A Tapestry of True Servanthood

by Julia Occhiogrosso

I recall the morning we first met Thomas*. Someone who knew of him because her husband had delivered mail to him for many years, had requested that he be added to our list of food box recipients. Upon knocking we could hear his struggling response. In between fits of wheezing, words became audible; “Come … on… in.” By the time we were in the door, Thomas was nowhere in sight. He had apparently stepped into the next room and all we heard was his distressed voice instructing us to leave the boxes on the table. It was difficult to completely understand what was being said. I stepped out of his tiny living room to follow his voice and to see if he needed help. He sat in the bathroom breathing through an oxygen mask. Careful not to overstep the boundaries and etiquette of this initial visit I inquired; “Are you all right?” He gave me a nod and I had the feeling this was part of the daily routine in the life of Thomas Freed.

On our next visit Thomas was feeling a little better. He sat on his couch and we were able to converse a bit. His apartment was neat and orderly. The walls were covered with images of Jesus. He expressed gratitude for last month’s visit and proceeded to hand me a stack of index cards, while explaining; “These here folks, they could sure use some help too”. On each of these cards were scrawled in pencil the names, addresses, and phone numbers of each person. I felt an immediate pull of resistance to the idea of taking on the responsibility for five or six more recipients in our food distribution program. I gave a weak answer to his request. He didn’t push.

A few days later I had a message on the answering machine from Thomas. He was calling to make sure I had the correct information on the index cards. When we spoke he went on to give the stories behind the names. “Now let’s see, you have Daniel Jones* on your cards. He was shot in the head ten years ago, gets around in a wheel chair now. Then there is Sandra Hill*, had a stroke some time ago, can hardly talk, doesn’t get out of the house much these days. And Lillian James*, she has health problems too. Her grandchildren are always in and out of her place. Rita Banks* has heart problems. None of these folks can get around too well. They can’t stand in line to get food in (continued on other side)

Jesus Was A Victim of the Death Penalty

“The new evangelization calls for followers of Christ who are unconditionally pro-life: who will proclaim, celebrate and serve the Gospel of life in every situation. A sign of hope is the increasing recognition that the dignity of human life must never be taken away, even in the case of someone who has done great evil. Modern society has the means of protecting itself, without definitively denying criminals the chance to reform. I renew the appeal I made most recently at Christmas for a consensus to end the death penalty, which is both cruel and unnecessary.” —Pope John Paul II, January 27, 1999

For more than 25 years, the Catholic Bishops of the United States have called for an end to the death penalty.
We were on the phone for forty-five minutes as he told and retold more stories. I listened, my mind wandering back to the image of his apartment. I could see it clearly. Thomas had set up his own home-style social work office. His telephone and answering machine were the extent to his high-tech resources. His index cards in ordered piles on his coffee table served for his filing system. When he was not breathing through an oxygen mask, he was on the phone as a self-ordained advocate for those he knew in need.

By the end of the conversation I was swayed. He had worked his magic and I solidly assured him that the persons he had referred would be put on our recipient list and would receive food boxes at the end of the month.

Over the last nine months, myself, along with other volunteers have had the blessed opportunity to meet and nurture relationships with those once only names on index cards. Daniel Jones received his gunshot wound while working as a security guard and moving a woman out of a line of fire. He is a relatively young man, with a pleasant hopeful deposition. He spent a year in a coma and the last nine years rebuilding and healing his body with a dedication to walk again. Rita Banks has moved from the projects to upgraded subsidized housing. She still needs help with food and other basics as her young adult children and their children depend on her for support.

Sandra Hill had a stroke and has trouble communicating with words, but understood very well as she hobbled out of her apartment with a sobbing embrace for Peggy who one Saturday had brought a vase of flowers along with the regular food box delivery.

A few months ago we went to deliver food to Thomas and he was not there. We learned from one of his friends that he had been hospitalized. Soon after we learned that he had died.

During one of our last phone conversations Thomas expressed a sincere happiness that food was being brought to his friends. He made a statement that in retrospect I wish I had asked him to explain. He said, "I have been praying for this for thirty-two years".

I tell this story of stories to honor the witness of a special man. I tell this story of stories to remember the significant, mysterious function of relationship; our life stories, shared and woven in love to create a tapestry of true sanctity.

While I was barely getting to know Thomas, I cannot hold back my perception that he was a man with a mission. Once accomplished, he was freed to leave this life where even breathing was difficult, and return to the place where he has been all along; in the heart of Divine Love. Farewell Thomas and much thanks.

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**ANNUAL FINANCIAL REPORT FOR 1999**

**INCOME:**
- Christmas Appeal: 9,820
- Monthly Donations: 10,420
- Regular Donations: 6,481
- Past Donor Appeal: 85
- Large Donations ($500+): 11,170
- T-Shirts, Merchandise from IHN for utilities: 3,289
**TOTAL INCOME:** 41,415

**EXPENSES:**
- Soup line supply costs: 6,459
- Food Basket program: 454
- Hospitality House: 3,679
- Utilities: 2,007
- Maintain & Repair: 201
- Improvements: 450
- Property tax: 2,025
- Fire/Liability 1999**: 1,987
- Fire/Liability 2000**: 717
- Chickens, Dogs, Cat: 1,670
- Guest Hospitality: 3,115
- Other Help to Poor: 5,875
- 1988 Dodge 600 costs**: 729
- Newsletter mailing-Supplies/Postage-Volunteer costs: 1,275
- Retreat costs: 167
- Shortage/Overage: 437
- Tues. Nite Liturgy: 73
- Staff expenses:
  - Julia & Gary Stipend: 2,700
  - Julia & Gary's house: 4,800
  - Health Insurance-Social Security: 1,614
  - TOTAL EXPENSES: 41,390

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**Thank you for your support & generosity!**

(FOR TAB)

**Our friend Toni Flynn has started the High Desert Catholic Worker in Valyermo, California (near Palmdale). For info please contact her: (661) 944-2655, P. O. Box 62, Valyermo, CA 93563.**

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**PLEASE JOIN US:**

**Wednesday-Saturday,** 6:00 a.m.:
- Morning prayer at Catholic Worker.

**Wednesday-Saturday,** 6:30 a.m.:
- Breakfast meal served at St. James Church parking lot (G & McWilliams St.) to the poor and homeless.

**Tuesday,** 5:30 p.m.:
- Mass or Liturgy, potluck following. Call for location.

**Seven Days a Week:**
- Hospitality (HN) to 3 to 5 homeless families, call 638-8806 to volunteer.

**Last Saturday each month,** 8:30 a.m.:
- Deliver food to homes in need, gather for reflection & prayer, call for info.

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