

December 2, 2000
Vol. 183 No. 18

America

THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC WEEKLY

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Vol. 183 No. 18, December 2, 2000

Homecoming

By Steven Diogo

I am one of the lucky ones. I am one of the few who got out of addiction and off the streets. There are not many of us. Of the half million to three million men, women and children who are homeless in America, it is a simple fact that many will die on the streets or in jail or institutions.

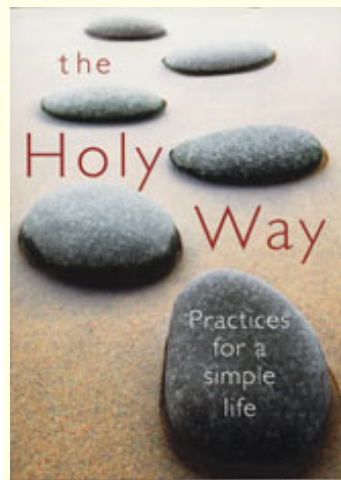
I have no answer to this problem. Sometimes I think that I should, that my brief experience of homelessness should give me insight. But I am not special. I am just an addict who was lost and now has been found through pure grace and the love of a few people. Before those to whom I now write—those with the wherewithal to contribute to solving this problem—I am embarrassed by what I did with the blessings I threw away. But I also am embarrassed to write as the voice of homelessness before those who suffer daily on America's streets without the escape route that I had.

You see, I am white. I am middle class. I have an apartment now, a good job, a loving family and beautiful, giving friends. I have opportunity. But opportunity is useless without the self-esteem and support to make use of it. Maybe that is where I can help.

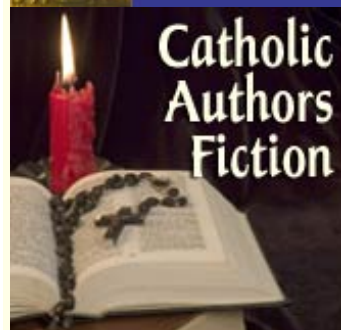
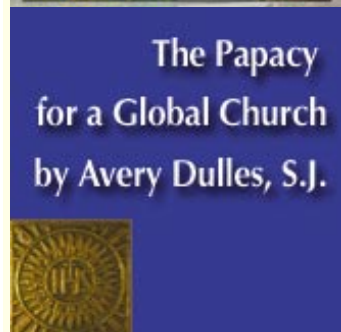
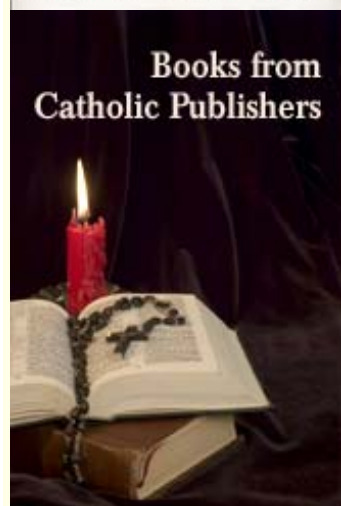
The first step for anyone who wants to help is to accept that there is dignity and value among those on the streets. God's love is there. God's love is hope, and where there is hope, there is opportunity. Everyone deserves the support and love that can empower a person to grasp the opportunity once it comes. One source of that hope is for those of us who make it to stand as examples and extend our hands, to bridge the gap between society and the street and create our own road to opportunity. I have no answers, no policy suggestions nor advice for those who wish to help. All I have is my story.

I was born on Halloween, 1966, in Providence, R.I. While I grew up in a poor area of town in a one-parent family, my childhood was relatively stable. My father, an alcoholic, left when I was eight. My mother worked hard to ensure that I had what I needed, which to her included 12 years of Catholic school and Mass on Sunday and a firm belief that drugs were evil and alcohol was to be avoided. Alcoholism runs in my family. My mother's father and both of my father's parents died from it, and my father remains an active alcoholic. (I have not seen him in 16 years.) The chance was pretty good that I inherited the faulty gene, and my mother tried to impress this upon me from an early age.

Though I never took her admonitions seriously, the sight of my drunken father



PAULA HUSTON



ravaging our home scared me enough that I was turned off to drinking. Throughout childhood and high school, and even college, I avoided drinking and those who drank. I was a good kid. I stuck to myself, did well in school and went to college to study journalism.

