

MINISTRY WITH THE POOR

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Just as I was finishing high school and getting ready for college, the stock market crashed in 1929 and the country moved into the great depression of the 1930's. Some of my friends were unable to finish their schooling because their families lost everything. Anyone who walked along the shore of Lake Michigan near Chicago, experienced vicariously the devastating impact of the depression. Homeless people sought whatever protection they could find in fragile lean-tos battered by the bitter cold north wind. "Brother, can you spare a dime?" was a genuine, heart-rending, often-heard plea.

During college years at Maryville from 1931-35, most of us had very little money and spent our week-ends exploring the area around Maryville known as Dutch Town and the remoter regions near the tracks named "Hooverville". Walking along the embankment on the cliffs above the Mississippi River we saw the wretched hovels which served as home for the poor and unemployed.

On Saturdays, I often did some beginning social work interviewing people in need at Catholic Charities. On Sundays, we spent some time visiting the girls at the Good Shepherd Convent.

The encyclical, Quadragesimo Anno, by Pius XI. appeared in 1931 and was forthwith integrated into Sociology class, taught by Dr. Eva Ross, an English woman with enlightened views. From her, I got my first understanding of the power and appropriateness of the Church's social teaching. I also learned of the opposition, especially among Catholics, to some of its fundamental principles, such as the basic equality of all people regardless of race, and the rights of working people especially to form unions and bargain collectively. New Deal legislation such as the NRA, NLRA, AAA, etc. conformed to the teaching of the Church but one law after the other fell before the reactionary Supreme Court, made up largely of corporation lawyers.

I did not come out of any theology in my poverty ministry, but was motivated and guided in my teaching and actions by the developing social doctrine of the Church from Leo XIII to Paul VI.

As an aspirant at Maryville during the 1940's one of our first and most practical projects was the organization of a Sacred Heart Boys' Club. Sister Mary Dowling and I were the directors. Club members included youngsters from the neighborhood who were allowed to play on our grounds in exchange for protecting it from vandals. Their reward was a once-a-week meeting and party and a semi-annual distribution of awards for outstanding performance.

In the 1950's my work for the poor consisted mainly of teaching the social encyclicals and encouraging the students to join what we called SAC - Social Action Corps. It functioned during the summer months when the students were at home, and consisted of various forms of service which they undertook on their own and reported on by a designated date. Reports were sent to me at Maryville and I compiled them in the form of a newsletter. This was circulated among the student participants and served to document and encourage their efforts. Later, a practicum was introduced into the Sociology curriculum as an academic course with most of the work done in the field.

With Maryville's move to St. Louis County and the heightened civil rights activity of the late 50's and 60's, I began to move into practical projects which were expanded with the easing of cloister. It was a very slow evolution for me, from behind-the-scenes activities where I tried to motivate and suggest

and even substitute at the switchboard for students so they could attend meetings and rallies. One that stands out in my memory was a rousing talk by Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. at Temple Israel in St. Louis County.

In the middle sixties, Maryville's Political Science Department initiated a Citizenship Training Seminar for the residents of a notoriously bad housing project, called Pruitt-Igoe. Most of the residents were black and many were very fine people, willing to take advantage of opportunities that came their way. CITRAS (Citizenship Training Seminar) was sponsored by the Public Housing Authority, Welfare, the North Side Team Ministry and Father John Shocklee, pastor of St. Bridget's Catholic Church in the inner city. Participants were selected by these four groups and they met twice a week at night in Crunden Public Library. A Maryville student and myself were the instructors and animators. The curriculum consisted in a comprehensive survey of the essentials of American government: federal, state and local levels. There were lots of lively practical applications as it was an election year with candidates for Mayor of St. Louis and for Fifth Ward Alderman vying with one another for a chance to address the group. A surprising number of Citras graduates became leaders in the black community during the 1960's and 1970's.

With enactment of the Economic Opportunity Act in 1964 and the launching of the war against poverty, educational, vocational and recreational projects received welcome inputs of federal money. My participation was direct and indirect. For one year, I worked as an education specialist for the Human Development Corporation, the official anti-poverty agency in St. Louis. My duties were to develop, supervise and teach programs in the poverty areas, designed to provide basic adult education. An amazing number of those enrolled in the VIP (Voluntary Improvement Program) classes eventually earned a high school equivalency diploma.

