

Forgiving

"THERE IS NO GREATER GIFT than forgiveness," says Franklin Stewart. "Once you believe God forgives you, then you can forgive yourself. You can believe in God but you ask yourself, 'Does he care about me? Will he forgive me?' When you wake up in a certain atmosphere—and you can only go by your senses—and it's corrupt in a certain way, it's really hard to believe that God has your back. That's why it's important to be around people who can help you believe that God is there for you."

by Jerry Pockar
photos by Rob Wexler

Duane Drotar, Clem Metzger, SJ, Nancy Rowell, Linda Catanzaro, Pam Meyers, and seven formerly homeless men were present at Jesuit Retreat House in Cleveland on a snowy March day. They were gathered to help residents of Cleveland's 2100 Lakeside Men's Shelter believe that God is there for them. Drotar is the director of the shelter; Metzger is the director of the retreat house; the women are shelter workers. The formerly homeless men are members of the retreat planning committee. The retreat leaders gathered with nearly 50 shelter residents for the first event of a four-stage retreat process. The purpose of the retreats is to help these men believe that God is there for them. The desired external outcome is that the retreats will be instrumental in moving them from homelessness toward an independent and productive life.

... People are separate, fearful, angry, not connected. Give us the chance to tell each other the truth with love . . .

Stewart is also present to help nurture the belief that God is there for all of them. He's a bridge. A former crack addict and alcoholic, he was a shelter resident for two years who now lives in an apartment and is a volunteer presence at the shelter—the largest in the Midwest—and at the retreats. He's been sober for four years but hasn't found a job where he can use his electronics skills. His fragility is evident, but so is his fierce determination to fully ascend out of the pit he was in four years ago.



... Fear interferes with trust. We want to tenderly touch those places where we hurt . . .

"When you are spiritually bankrupt you go through all kinds of reasons to cancel something out," says Stewart, "but when they see it works for me, it's not as easy for them to disbelieve it. It's part of my recovery to help someone else."

These retreats for the homeless, funded in part by three area foundations, aren't unique. Jesuits Bill Creed and Mike O'Grady have been working this spiritual territory for some time in Chicago. The four-stage Cleveland model, driven by Drotar and his shelter-based planning team, is a year old and seems to be bearing fruit. Of the 240 men involved so far, about 75 have moved on to stable housing. Most of the others, says Drotar, are pursuing recovery programs and seeking jobs with more intensity than before the retreats. It's early, the data isn't definitive, but Drotar is convinced this spiritual process has an undeniable practical outcome.

The retreats are central to the plan he and the shelter staff offer for transformation, a way of gradually leading the men from isolation to connection. The retreats are only one facet of what is intended to be an extensive process, most of which

Yourself

Healing retreats for shelter residents at a Jesuit retreat house

occurs in the context of the shelter.

Drotar, a Xavier University grad who has been leading retreats for over twenty years, says, “The retreats shorten their time span in the shelter. They plant a seed. They have been an incredible experience of our common humanity.”

. . . What keeps us in hell is shame, judgment, anger, fear . . .

The men are sorted into groups of four or five around tables in the retreat house dining room. Stewart is a table discussion leader. He’s next to Calvin, a handsome man in his early 50s whose front teeth are missing. He was a plumber before crack laid him low. Steve and Ray, nearly elderly, are two of the five Caucasians in this assemblage of almost 50—a stunning visual fact. Steve retreats behind his hearing difficulties. Ray, coughing from pneumonia, is coaxed to talk of his professed deep faith in God and of being thrown out of his house by his wife. Stewart, gravely serene, leads the men through a scripted inventory of the obstacles to connection with each other and with God. For Calvin, still using crack, the obstacle is forgiving himself for not taking care of his family, for losing it all. “Forgiving myself is a load,” he says.

Were the dialogue captured, it could provide the building blocks for a stage play. The digital recorder stays in the visitor’s pocket. His few notes are written self-consciously. Stewart makes it clear that he doesn’t welcome a stranger taking notes as the men open a window into their souls.

Which they do. There are a few big understandings for a visitor. One is how quickly the “homeless” label, which so powerfully screens human reality, evaporates when you sit and listen. Another is that many of the men seem profoundly

self-aware. A second visit reveals, on the part of a few, some posturing and prevarication. Mostly, though, the perception is that it would be hard to assemble a collection of business leaders, say, who would seem to be as self-aware and self-revealing as these men from a homeless shelter. They have been battered and seem hungry to talk real when they come into a space where people are respectful and ready to listen.