When I was 21, I spent a year studying in England. Alone for the first time, away from my small group of non-drinking friends, I found that my aversion to alcohol depended more upon my surroundings than on any moral superiority. In England, charming pubs replaced frat parties, and gentlemen with pints of ale replaced beer bong and shots. I tried it. I liked it.

According to one study, as many as two-thirds of homeless adults suffer from alcoholism, and at least half suffer from drug addiction. In their book, *A Nation in Denial*, Alice Baum and Donald Burnes state that 65 percent to 85 percent of all homeless adults suffer from chronic alcoholism, drug addiction, mental illness or some combination of the three, often complicated by serious medical problems. Forty percent to 50 percent of these individuals are addicted to both drugs and alcohol. I have read many statistics from many sources, but all I know is that for me, alcohol and drugs were my ticket to the streets.

Back home from England, I continued drinking regularly. I binged into blackouts almost every weekend, but I was confident that I did not have a problem. I drank only on weekends. As difficulties built up, I drank more. When the problems became too big, I ran. I moved to New York City at 25, determined to start over and build a glamorous life and a career in journalism.

Turned on to cocaine by those who lived the life I imagined as romantic and exciting, I sat back, got high as often as I could, and watched my career, apartment, savings account, 401-K and car disappear within a year. Family and friends departed one by one, as I refused their help and traded their love for a crack pipe. My drug-using “friends” stuck around as long as the drugs did, providing places to crash as long as my supply lasted—usually one night. Then it was the streets.

A **“normal” upbringing** with family and friends, no matter how dysfunctional, does little to prepare one for life on the streets. But human beings are incredibly adaptive creatures. I learned quickly to scam money and steal food, to see strangers as marks. On the streets, life contracts to the immediate: Where is the next hit, the next drink, the next meal? Where will I sleep? Where can I piss? Giving up on society, my days became an endless search for isolation. But there was none. No privacy, no peace, no love, no life. I slept wherever I found shelter, or wherever I fell when I gave up on finding it. I awoke to the sounds of traffic and the sight of feet rushing past my face, and all I could do was sit and stare and wish to disappear.

Thoughts of escape became as alien as dreams of flight. There was no time to think or plan, only to scheme enough to get through the day. To survive, I changed, as I moved through the invisible subculture that inhabits a parallel universe among the straights, scamming marks and each other for drugs and sex—the economy of the street. Without well-developed street-smarts I didn’t survive in that world for long, and I dropped through a trap door that I didn’t know was there until I stepped on it. Used up and tired, I couldn’t compete anymore and I fell to the street. This is the real Skid Row. This is Hell. This is where you hate yourself and fear the world and those you considered friends,

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How to
CHANGE
the
WORLD
Social Entrepreneurs
and the Power of New Ideas



where you don't even have the strength to try to hide your stink and dirt and there's nothing to do but beg for booze and wonder when you'll die.

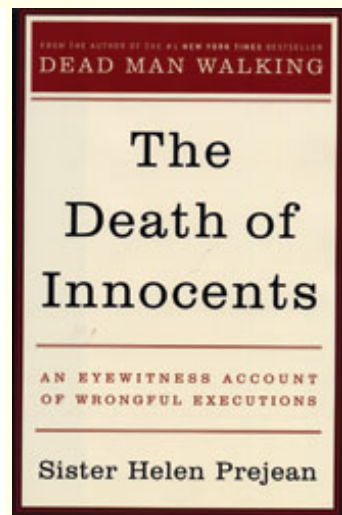
I have read of “survivor’s guilt” among war veterans and disaster survivors, and I imagine that it is similar to what I feel when I see someone on the street today. I survived. I escaped. My gratitude is tinged with sadness when my head hits my pillow. It is a miracle that I am here. But why me? Through no work of my own I was lifted from a current that I was powerless to stop, a current that flows inexorably toward a slow, lonely death. In my case, friends who I thought had abandoned me long ago—including the person who first gave me cocaine—came to my rescue. They got me into a nationally known drug rehabilitation program, where I received the best care, paid for by charity. Today I clearly see the ways in which God depends on his children to take care of one another.

The road back has been long and difficult, but all it has really required of me is surrender: surrender to my powerlessness over my disease and willingness to follow God’s will for me. I thank God every day, not only that I am sober, alive and sheltered, but that I had the opportunity to lose everything. Few people have the chance to burn it all down and see for sure that a person with nothing is still worthy of love. My addiction, my life on the streets and my recovery have taught me more about myself, my fellows and my God than I ever could have learned otherwise. Would I have chosen it? Never. Do I have regrets? Of course. But my challenge now is to accept the gift, embrace it and learn to use it to help others.

