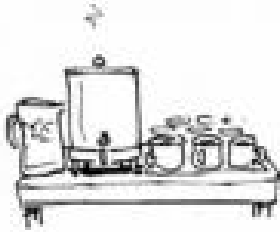


The other cheek, the extra mile

Pat Marrin | Jun. 15, 2009 NCR Today



"The other cheek, the extra mile ..." Matt 5:38

The local Catholic Worker House opens at 7:30 a.m. for coffee and donuts. It is a rainy Monday morning, and the guests who file through the front door are wet, many showing the film and grime of homelessness. Except for a brief quarrel between two regulars about who was first to claim the dishwashing job that earns two bus passes, the crowd is civil to the point of courtesy. Hospitality takes shape as everyone gets coffee and finds a place at the four tables with plates of toast and donuts, the morning newspaper. Patty, a volunteer, works two four-slice toasters non-stop to keep the toast coming, while Jerry, another volunteer, warms aluminum pans of donuts in the big oven to replenish the plates.

Conversations overlap, some loud, some whispered, weaving the community together, familiar faces and some strangers, first-timers who had heard about the House, where you can use the bathroom, the phone, get help with prescriptions, half-price bus passes, a toothbrush, plastic razor, a dry pair of socks.

The House, known as Holy Family, or just the "Holy House" to many of the guests, celebrated its 35th anniversary over the weekend. Mild weather, the return of a large group of former staffers and volunteers, good meals and lots of remembering conspired to make this CW seem like a miracle. Angie, who started the house in 1974, related the conversation with Dorothy Day, who asked if there was a Worker house in Kansas City. Angie said no, and Dorothy said, "Well, start one." A Saturday picnic fed 200 people. A Sunday morning Eucharist ended with a blessing of the main house and the family shelter next to it.

Monday morning, wet and gray, was a return to normal: the front porch was crowded as the small community prayed in the living room upstairs, reflecting on the Gospel from Matthew 5, the Sermon on the Mount, and those especially challenging words of Jesus about nonviolence. Turn the other cheek, give both tunic and cloak, go the extra mile. Under the familiar phrases lies a strategy for resisting violence by shaming the oppressor who would strike twice, take a poor man to court, force a second mile. Jesus was confronting power with truth, eliciting compassion with paradox. It is the hardest and most misunderstood message at the core of the Gospel. It has to be experienced to make sense.

A young man named Joshua had just arrived, a possible staff volunteer from Washington DC who came to see for himself what life is like at Holy Family. After morning prayer, he was at the door when the community came in out of the rain.

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