

A Culture of Peace that Includes the Homeless

REV. BILL CREED, S.J. AND BR. MIKE O'GRADY, S.J.

"Just as the God of love is the God of community, so we as a community need to try together to understand God's teaching about how creation should be honored.

We try to do this through the tradition called "Catholic Social Teaching," frequently expressed in papal encyclicals.

In this tradition, asking he guidance of the Holy Spirit, and in dialogue with the community of faith, we try to interpret God's word for today's society.

This tradition, we believe, is a rich resource for us as we see to find a path of life based on sustainable communities."

-- Catholic Bishops of Appalachia

Fr. Creed (Chicago Province) is a member of the Loyola University Jesuit Community. He leads the Spiritual Exercises in Daily Life for faculty and graduate students, trains others to be spiritual companions in the Ignatian tradition, and chaplains the Ignatian Lay Volunteer Corps.

Br. O'Grady (Chicago Province) is a member of the Claver Jesuit Community ministry of listening and responding to the gift of the African American Community in Cincinnati.

More than five years ago, Fr. Dick Baumann, the Chicago Provincial, asked Bill to bring the Spiritual Exercises in adapted form to those who were at the economic and social margins of our culture. When Bill asked about giving retreats to those most marginalized – the homeless – Fr. Baumann encouraged that notion. Never was there a thought that such retreats were an act of peacemaking. The realization came only on reflection: this retreat outreach to the alienated in respect for them as human beings is an act of peacemaking.

In the last six years, we have been privileged to be involved in 44 overnight retreats for homeless men who are striving for sobriety and recovery in their lives. We have presented these retreats in Chicago, Cincinnati, Milwaukee, Boston, and Indianapolis. We recruited men for the first retreat through our collaboration with the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless. In each city, we work through agencies that serve the homeless and who know of those homeless who are trying to get out of addiction and off the streets. The homeless men who come on retreat are attempting to get off the streets and have abstained from alcohol and drugs for several weeks before the retreat. The retreat is an adaptation of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola. It evokes "radical honesty" (a phrase used by several retreatants) and deeper trust in God.

We believe that God invites us into the broken places of our world; if we persevere, he invites us into the broken places of our hearts and meets us there with forgiveness, healing and love. Only then can peace take root within our hearts. This understanding has been the core gift of our participation in these retreats.

B.C. and M.O'G.

Mike: *Through my experience of assisting in Homeless Men's Retreats, I believe that a culture of peace is built in the following ways:*

■ **Touching the deep interior.** A key element of building a culture of peace through the work we do is to assist our friends in helping them to touch the deep interior space that remains uncharted territory for most of us. We can't be peaceful, we can't model peace, if the inner conflicts and unsettledness of our interior life aren't being explored, understood, and befriended. It is in this space that we make good decisions, from this space that we see people differently. Operating from this space, our fears, angers, anxieties no longer order or control our choice-making. We help our friends to experience the gifts of peace and freedom.

■ **Radically dependent creatures.** The culture of peace must involve the concept that we are radically dependent creatures, dependent upon others for our thriving and flourishing, dependent upon our Creator for our very existence and spiritual nourishment. Our

retreats reinforce this, from our opening Exercises to our reflections on how God has been modeled to us in our lives.

■ **Shared community, vulnerability, honesty, openness.** A culture of peace is built at the most fundamental, basic level when we share the gift of community, vulnerability, honesty and openness with men who have by and large never experienced such graces. We simply facilitate and participate, trusting that God is working in the hearts and minds of each of our retreatants, offering gifts; at the end of the day, it is up to them to accept or reject these gifts.

■ **Equality.** I have to see these men as my equals. They are neither worse than nor better than I am. By sharing my gifts, talents, abilities and experiences, I open myself up to the same within the fellows we invite to join us. This is the first step in building a culture of peace. If I approach our retreatants as "pitiable creatures upon whom I will bestow my precious time," then I'm simply acting out of ego and pride disguised as service.

■ **Give without expectation of reward.** Jesus our Friend asks us to give without expectation of reward. He invites us to seek out the oppressed, forgotten, "surplus" people. In our culture's perspective, there are few less deserving than criminals and addicts, yet it is precisely these who are our brothers, for whom we are grateful. So by simply modeling the praxis of Christ in our particular 21st century context, we invite our friends, supporters, collaborators and others into reflecting on how they might also do so.

