

The Value of Vulnerability... and Eye Openers

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Ever wonder what made Vincent Vincent? Here's a thought. The value of vulnerability and eye-openers.

A few days ago I read a description of Jesus' way of formation. It went something like this... When Jesus sent his apostles into society he insisted they be very vulnerable (no shoes or wallet, like sheep among wolves). In many ways it was an "urban plunge," a high-risk experience where something new and good could happen. It was designed to change the disciples as much as it was meant for them to change others! (See Matthew 10:1-33 or Luke 10:1-24.) Today we call it a reverse mission, where we ourselves are changed and helped by those whom we think we are serving.

He wanted his disciples—then and now—to experience the value of vulnerability. Jesus invites us to a life without baggage so we can learn how to accept others and their culture. But it took a lot of reflecting. They had to walk along many roads to Emmaus with him. Vincent certainly took Jesus seriously... And it changed him!

After years of seeking the life of a "good cleric" he became converted by the people he thought he was serving. In a "reverse mission" he learned that they, his Lord and Masters, had much to teach him. His "eye-openers" included, Olier, Benedict of Canfield and others including Louise de Marillac.

A few centuries later this same process changed a young collegian by the name of Frederic. A Daughter of Charity opened his eyes to seeing what he had not seen. In effect they are both patron saints of modern day student "plunges."

Father Dennis Holtschneider shares his own experience of how he was changed by a "home visit" or an "urban plunge."

It happens when they let you into their lives. I don't mean that they let you give them something; I mean that they let you into their lives as a fellow human being. I remember my first visit to the projects in Bedford-Stuyvesant Brooklyn 21 years ago. I was really scared, but I didn't say anything because I was going with a Daughter of Charity and she didn't seem frightened, so I didn't want to either.

We walked through the crowd of toughened young men at the door, (I glanced at them; she said hello), got to the elevator, and I realized there was no where we could go if this group decided to come in our direction. We rode the urine-smelling steel elevator to a high floor, got out and walked down the institutionally turquoise, graffitied hallway to Nelly's apartment. I don't remember her mother's name, just 7-year-old Nelly. Both Nelly and her mother had been raped a year before. Her mother was so traumatized that she no longer left the apartment, so 7-year-old Nelly picked up groceries on the way home from school each day.

Sr. Chris was wonderful with both of them, and they were really happy to see her. I caught Nelly's eye sneaking a peek behind the sofa from time to time, and got her to smile. When I left, Nelly brought me one of those small school pictures, wrote her name on the back of it, and told me she wanted me to have it. Nelly's mother started to cry, and told me that I was the first male that Nelly had spoken to since the rape. I was so overwhelmed, I didn't know what to do with that vote of confidence and love from that child.

I learned a lot that day. I learned about my fear. I learned about the poor's fear. I learned about how little it takes to touch another's heart. Most of all, I learned that all the enormous differences between me and this traumatized mother and child can melt away into human friendship. The great divide can be crossed. I still have Nelly's picture. It's in my framed picture of Vincent DePaul. Somehow I connect that moment to part of my own journey to becoming a Vincentian. Nelly and her mother were two of the many poor people who welcomed me into their lives, and by doing so, made me a Vincentian.

Whatever you call it... "Urban plunge," "home visit," "going to the peripheries"... if we are open to it, it will change us as much as it changed Vincent.

Unfortunately, too often we walk through other people's lives without really seeing them. Lord, that I may see the hallowed ground I am on when I enter into another's life.

Help me to find guides who will slow me down to see what I did not see.
Who are our "eye-openers" who walk with us as we travel through other people's lives.

VULNERABILITY