. . . This is, I hope, for many of us, a beginning. I’m talking about the scales dropping from our eyes . . .

Jesuit Retreat House in Cleveland is where retreat manager Duane Drotar, who also manages a Cleveland shelter for homeless men, helps shelter residents gain stability in their lives. Former shelter resident Mike Reynolds (opposite page) is a retreat alumnus who now serves on the retreat staff.



“The retreats shorten their time in the shelter. They plant a seed,” says retreat director Duane Drotar. Retreatant and shelter resident Ken Neal, now with a job, plans to move out soon.



The first retreat's theme is connection, the second deals with fear and trust, the third focuses on purpose, and the fourth is headlined integration. The content, the leaders' tactics, the intensity and duration of the retreat experiences all vary. It's a progression, but the sessions are variations on a theme: how, when our life has been a nightmare of fear and mistrust, do we find connection with ourselves, God, and other humans? How do we integrate our spirit and behavior so we can begin to have a life of connection and purpose?

“The root cause of homelessness is dislocation, isolation, lack of relationship,” says Drotar. “It is not being able to move in a world you can trust. The retreats help us to work an inner journey. As we let go of fears and addictions, we typically take those risks necessary to build stronger relationships and experience a sense of community.”

“We were all focused on the same page,” said Stewart a week after the Fear and Trust retreat. “It's a re-education. It's gradual. You learn to trust the people who God puts in front of you. Just keep going. Show up and make the retreats; stay on the path and see what God does for you.”

Metzger, age 72, has been in prison ministry and parish work. He says, “What I like about the program is that it is a process and not a one-shot deal. It touches the interior of the person. People will feed and clothe the homeless and that's wonderful, but there is more

“One guy told me it took him six months to get the courage to come because he was afraid,” says Jesuit Retreat House director Fr. Clem Metzger, SJ. Retreat staffers Pam Meyers and Mike Reynolds demonstrate the trust walk, an exercise that retreatants later conducted outside.



that needs to be done, and this program does it. One guy told me it took him six months to get the courage to come because he was afraid, but he said, 'I'm a different person now, and I see things differently.' To me that is a conversion.

"I see this as what the Jesuits are called to do, helping the disenfranchised and the impoverished. The men begin to experience the gracious mercy of God, and in that way it's a mirror of the first week of the Spiritual Exercises."

Mostly the men talk to each other. When they stop, Drotar, often tenderly, leads them:

*... Fear can cast out love ...
On the other side of fear is
freedom ...*

They talk primarily about their stories—their losses, imprisonments, defeats. The thought occurs that while *stories* are wonderfully human and a means to imagined coherence for our lives, they are also heavy baggage and their words can be a prison of remembered shame and fear. Drotar says later, "What we do here is help each other *rewrite* our stories, now that we see how our pasts have prepared us to uniquely contribute to God's purpose."

The men watch Franco Zeffereilli's 1977 film, "Jesus of Nazareth." Drotar leads a discussion of the struggle of Mary Magdalene, and many of the men are as eagerly analytical as a classroom of English grad students.


Not all are fully present. Some nod off, others display the physical evidence of a lack of wellness. But given that they have come to these wooded acres in suburban Cleveland from a homeless shelter and all that means, most seem remarkably present.

"The beauty of these guys is incredible," says Nancy Rowell. "It's where I meet Christ, and that's what makes it most wonderful. You fall in love and there's always risk and vulnerability when you fall in love, particularly with a homeless population. They have more of a sense of urgency to get in touch with the Kingdom. They have a lot of detachment because they have been tricked so much. There is a rawness about these guys that is very endearing. There are boundaries, and I want the boundaries to go away. It's the tension of, 'The Kingdom is here, but not yet.'"



Shelter residents, including Luther Glasgow and Derrek White, take part in four retreats, each with a theme: connection, fear and trust, purpose, and integration. The goal is to help them make a successful transition out of the shelter.

But the Kingdom seems closer here at Jesuit Retreat House. Few, certainly not anyone on the retreat team nor anyone who spends time at the shelter or with these men, believe that the transformation Drotar and his band works to facilitate will happen quickly, easily, completely. Getting there involves a daily slog through uncertainty and the aftereffects of shame, abuse, addiction, and most other types of human misery. But in Parma, Ohio, just before spring, a gradual awakening seems . . . possible. The men listen and look each other in the eyes. In the spaces where there isn't talk, there's a warm stillness and safety and respect. It feels like a beginning.

Stewart is saying to the group at the table, "I am enough; there is enough. Am I ready to take the next risk?" 

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