■ **Processes that honor everyone.** In a world sinfully oriented towards power relationships and the utilitarian calculus of our consumer society, we carry those values directly oppositional to our "market thinking" into our retreats. Group processes in which all voices are heard and respected, recognition of particular needs of individual retreatants, language, listening and personal care for our men retreatants – each of these models a different way of acting, of being male, of being human.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE CHICAGO PROVINCE
Br. Mike O'Grady, upper left, and Fr. Bill Creed, second from left with glasses, pray with a group of homeless men during retreat.

Bill: *As I reflect on what we do on the retreats for the homeless, I find four aspects that concretely build a culture of peace. These are: naming personal fears, confessing our vulnerabilities as men, allowing friendship to develop despite the differences between us, and acting in hope when addiction or physical violence has sabotaged the peace. Let me give some examples of these from actual retreat activities.*

■ **Fear.** We build a culture of peace in the beginning of the retreat by asking each other to name a fear we have overcome and to face a fear we still struggle with. For men to talk about personal fears is counter-cultural. It is fear that makes men hate, it is fear which makes men enemies, it is fear which makes men self-absorbed, it is fear which makes nations prepare for war. Admitting a fear initiates the possibility of addressing the fear in a humane, caring and courageous manner. We begin to build trust of God, others and ourselves by talking honestly about our fears with one another. "Fear is useless, what is needed is trust" (Mk 5:37)

■ **Confession and Healing.** We build a culture of peace by telling our personal stories, especially confessing those parts of our stories we would normally edit out because we wished those parts had not occurred. We confess in order to detoxify hidden hurts and failures which, when hidden,

fuel violence and enmity. Confession by one person elicits a willingness to confess in other retreatants and makes clear the need for repentance and, in some cases, a follow through towards reconciliation or restitution. We rely on God's mercy as the source of our strength. Together, we experience a guided prayer to heal our memories of violence given and violence received. Retreatants are invited to follow up the healing of memories with quiet reflection and journaling. One retreatant later shared that he had written a letter to his estranged spouse prompted by the experience of healing of memories.

■ **Friendship.** For me, the homeless retreats have offered an opportunity to become friends with persons of a very different background and to discover a common bond as fellow humans, a bond much deeper than drug use, violence, incarceration and homelessness. Something unitive has occurred below those realities. Mutual trust has been fostered, and the bridge of trust continues to grow among us. Several of the men have become my colleagues and have

joined our team in presenting the retreats. Three of the men have become my trusted friends; they are now fully employed and living ordinary lives and an extraordinary recovery. On Valentine's Day, my Jesuit community hosted 10 homeless men, former retreatants, for a first-class feast prepared by community members. This is the third year we have welcomed homeless men into our home for dinner and conversation. Last year, during the cleanup, when I returned from the shelter to help with the dishes, I overheard a brother Jesuit commenting: "These guys were real people, not the way I had thought of homeless addicts. I mean we had real conversations."

■ **Hope.** Finally, the homeless men's retreats build a fragile peace. Many relapse. It takes only one incident of addiction or physical violence to sabotage the peace and spiral downward into the cycle of strife, joblessness, homelessness and hopelessness. Then the recovery process begins again. I have discovered reserves of patience and persistence, of mercy and compassion in so many recovering addicts who reach out to their buddies who have relapsed. Recently, one formerly homeless and addicted man told me that every day he phones his former roommate in recovery, and has done so since his roommate relapsed. He does this as a sign of support and care, but also

as a gesture of hope that his roommate, who has now been sober for 11 months since his relapse, will not relapse again. Hope imagines what is possible and then strives for it. Over the five years we have presented these retreats, several men have relapsed and then, to begin anew, have asked to make a second retreat. We welcome them eagerly.

These are some ways that the retreats for the homeless build a culture of peace. These retreat experiences with homeless men have led me personally to a greater honesty about myself, to a deeper place within myself, and to a heightened awareness of how the inner saboteur within each of us can derail our lives and thwart God's gift of vitality.

Most of all, these homeless retreats have helped me recognize the truth in the words of the late Anwar Sadat, President of Egypt, responding to those Arabs who criticized his travel to Israel in 1977 for peace talks with Menachim Begin, Prime Minister of Israel. He said he was building the possibility of peace because he had learned while imprisoned that underneath religious, social, economic and political realities was a deeper, common and unitive reality – we are all human beings and brothers and sisters of one another and we need to demonstrate that reality by our actions. The lesson: reach out. ♦



Wayne Richard, who has been involved in 31 of the homeless retreats, outside the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, where he works. "During the retreat, I began to examine the continuous present of God in my life."