I continued to teach courses in political science at Maryville and always found my experiences with the poor enriching and challenging. They provided substance to the text book theory.

While at HDC, I was sent next door to the Municipal Jail to work out some educational projects for a group of bright young blacks who were doing time for civil rights demonstrations. They were soon moved to the Workhouse, a medium security institution. The program followed them, enabling inmates of the workhouse to earn high school equivalency certificates.

Thus began my work with prisoners, a marginalized group if there ever was one. I visited the jail once or twice a week and a college student usually went with me. We talked with the women and taught those who wished, what we could under the adverse circumstances of their crowded 6th floor quarters. Most were there for a short time, waiting to be sentenced. Many were repeaters who turned up periodically. All were in need and it is this dimension of poverty that I find most appealing. It isn't just a matter of material deprivation, but the searing human need that may exist under a well-to-do and seemingly successful exterior. I developed some firm and lasting friendships with the "girls" as we called them and kept in touch for years after they were released. The same was true for the men on the lower floors of the jail. A few managed to escape the criminal web, but most were never able to totally disentangle themselves from a way of life they had known for too long. For these, it was a frustrating cycle of hitting bottom, pulling oneself up for a while and slipping back again. These are society's real outcasts.

For a while, I belonged to a creative group at the state penitentiary at Jefferson City, Mo., called Lifers Incorporated. These were men with life

sentences who drew up a comprehensive program which they would have liked the entire prison to adopt. That was not to be. As an "outside" member, I attended meetings in the penitentiary and was amazed at the fine calibre of reports the men gave, projects they designed, and methods by which they hoped to extend membership among insiders and outsiders.

In the early 70's, Maryville introduced into its curriculum a criminal justice program which enabled law enforcement personnel to earn a bachelor's degree with criminal justice as a major. I taught many of the classes both on the college campus and at police stations and public centers in suburban areas of St. Louis county. It was a mutually enriching experience to have cops in class with college students, male and female. The peaking of this program gave a wonderful opportunity to experience first hand, two sides of the crime problem: policeman and criminal. The victim's plight was taken up a bit later.

Maryville's Criminal Justice courses had a reputation for solid content and the graduates deserved the feeling of accomplishment which they brought to graduation day.

Hundreds of law enforcement officers and aspirants went through the program and some went on to graduate school and teaching careers in colleges and universities. The program was terminated after the end of the Law Enforcement Administration.

I can say, in summary, that my work with the poor had its roots in a youthful attraction to the "under-dog" (read marginalized). I simply took advantage of the opportunities that presented themselves without much thought of changing the system. I did what I could to help those in need without alienating the powers-that-be. The strongest expression of sympathy with the poor blacks, took place in the Selma-Montgomery March in 1965. Thousands of people from all over the United States and Canada poured into Montgomery, Alabama on the morning of March 25th where they linked up with the smaller, original group which had made the trek from Selma. The entire group gathered at the mansion of Governor George Wallace and registered their protest against his segregationist policies in songs and speeches. It was for me a unique experience of what it feels like to be a despised and persecuted minority.

My last poverty project involved discussions and service at the Catholic Workers House, in St. Louis. I was teaching at Villa Duchesne and went every other week with four or five of the students to serve dinner in the "soup line". Socializing with these people, gave us a better understanding of how hard it is to make a welfare check last for its appointed period. Lines were always longer toward the end of the month.

Father Alan McCoy, Superior of the Franciscan Mission in Santa Barbara, Ca., speaking of the Church in Nicaragua, said that "the option for the poor" can be interpreted three ways: "The hierarchy can give to the poor - and of course the poor will love them. You can even work with the poor. But nothing will really happen unless you allow yourself to become an agent of social change, standing with the people to transform the institution that perpetuates their poverty." (Kevin McKiernan, SHRINES AND SLOGANS; The Divided Church in Latin America, pp. 28-33, 47-53. p. 53, Mother Jones, April, 1984.

Today, in 1984, nearly twenty-five years after I began my active work for social justice, I, too, believe that this third mode of solidarity with the poor is the most effective in third world countries. I also believe that there is still much to be done in the first and second expressions of the "option for the poor."