

Lenten Programme: Soup and Substance (1)

The theme of the first Lenten Reflection in this six part series is **Solidarity**. You are invited to engage with it by:

- Reflectively reading the presentation 'You *are not alone*' by Jo Kennedy, rsm.
- Finding inspiration in the Scripture and Mercy Tradition
- Taking Action

This Reflection is suitable for both personal and group engagement.

'Know you are not alone'-the theme of Solidarity in the Christian life

We'll begin this talk by paying attention to the soup in front of us, the fact that we have it; we can reflect for a moment that we have chosen this meal rather than our usual full meal to-day, and instead of just drinking it, focus our intention on being in solidarity with those many thousands of people, refugees in Libya and elsewhere who have nothing whatever to eat.

Now we'll light a candle, a small candle, because no matter how tiny the light, it can burn, even in the greatest darkness.

And let us remember we are in this house in Baggot St., a house that Catherine McAuley built, in, at the nineteenth century, a part of Dublin that was very middle-class and affluent -still is!-and in so doing she was saying to the residents of the area "these women have as much right to be here as you have; and there is a connection between how you are living, your lives and the women who live here- these lives are connected."

Let me start with a poem by Vikram Seth, a great Indian poet-

All you who sleep tonight

Far from the ones you love

No hand to left or right

And emptiness above

Know you are not alone

The whole world shares your tears

Some for two nights or one

And some for all their years

Know you are not alone

If you come to the talks here during Lent, and listen to the Radio and look at T.V., you'll be challenged to give, to think about, to support children and adults-, refugees, those made homeless by wars, and slave labour.

What these people have in common is that they are outsiders in society - placed on the margins of society by ourselves -poor, neglected and most of the time invisible.

Our invitation is to enter their world, to say to them 'know you are not alone'.

Each of us, if we are true to ourselves. can remember a time when we ourselves felt misunderstood, unjustly treated - we looked then for someone to understand, for a bit of 'solidarity' and maybe we didn't find it?

When are we in solidarity? When we read, reflect, give time to, listen to and let ourselves be challenged by 'the outsider' in our society. We can give a donation, a few Euros, and then immediately forget. Or we can give and remember, have an intention to be in solidarity.

There is a long history of solidarity in Christianity. Are we not told in the New Testament that Christ 'became one of us', the greatest act of solidarity we humans can dream up? Fr. Peter McVerry, for the past thirty years, has lived and worked in Ballymun, with the young, homeless boys. What is that like for the boys? - that someone chooses to share their life-to be in solidarity.

We can be in solidarity through self-interest of course. We only have to think of the way the over-'70' in this country came together a few years ago when they thought that the government was going to take away their medical cards!-but true solidarity is about 'the other', not ourselves.

I'd like us for a few minutes, to look at solidarity in a different way. That is to be challenged to allow ourselves to be changed by befriending the outsider. To do this, we'll look at the story of St. Francis. We all know how he threw off his clothes in the city square when his father wanted him to return home and help to make the family's fortune. But Francis tells us himself that although he then began to give alms and to build up the church that was fallen, it was not until he went among the lepers and embraced them and kissed them, that he was changed and converted himself. Now, we have to realise what he was doing when he embraced the lepers. In his day, lepers weren't just seen as ill and contagious, but they were blamed for their illness, their disfigurement, much as we blamed people who had AIDS in the 1980s. So for someone of his status to befriend them and to embrace them- it was shocking. Yet Francis tells us that this was his moment of conversion. He was accepting the humanity in the other, not just seeing his illness.

But I think we can see, too, the leper as a metaphor for the outsider in ourselves, the parts of ourselves that we refuse to embrace and so are unable to embrace in others around us. Embracing the 'leper' in ourselves changes us and frees us to embrace the other. We are all disfigured, all human beings struggling, and in accepting that struggle, we join all of struggling humanity.

You know, scandal occurred around the sexual abuse because of the abuse itself; scandal occurred because of denial and so a lack of amendment and contrition; but scandal lastly occurred because so many in the church were disconnected from the sufferings of others- the suffering of the children, the suffering of their families. Disconnection is the opposite of solidarity.

Years ago, a young sister who had been working in South Africa told me this story. She was only a few months in the country and she was a white person. She visited a black family who were starving and she thought that one of the local shops would help her with food. Unfortunately, when they found out who she was trying to help, they refused her. She tried a few places unsuccessfully. Then she went back to the convent, but it was a very large institution and everywhere was locked up and she couldn't get a key. She was very upset going back to the family and as soon as the mother opened the door of the hut, the sister began to cry as she told them that she had no food for them. The mother brought her over to the stool and sat her down. "Don't cry, Sister. Don't worry. Your tears have filled our bellies". How that sister showed true loving kindness and solidarity.

Finally, let me tell you another story. A neighbour of mine lost her husband last year. His anniversary was in February and I dropped down to see her. In the course of our conversation she told me that she had dreamt about her husband Al the night before. "Jo", she said "I knew he was in heaven. And I said to him "Al, what's heaven like?"

And he put his arms around me and he said "Phyllis, it's what's in your heart; it's what's in your heart." Let's ask ourselves what's in our hearts prevents us from being in solidarity with those around us- family member, sister, friend, colleague and what supports us to be connected and loving to the outsider wherever ,whoever.

Finding Inspiration

Scripture

Jesus shows compassion and responsibility

Jesus summoned his disciples and said, "My heart is moved with pity for the crowd, for they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, for fear they may collapse on the way."

Matthew 15:32

Solidarity with the outcasts of society

The tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to him, but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Luke 15:1-2

The Lord calls me to bring glad tidings to the lowly

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the lowly, to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, To announce a year of favor from the Lord and a day of vindication by our God, to comfort all who mourn; *Isaiah 61:1-2*

Mercy Tradition

Catherine McAuley, not only responded to the needs of poor people. She could identify with them in their sufferings and deprivations. Think of Catherine's experience. Catherine was born into a comfortably wealthy Catholic family. However, her father died before she was five years old, and towards the end of her teens her mother also died, having flitted away the family inheritance. By the time she was twenty, Catherine's life was already chequered by transitions from wealth to poverty, to orphan hood, to being homeless, to reliance on other people's charity and dependency on those who provided for her. Who would blame her if she felt a bit resentful and hard done by? Instead she turned it into an empathetic and compassionate

understanding of others who shared the same losses and this animated her to respond to the needs of such people

Catherine's Wisdom

God knows I would rather be cold and hungry than that the poor of Kingstown or elsewhere would be deprived of any consolation in our power to afford them.

There are three things that people prize more highly than gold though they cost the donor nothing. Among these are the kind word, the gentle compassionate look and the patient hearing of their sorrows.

We should have compassion for those who have seen better days, and are ashamed to make known their indigence. We should assist them privately.

Taking Action

Engaging the Reflection on Solidarity

What do you feel called to do as a response to your engagement with this reflection:

... at a personal level?

... in your sphere of influence?

...at a financial level?

Personal Action

You might like to respond with an action that is a change:

... of attitude

... of heart

... of mind

... of policy

... of funding priorities

Or you might like to join others in prayer and reflection on this theme.

