finally disappear as I walked over to talk to them. They did need help.

They came to stay with us until they could pay rent on their own apartment. But soon after they were in their own place, problems stirred. Mom and Dad were fighting. Money was being lost to drinking and gambling, until one day Dad left town without paying the rent. Mom was left with the child and an eviction notice. Mom and Alfonso came back to stay with us. Mom grew quickly frustrated with our "No drinking" rule and chose to leave us. We are still in contact with Mom and her son. They have a place for this week only. It's a lifestyle that vacillates between desperation and disaster.

Much like the Good Samaritan, we journey through a world of suffering that we cannot ignore. We are continually being called beyond human standards of judgment, expectation and fear to a place of mercy, regardless of cost or consequence. The Catholic Worker is not sustained by happy endings or success stories. Broken, we try to heal a broken world only to grow more familiar with our own sinfulness and more in awe of God's grace. Indeed, it is only in embracing the tension between sin and grace that we truly live our Christian mission to be the salt of the earth, a light in the darkness, a sign of hope for the world.

With this in mind we come to you once again for support. We need your financial assistance to continue our hands-on service to the poor in Las Vegas. The numbers of homeless and hungry continue to grow and with this, our need to respond to the human suffering born of this broken world. As we approach our fifth year in Las Vegas, our ministries still include a daily morning breakfast line, a weekly dinner meal, a hospitality house, a winter clothing distribution room, a summer children's program and a quarterly newsletter.

Your support from the past is appreciated. May Jesus draw you near this Advent and Christmas. God bless you!

Julia Occhiogrosso

Roselee Papandrea

Jean Uhlenkott



Sharing the Burden

By Roselee Papandrea

A few days before Thanksgiving last year a friend and I met in Denny's Restaurant before leaving to spend the holiday with our families. An elderly man sat alone in a booth across from us. We listened to the conversation between him and the women sitting at the table next to his.

"How are you spending your Thanksgiving?" he asked.

One of the women answered for both and to be polite asked him his plans.

"I can't get to my daughter's this year," he said softly. "I don't know what I'll do."

Without a word of response the woman turned toward her friend and continued chatting as if never interrupted.

My friend and I also turned our attention back to each other trying to distract one another from this man's reality. I ached inside thinking of this man spending a family holiday alone.

My thoughts were interrupted by the old man as he rose to leave. As he headed out he stopped to speak with a family eating at a table by the door. Anticipating he would ask them the same question, I began to pray intensely. Please ask him to spend the day with you. Please notice he's all alone and desperately asking for an invitation.

But he received another brief answer with no invitation attached. He walked out of Denny's and out of my life, but the memory of his desperate situation sat heavily in my chest.

I was angry at those who offered no invitation, but even more angry at myself. My hurried prayer that the old man's needs would be met by the family was merely to relieve myself of the burden his situation created in my heart. I wanted to drop the responsibility to serve those in need on someone else's shoulders.

Consequently, I frantically tried to redeem myself before Christmas by contacting many volunteer organizations. I had to somehow make up at Christmastime for where I failed on Thanksgiving.

My heart was never put at ease. My guilt never subsided. Many had similar ideas. All the places I called had all the people they needed for the holiday season.

Surprisingly, once the holidays were over my yearning to give to those destitute and impoverished seemed to grow stronger. I know it was that overwhelming need that brought me to the Catholic Worker.

Every morning that I serve on our coffee line I stare deeply into eyes filled with loneliness. And I hear that familiar cry for companionship that consumed me in Denny's last year.

I watch as hot soup is ladled into over 200 bowls. I wish it was as easy to nourish their hearts and souls as it is their empty stomachs.

But I realize that in my attempt to give my time last holiday season, I was misled by the illusion that giving to the poor would be easy. I would give and they would receive with glowing smiles of appreciation and hearts filled with

joy. And once this was accomplished, I could sit comfortably under the Christmas tree collecting all my gifts.

Unfortunately, homelessness and loneliness are realities not strictly limited to the holiday season, and they aren't wiped away with one act of giving. The colored lights and mistletoe eventually come down. The stockings and tree ornaments get packed away until next year. But our homeless brothers and sisters sleep on the streets every day. There aren't enough blankets to keep them warm on cold winter nights. There isn't nearly enough shade to protect them from the blazing sun on hot summer days in Las Vegas. And there just isn't enough love to heal their brokenness.

Six months ago I would walk away from the coffee line each morning carrying the burdens of all those whose lives touched me. Their pain and sorrow weighed heavy on my heart. Regardless of what I said or did, I barely made a dent in the destitution encompassing their lives.

I could not accept my powerlessness. I was there to make a difference. I felt obligated to those who suffered and to God.

I quickly realized I had to let that part of myself die. Jesus tells us in Matthew 11:28-30: "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves for my yoke is easy, and my burden light."

I am not at the Catholic Worker to rid Las Vegas of homelessness or to change the world. I am here to live and share with the poor just as Jesus did. I struggle with simply leaving the burdens of the world in God's hands, but I am learning that He is the only one able to carry the load.



CHRISTA OCCHIOGROSSO

WE ARE NOT TAX EXEMPT

All gifts to the Catholic Worker go to a common fund which is used to meet the daily expenses of our work.

Gifts to our work are not tax-deductible. As a community, we have never sought tax-exempt status since we are convinced that justice and the works of mercy should be acts of conscience which come at a personal sacrifice, without governmental approval, regulation or reward. We believe it would be a misuse of our limited resources of time and personnel (as well as a violation of our understanding of the meaning of community) to create the organizational structure required, and to maintain the paperwork necessary for obtaining tax-deductible status. Also, since much of what we do might be considered "political," in the sense that we strive to question, challenge and confront our present society and many of its structures and values, some would deem us technically ineligible for tax-deductible, charitable status.

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