

MANNA *in the wilderness*

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When Breaking Bread Breaks the Law

by Julia Occhiogrosso

Las Vegas is known for providing a haven for the shadowy albeit forbidden practices of modern society. This point is made all too well in the popular advertising slogan associated with Las Vegas “What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas”.

Last month the City of Las Vegas took a profoundly immoral action that defies its own slogan’s promise of keeping unseemly behavior under wraps. This action, far from being hush-hush, was featured in headlines all around the world. On July 19, 2006 the Las Vegas City Council voted to approve an amendment to an existing ordinance that will ban “the providing of food or meals to the indigent for free or for a nominal fee” in city parks. It further defines an “indigent” person as a person who a reasonable ordinary person would believe to be entitled to receive public assistance.

The Las Vegas Catholic Worker has been feeding the hungry in Las Vegas for twenty years. We serve outside in a vacant lot and as of yet have not been affected by this ordinance. Still, the enforcement of this law has sorrowful fall-out for the poor and hungry, for City Council members and for the entire Las Vegas community.

When I first heard about this law I was sick to my stomach. Lately there has been an onslaught of legislation that seems to be directly aimed at the most vulnerable. While all these actions cause me to cringe, this particular ordinance directly forbidding the feeding of the hungry offends my most basic sensibilities.

I had a few images. What if the Bishop was to celebrate Mass at a city park. Would he be arrested for giving an indigent person the Eucharist? I imagined Jesus surrounded by the thousands of hungry men, women and children who sat outside on the public grounds and waited for him to divide the loaves and fishes. Only, in my image he was stopped by the Roman soldiers.

I recalled the story Sister Klaryta told me of WWII victims in Poland who in their hunger went from Mass to Mass to be fed in the Catholic Churches by the communion bread.

In the Catholic Worker tradition you will find a very strong connection between

the significance of the Mystical Body of Christ found in the celebration of breaking bread in the Eucharist and the breaking of bread to feed the hungry. For the poor and hungry, God truly comes in the form of bread. Feeding the hungry is sacramental.

and strengthens this type of thinking. Thinking which divides the human family into competing groups misses the truth of our common needs. It fails to recognize the woundedness and sacredness that paints a universal and poignant portrait of the human person.



I WAS HUNGRY, BY MEINRAD CRAIGHEAD (MATTHEW 25: 34-36)

My years of experience with street people have given me a perspective that is sometimes difficult to translate in to mainstream dialect. We tend to speak in dichotomies of “us and them” thinking. It is the homeless versus the city police or the the indigents versus the ordinary citizens. What is most dangerous and counterproductive about this law is that it fosters

Us and them thinking and acting damages the possibilities for true healing of social ills. The homeless, like all of us, carry the wounds and traumas of life’s scarring . The neighbors who complain about feeding the homeless in the parks, have the same fears and a need for a safe haven as the homeless do. Catholic so- (continued on back page)

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cial teaching requires us to strive to meet basic human needs for all people. This teaching is clearly expressed in the Corporal Works of Mercy; feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, give drink to the thirsty, care for the sick, visit the imprisoned, bury the dead. These simple mandates are responsible for much of what we can hold up as good, just and healing in society today. They have served as humane standards to guide the creation of social programs that benefit us all.

The complex tapestry of human experiences, its hopes, its disappointments, its needs and its possibilities are what we hold in common. Feeding the hungry in a park or anywhere for that matter is an opportunity for two seemingly different worlds and different life experiences to discover common ground and deeper understanding. In Christian tradition, sharing a meal was more than nourishing the body, it was the place where one shared stories of life and found spiritual sustenance for the community. For Catholics, this practice of sharing a meal is central to our faith experience and is celebrated in the sacrament of the Eucharist. We draw strength and spiritual nourishment in remembering the life and suffering love of Jesus through the breaking and sharing of bread. When we break bread and share food with the hungry we open a space for the sacrament to take on tangible Reality. When breaking bread breaks the law, the law not only withholds food from the hungry but it also steals from those who have the food to share. It steals from all an opportunity to gain understanding, empathy, compassion and communion. The city defends this legal action as helping the homeless by motivating them to get the social services they need. Yet Las Vegas rates among

the lowest in the nation on mental health and social services. It is not that the Las Vegas community is not capable of developing more ways of responding to the needs of the poor, but for some reason the present leadership is choosing not too, and instead creating an environment where even nongovernmental efforts to respond to human needs are being thwarted.

To respond effectively to human suffering, a community must be guided by

the collective heart. It must choose compassion as a guiding principle. In a world filled with religious people who in the name of high morals cause undo harm to the human family, we need to embrace spiritual practices like feeding the hungry, so that we can be taught the art of compassion. When we learn this art the remedies for all social ills will come easily. Freedom to break bread with the poor in a city park will multiply the infinite possibilities of the human heart.

CURRENT POPE NAMED AFTER BENEDICT XV, "THE PEACE POPE" OF WORLD WAR I

In this time of war and civilian death, it is fitting that the current Pope chose to name himself after Pope Benedict XV (1914-1922), who earned his title "the Peace Pope" by trying to prevent World War I and by his encyclical *Pacem Dei Munus* (1920), a plea for international reconciliation. He called for a boycott of any nation that had obligatory military conscription. He sent a representative to each country to press for peace. On Aug. 15, 1917 the Vatican sent a note to Archbishop Gibbons (the leader of the Church in the U.S.) to "exert influence" with President Wilson to endorse the papal peace plan to end the war.

Asked in the fall of 2002 if the U.S.

invasion of Iraq would be a just war, Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) responded, "certainly not," explaining that "the damage would be greater than the values one hopes to save." On May 2, 2003, shortly after the invasion of Iraq by the U.S., Cardinal Ratzinger stated "there were not sufficient reasons to unleash a war against Iraq" and suggested "that, given the new weapons that make possible destructions that go beyond the combatant groups, today we should be asking ourselves if it is still licit to admit the very existence of a 'just war.'"

"Blessed are the peacemakers." We pray that like both Benedicts, Catholics will continue to speak boldly for peace.

PRAY FOR PEACE IN OUR WORLD!

(FOR TAB)

Thanksgiving: We need boneless cooked turkeys by Nov. 21, call 647-0728 to arrange delivery.

GOODBYE RYAN HALL & EUGENE BAHN!

In May, Eugene left, heading in his VW van for the cooler climate and small town life of Oregon. We still have his "Eugenious" inventions throughout the house, and the many gifts he brought to our community in the over 2 years he lived here. He is still a leader in the Complete Coverage Campaign which strives for coverage of civilian suffering in the media

(CompleteCoverageCampaign.org).

Ryan, who leaves Sept. 2, has been volunteering for 9 years and been a member of our community for the past 4 1/2 years. He is leaving to pursue a degree in Theology. His gifts of humor, hard work, faithfulness, insight and idealism have enriched our lives and the life of the Catholic Worker community in Las Vegas.

WEBSITES:

www.lvcw.org

www.catholicworker.org

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PLEASE JOIN US:

Wed., Fri., Sat., 6:00 a.m.:

Morning prayer at Catholic Worker.

Wednesday-Saturday, 6:30 a.m.:

Breakfast served to homeless.

Last Saturday of month; 8:30 a.m.:

Deliver food to homes in need.

Wednesday; 8 a.m. - noon:

Hospitality Day, we invite 15 folks home for showers & lunch.

Thursday; 8 a.m. - 9 a.m.:

Vigil for Peace in front of Federal Courthouse, 333 S. Las Vegas Blvd.

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