

## E-BULLETIN #139

*"Let the holiness of God shine forth" (cf. Mt 5, 16)*

item 264

### Miracle

A focus which was to the forefront of St Vincent Pallotti's apostolic zeal and work was 'salvare le anime', or 'to save souls'. I have often reflected on this, on what he meant by it and how this vision spurred him to reach out untiringly to others. How could he affirm that "among all the divine perfections that God communicates to his creatures, the most divine is that of calling the creature to cooperate with God himself in the salvation of souls"?

An explanation of just what this might mean is that he intuited that the person is invited to commit oneself to bringing others to God, to knowledge of God, to Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. That commitment is realized in bringing others to know and experience the infinite love and infinite mercy of God as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ.

A gospel passage from St Luke struck me: "At sunset all those who had friends suffering from diseases of one kind or another brought them to him, and laying his hands on each he cured them." It may have been the relaxation of the closing days of summer, or a good nights' sleep the night before, but it was very easy for me to visualize the scene in Capharnaum at sunset; the hazy setting sun, the pleasant evening warmth, the trees, the sea in the distance, and then 'all those who had friends suffering ... brought them to him'. The impression is given of concerned, loyal FRIENDS bringing the sick and suffering to Jesus with hope in their hearts and a generosity of spirit and, because the friends did this, the sick and suffering ones have an opening to meet Jesus, and he readily responds and touches them.

I read further on and in the following chapter once again I noted: "Then some men appeared, carrying on a bed a paralysed man whom they were trying to bring in and lay down in front of him. But as the crowd made it impossible to find a way of getting him in, they went up on to the flat roof and lowered him and his stretcher down through the tiles into the middle of the gathering, in front of Jesus. Seeing THEIR faith he said, 'My friend, your sins are forgiven you'. And later 'get up, and pick up your stretcher and go home'. And he did.



I came across a poem by the late **Seamus Heaney**, the foremost Irish poet in recent decades, in which he refers to this 'miracle':

## **Miracle**

**Not the one who takes up his bed and walks  
But the ones who have known him all along  
And carry him in -  
Their shoulders numb, the ache and stoop deeplocked  
In their backs, the stretcher handles  
Slippery with sweat. And no let up  
Until he's strapped on tight, made tiltable  
and raised to the tiled roof, then lowered for healing.  
Be mindful of them as they stand and wait  
For the burn of the paid out ropes to cool,  
Their slight lightheadedness and incredulity  
To pass, those who had known him all along.**

Poetry speaks differently to us all. Heaney in an interview on this poem commented:

“I realized that the guys that are hardly mentioned are central ... without them no miracle would have happened.”

For me there are three strands coming together, or converging: (1) ... **those who had friends** suffering brought them to him: (2) ... **some men appeared carrying** on a bed a paralyzed man: (3) **the Miracle**, not the one who takes up his bed and walks, but the ones who have known him all along and carry him in.

Is this a way of understanding Vincent's drive to 'save souls'? To bring them to God, to Jesus, to a knowledge of him, to an encounter with him? As UAC members, apostles, friends of Jesus and friends of the suffering, we 'wear ourselves out' in bringing others to Jesus; putting all our strength and energy into the daily tasks with our hearts and souls focused on Jesus.

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item 265

## **Stepping Up the Pace: Remember the Loaves and Fishes**



Melbourne, Australia recently hosted the 20<sup>th</sup> International AIDS Conference attended by over six thousand people from around the world. The theme of the conference was “Stepping Up the Pace.” There were several pre-conference events, one being a Catholic HIV/AIDS encounter. A sub-theme for these days, was “Remember the Loaves and Fishes”. I was fortunate to attend both the Catholic Encounter and the main conference. In this article I will share some of the insights gained from that experience.

What became abundantly clear at the beginning of the Catholic encounter was the role of faith-based groups in the provision of health care to people suffering with AIDS. Overall 30 to 60 percent of health care is being provided by such groups, with the Catholic Church providing over 25 percent of that care worldwide.

This work was seen as frequently overlooked, especially in the secular media. Deborah Brix, who is the global AIDS coordinator for the US Government stated:

“You have been the voice for the most vulnerable and the outstretched hand for the most needy ... we know that through your work in the community you can be the voice to decrease stigma and discrimination.”

The issue of stigma and discrimination were seen as the two biggest obstacles which face people who are HIV positive. The role of the church in reducing this stigma was frequently raised during the Catholic Encounter. Monsignor Robert Vitillo, a priest from the diocese of Paterson in New Jersey, US who is the Caritas Special Advisor to the United Nations on HIV/AIDS, noted that care and non-judgemental compassion were central to the catholic church’s response, saying that people may pray for people with AIDS without realising that some were actually members of their own communities!

The role of the church and particularly the priest was seen as pivotal in reducing this stigma and discrimination. The potential for faith-based communities to influence and change government policy was recognised. In terms of the role of the priest, there was a call for them to fight the fear, hatred and stigma within their communities and to call all to love. We need to be there to welcome all and it was stated that ‘if one of us feel unwelcome - all of us feel unwelcome’.

During the conference, I worked as a volunteer in the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance area. There we had various faith-based videos and print material in a variety of languages. Throughout the week people stopped, watched the video’s, availed themselves of some of the material and asked questions about the Alliance and particularly the attitude of the various faith-based organisations. I was particularly struck by the number of people who asked whether they would be accepted in the various churches. For example one man asked if I knew of a “gay friendly” church he could attend in Perth, Western Australia. I would have liked to say “any church” but did not have that confidence. Another person who was a catholic spoke of the rejection he had experienced which led him to seek God within another religion.

Happily I was able to provide a good example of a warm church response in Melbourne – the Catholic HIV/AIDS Ministry, run through CatholicCare. This service is a place of welcome and hospitality for all who come through its doors. In a recently published booklet titled *Angels in Disguise* the stories of those who attend the ministry, and various health professionals and clergy who have been part of the ministry’s history, are told. Within the book one person speaks of how he is glad that the catholic church in Australia supports people with HIV/AIDS and that he is able to come to a welcoming space where he can relate with, and confide in, those who are going through similar situations. He states: “In some ways this is family for me, because I feel like ... it’s okay”. A woman spoke of her feeling of rejection and that the ministry had ‘given her a life’. She related the story of her birthday celebration and the group singing Happy Birthday reflecting that “this is family!”



The title ‘Remembering the Loaves and Fishes’ was integral to the Catholic Encounter with the reminder that as disciples of Jesus we are called to live eucharist and hospitality. Fr Rick Bauer, an American Maryknoll priest who has ministered to people with HIV/AIDS since the early 1980’s, reminded us that with loaves and fishes, Jesus calls us to feed the people ourselves. When we do not think we have enough Jesus still insists, saying “you feed them”. When asking how we do this Jesus says “bring them to me”. We are called not to focus on the little we have but the abundance of Jesus – recognising those on the margins are the centre in the life of Jesus. Jesus sends people home fed and that is what we are called to do for all, including those on the margins who are living with HIV/AIDS.

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**on #138**