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In his Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exaltate,* Pope Francis includes a section entitled “The great criterion,” which expands the Beatitude, “Blessed are the merciful” by citing Matthew 25: 31-46, where Jesus identifies himself with persons who are hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick and imprisoned (n95). This passage in Matthew, which “offers us one clear criterion on which we will be judged” (n95), reveals “the very heart of Christ, his deepest feelings and choices, which every saint seeks to imitate” (n96). Francis goes on to insist that “holiness cannot be understood or lived apart from these demands, for mercy is the beating heart of the Gospel” (n97). Our worship is pleasing to God when it “nourishes a daily commitment to love” and “concern for our brothers and sisters” (n104). Treating those in need with mercy is “the very foundation of the Church’s life,” the “most radiant manifestation of God’s truth” and “the key to heaven” (n105).

My own unsung model of merciful care for the needy is my grade school classmate and lifelong friend, Pat, who, very appropriately, is an exemplary member of the Sisters of Mercy. Pat taught grade school and high school for 24 years and served as a campus minster at Bowling Green State University (BGSU) for four years. After that she earned a doctorate from BGSU with an excellent dissertation on liberation themes in the writings of the black author and activist James Baldwin. She then spent almost 30 years as a professor of English at Siena Heights University in Adrian, Michigan, where she taught a variety of courses, including Shakespeare, black literature and Catholic short stories.

All throughout her life as a Sister of Mercy, Pat has demonstrated special care for the least of our brothers and sisters; for example, reaching out to troubled students in her classes and leading students on numerous Christian service missions to help needy youth in Jamaica. In addition, she has been a committed advocate for peace and justice, often joining public demonstrations against war (for example, almost a year of frequent demonstrations against the war in Iraq), and publishing letters to the editor and op/ed articles in local papers in support of human rights and justice causes.

During her years at Siena Heights and beyond, Pat has taught weekly literature classes at a state prison just outside Adrian. In her short story class, now almost 30 years ago, she was impressed with the intelligence and writing skills of a student we can call “Bob.” When he was 17 years old, he was convicted of being an accessory to a murder and sentenced to “parolable life.” After ten years in prison, Bob was denied parole despite being a model inmate and having a supportive family, an available residence and a job awaiting him. Despondent and convinced he would never be paroled, Bob simply walked away from a minimum-security prison and spent six years working at a ranch in Texas before being apprehended and returned to prison.

It was a few years later that Pat met him in her class and committed herself to working for his release. Over the next 25 years, she persisted in this effort: writing to the parole board judge; sending petitions to the governor; meeting with congressmen; securing the services of a new well-qualified lawyer; speaking on his behalf at two parole board hearings; soliciting the help of the governor’s liaison to the state parole board; and speaking on Bob’s behalf at a public hearing which led to his release after 40 years in prison.

During her 25-year effort, Pat visited Bob in prison several times and succeeded in getting a book of his short stories published. Ironically, during much of this time, Bob took out his frustrations on Pat, expressing his anger at her, accusing her of not doing enough and berating her for engaging an incompetent lawyer to represent him. With prayerful reliance on divine help, Pat withstood this verbal abuse and maintained her commitment to free him from prison.

Since reentering society a few years ago, Bob has done well with help from his family. He has stayed out of trouble, married a good woman and written a novel. He and Pat have met a couple of times and their conversations have been informative and cordial, although he has expressed nothing of apology or gratitude. For her part, Pat continues to pray for him as she has for a quarter of a century.

Here is another story that illustrates Pat’s commitment to assisting those in need. On Tuesday December 20, 2005, a bitterly cold afternoon in Adrian, she was driving from the mall to the home she shared with three Dominican sisters. Pat saw a homeless man foraging in a garbage bag for pop and beer cans he could redeem for a dime apiece. She stopped, gave the man $20.00, all the money she had and sped home, where she spent hours sobbing, struck to the heart with guilt and dismay over the stark differences between her comfortable lifestyle and his homeless situation. At that moment, she vowed to do something to assist homeless persons in Adrian.