I first told my full story on a retreat with homeless addicts sponsored by the Society of Jesus. Though I was living in a halfway house at the time, the retreat master invited me to come along. Once there, he asked me to tell my story. I believed I had nothing to offer. My guilt and shame strove to silence me. My fear choked me. I was the only white man there. I lived in a recovery home that would seem like a mansion to the other men. Material comfort had returned to me quickly. I had a good job. They would resent me.

But I trusted the priest. Kneeling in the chapel, I prayed, “Please let me see that my entire life has been preparation for this moment.” Then I told my story. “My name is Steve, and I am a drug addict....” Nervously, I played with the Buddhist charm that hung around my neck, inscribed with the Tibetan phrase that means, roughly, “enlightenment in suffering.” As I spoke, I felt the truth of that phrase and the power of community for the first time. My experience began to make sense. For the first time, too, I felt at home. Encircled by 13 homeless African-American men in a suburban Chicago retreat center, I began to recognize the source of the spiritual homelessness that led me to the streets—the distance from my brothers and God that fuels my fear. For the first time, I felt whole. I felt good. I felt that I could help, that there was a plan.

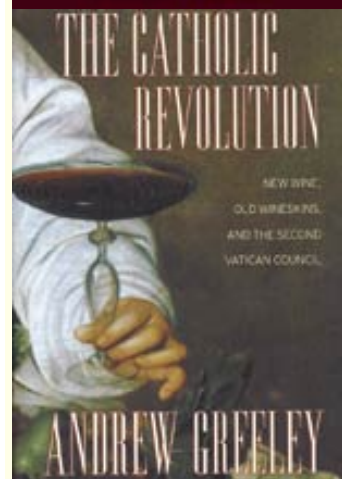
Far from resenting me, the men embraced me. They called me brother. “Don’t worry, man,” one said. “You’re one of us.” And for the first time, I felt it. Later, others told their stories, and I saw their faces soften as we laid down our street-smarts and listened and trusted. And a voice in my heart said, “God’s love is here.”



Tobacco:
The Moral Issues
by Joseph A. Califano Jr.



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Back on the streets, men and women of all ages and backgrounds—each with a story—remain lost in addiction, unaware that there is a way out. They are blind to the fact that God loves them. Few people are willing to listen, to be the instrument of that love in their lives. That is sad. That is my challenge. I do not know the road ahead of me, but I know that I have found the way home. It will take me the rest of my life to travel it, and I pray for the strength and opportunity to show others the way.

Any chance to treat the homeless with love—no matter how small—is an opportunity to change the face of the streets. Money helps. Food helps. Rehabilitation programs help. But without the simple belief that one is worthy of that help, it is all fruitless. In the end, it is only love that helps.

In a way, we all are homeless. Maybe that's why street people repel us—they cut through our flimsy illusion of security and permanence. It is frightening to look upon the dirty, drunken face of a street person and think, "This is me." But I have been granted a unique perspective. I know it is me. And I am you. And though I fall asleep each night in a warm, simple, beautiful apartment that is my home and castle, cell and sanctuary, I have yet to shed the inner feeling of homelessness that I carried with me long before I first awoke on a sidewalk or a subway seat. It is a void that I now accept and cherish as my soul's longing for its true home.

Steven Diogo is a freelance writer living in Chicago, Ill. Click here for a [sample of author's writings in America](#) and for [books by author at amazon.com](#). Link to "sample writings" is slow; link to amazon may list books by authors with similar names.

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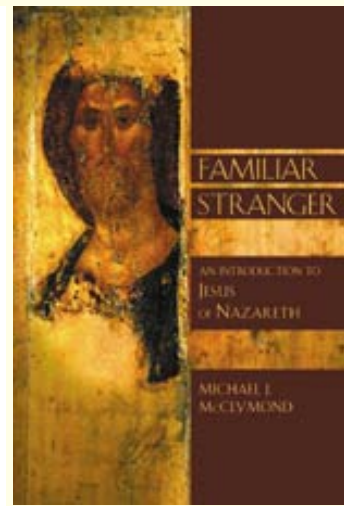


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