

# the sector speaks

## christianity not churchianity

The idea of falling in love with God is not something that many of us Catholics grow up with, or are even encouraged to pursue. Most of our formation tends to centre on our 'doing'—doing the 'churchy stuff'; rather than our 'being' - being in love. As a consequence Church takes centre stage while Christ, God, is left tucked away somewhere; somewhere not readily accessible.

Thus we find ourselves immersed in a kind of non-relational 'Churchianity' masking itself as Christianity. This leaves us bereft because at the heart of Catholicism is the experience of a deep, intimate encounter with God. A falling in love. A mutual in-dwelling. Christianity.

### the cry of the poor

Last year I had the privilege of attending a retreat directed by Jean Vanier, the Founder of L'Arche, an international organisation dedicated to the creation and growth of homes, programs, and support networks with people with intellectual disabilities. At the retreat he recounted his first experience of visiting a psychiatric institution in France almost half a century ago.

"I approached the visit," he said, "with great trepidation and fear, asking myself: 'What will I say to these people? How will I act? What will they say to me?'"

"When I arrived at the asylum I was confronted by dozens of men walking aimlessly up and down a spacious room seemingly carrying the weight of deep anguish & loneliness.

"My stay lasted an hour and all I was asked over and over during that time were three questions: 'Do you love me? Will you come back? Will you be my friend?'"

These questions are the produce of what I call 'Relational Poverty'—an entrenched isolation in which there is minimal and, oftentimes, no meaningful human contact. Among people with chronic mental illness, for instance, this is an all too pervasive reality— one that leaves those who are very sick fending for themselves on the streets, in refuges, gaols and public housing estates throughout the nation. It is the poverty of the lonely, broken heart. And it cripples and destroys lives.

When people are overwhelmed by Relational Poverty their capacity to engage, find work, to get better, to 'get up' and to live with dignity, is significantly diminished. Sometimes, it is even extinguished. Much of our approach to welfare and homelessness (governments, community, charities and churches) is underpinned by impersonal charity which focuses on relieving material poverty—ie through the provision of

low-cost housing, welfare benefits, soup kitchens, refuges, second-hand clothing bins, anonymous cash donations, vouchers etc. This has its place and, at times, is critical. But it has little, if any, impact on addressing Relational Poverty. More often than not, our impersonal charity helps people only survive or exist. Lives are not transformed.

In relation to accommodation, it is becoming increasingly obvious that the crisis approach tends to be reactive and superficial only - a 'one-night stand' type of care that has little long-term impact. Within this milieu, relationships are not fostered or encouraged, so people become entrenched in a never-ending cycle of homelessness - bouncing around refuges, housing estates, hostels, and the streets. Thus, the often complex issues that underlie peoples' crises are never properly addressed, so nothing really changes. We just re-cycle homelessness.

It is my belief that this approach tends to address 'houselessness' (physical needs), rather than homelessness (relational/spiritual/emotional needs). The only way to address the poverty of the 'broken heart' is through consistent, loving relationships. People need people. People need to know we have time - time for them - even if that means having to sit in the gutter on occasions. Such encounters, as Jean Vanier says, should not be underpinned by 'generosity', but by a desire to be in Communion with the other. Generosity

tends to be offered from a position of power and strength and privilege, 'I have something, you don't'. Communion, on the other hand, is a meeting on equal terms - a mutual exchange in which both participants are transformed.

There is nothing more important than falling totally and absolutely in love with God - with Christ.

Communion is what Christ calls us to. It is an intimate friendship. So as we approach the Eucharistic table we do so not to receive Communion, but to become Communion; to become a people willing to give ourselves, our very beings, to others—especially the poor who most powerfully manifest the cry of Jesus: Do you love me? Will you be my friend? Will you come back?

ministry on the margins is a mainstream activity

One of the problems or, better still, illusions regarding ministry to people on the margins is that it's often viewed as a radical, specialised, or so called, heroic ministry.

That said, sometimes it can also be fobbed off as a bit of a curiosity, a job best left to a small minority while the rest of us get on with the more important mainstream activities.

There needs to be a cultural-shift here because loving the poor, for those who profess to be Christ-followers, is the most ordinary, natural, bread-and-butter thing to do. Indeed, there is nothing more necessary, more important, more urgent a Christian activity than attending to the dignity and cry of the poor. While many parishes and schools can claim via the presence of a Vinnies' Conference that the poor have a place; really, each diocese, each parish, each school, each of us should be a Vinnies' Conference - it's not a ministry to be left to a handful of 'retirees'.

When we fall in love with God, we also fall in love with those overwhelmed by poverty.

fr peter day

HOME in Queanbeyan provides 24 hour pastoral care to men & women with chronic mental illness