Pat started out by securing support from local churches and meeting regularly with interested pastors. She got an expert on homeless shelters in Ann Arbor to come to Adrian to give a presentation, which drew over 160 people and led to further meetings with a core group committed to the project. The group was able to open an overnight shelter, which they named “Share the Warmth,” the following winter of 2006 during January and February, making use of space donated by two local Catholic churches. Pat not only led the planning but was also involved in the practical logistics of providing cots, blankets and food, as well as recruiting and organizing volunteer helpers to supervise the shelter during the night.

As time went on, it became clear that assisting the homeless in Adrian required a larger facility. For two years, the Lutheran church provided a former school. After that Pat entered into negotiations with a new Salvation Army captain which led to using their building to house Share the Warmth for the next eight winters. During these years, Pat helped move Share the Warmth toward a more structured organization with a governing Board and official charitable status. Convinced that they needed a bigger and better building of their own, the Board initiated a major fundraising effort, including an annual dinner auction and golf tournament. Over time, they raised enough money to purchase the local Moose Lodge, which will eventually house and feed up to 60 guests every day of the year.

In 2015, Pat retired from her teaching position at Siena Heights, handed over her coordinating role on the Board and moved to her hometown of Toledo. However, she remains involved in Share the Warmth, driving about 35 miles one-way to attend regular board meetings and spending all night, about every two weeks, supervising the shelter, which means getting little or no sleep. She continues to write articles and give talks on justice and peace issues, while maintaining her prison ministry in two separate facilities.

In her marvelous book of prose-poems, *Out of the Shadows*, Pat has a section on Share the Warmth, where “need and compassion intertwine,” and where hosts not only feed and shelter guests, but look for simple ways to assist them, like getting them to the store or church, and in more lasting ways, such as finding them a job and affordable housing. Citing the motto of the shelter: “Keeping people alive until they can find hope,” she speaks of “the hand that profoundly joins hosts and guests” as they “huddle together, always under the roof of God’s mercy.”

From that spiritual perspective, *Out of the Shadows* presents ten prose poem profiles of individual guests who have made an impact on Pat. For instance, there is

**JOHN.**

With grizzled beard and hair/and flaming eyes/he could be John the Baptist./But this John booms slurred words/in alcoholic patois./Layers of stained clothes/clutch his large frame/as he lies on his cot/in the corner of the Shelter./When food arrives/he lumbers to the table/and begins cramming his mouth, oblivious to drops of spaghetti sauce/spotting his beard./Once, thirty years ago/he took art classes/at the college across town./From alabaster stone/he sculpted a female figure/still displayed in the gallery’s permanent exhibit./He arouses a quixotic desire –/to take a hammer and chisel to him,/to chip away the boozy detritus of years/and uncover - like Michelangelo –/the stunning possibilities.

And there is

**ANNA.**

Anna’s hair is long, thick, and straight,/a comely curtain/for her pretty plump face./She chooses men badly./Often she’s sitting at the table/next to Bobby,/sweet-faced alcoholic,/numb (it seems) to her arms/draped over his shoulders. Anna talks well/but has learning blocks and no GED./Though she’s tried./A series of men/have all disappointed,/and last night at the shelter,/ Bobby gruffly shoved her away/and collapsed onto his cot./She sat and cried quietly, chest rippling with sobs./Her children are with a relative./Her heart is with the next man/who shows her kindness./But she’ll probably give Bobby/another chance.

For my friend Pat, the guests of Share the Warmth are not nameless, faceless street people in need of pity and patronizing assistance. On the contrary, as a true Sister of Mercy, she sees them as human beings with inherent dignity, as unique individuals with a distinctive story to tell, as children of a God who is ever merciful and as the beloved of Christ, who identifies himself with the hungry and thirsty and all persons in need.