



2015 Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers - St. Anthony Foundation
Tenderloin Immersion Experience
Participant Reflections

Everything in the Eyes of God

by Jackie Gong

I began this journey to the Tenderloin because I received a quiet nudge from God (an email invitation) to seek how to serve the Poor.

It turns out I received an invitation from God to dine with Him at the table, to enjoy a good meal or two and conversations about the last Golden State Warrior's playoff game, get a rave restaurant review about a pizzeria in SOMA, and learn about the Okinawa coral diet. And an invitation from God to meet Tim, jobless the last two years because of illness and age 52, yet stoic and interested in my volunteer work in the dining room. And God brought Michael to the table too...

Michael was laid off from construction work six years ago. Yes, he is hooked up with EDD. He says, "I'd like to do line cooking, but you know I'm 56". He shares this with a smile, without a hint of anger, frustration, or even resignation. It just is. He yearns to see his family in Tucson. On Sundays he goes to Mass- mostly at St. Ignatius or St. Dominic's, not so much at St. Boniface. I ask him if he is on the streets. He is grateful because he just got a 30-day stay at an SRO. I ask what will happen at the end of the 30 days. He shrugs his shoulders, smiles, "I will have to reapply." My break is over and I must leave our conversation. Michael reaches out and takes my hands "God bless you," he says with a warm smile. "Thank you for helping in the dining room."

While I was worrying about Michael's likely return to the streets, he was in the holiness of the present moment, praying for me. Looking back, I see now that Michael had *nothing in the eyes of the world but he had everything in the eyes of God* because of simple faith and trust in God. And he offered me all that he had...his faith... and that wonderful smile. (continued next page) For me the poor have become more than an abstraction of unfortunate individuals who fit into categories: drug addict, mental ill, elderly poor, working poor, poor families. I know I can never fully understand their worries, pain, suffering and hardships. But I **see** them more fully now. I

see their names (Tim, Joseph, Douglas, Christina, Michael...) - each with a history, family, passions, interests, with their own personal yearnings and hopes. In the words of Maria at St. Anthony's, "I see with my heart ", broken over and over again by their brokenness. And now I know more strongly that I am called to be in relationship with them, as I am called to be with everyone - we are all made in God's image - we are all children of God.

I see more clearly that serving the Poor is only half of the equation, that God desires the Poor to evangelize us, to bring us, ME, in closer relationship to Him - to teach us to choose to let go - of all the keeps us separated from Him (whether stuff, distractions, our egos or need to be in charge) and to let God be at the very center of our lives, MY life. And for me to empty myself so that I may completely trust and depend upon Him for everything, like the birds in the air and the lilies in the field ... like Michael - so as to embrace the unbearable lightness of being one with God.

It was a tremendous blessing to share my Tenderloin Immersion with my fellow travelers. They were each so Faith-filled in their own unique path to following Christ's way. We shared great laughter and shed not a few silent tears for the brokenness we encountered.

I know this experience and fellowship have led to the planting of a few mustard seeds, but I do not know what all will grow from them. This is a mystery that will unfold in God's own time. But I am now nudged into deeper prayer, a closer examination of conscience and discernment of how I am meant to serve the Poor. For the time being, God is asking me to bear witness for Michael and all the others I encountered this week, to give them a voice and help others in my home, parish and community to see them too, to share my relationship with them and the realities of poverty, to teach the meaning of "safe sleep" and "street age". I will continue to simplify my life to make more room for God. Perhaps the mustard seeds will take me into more immersion programs and social justice ministry. I see the homeless invited through the open doors of St. Boniface and I too am invited in.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus teaches us to reach out and help the stranger in need, to overcome our fear, discomfort, and resistance to the unfamiliar. It turned out that in the Tenderloin I was the stranger who received the help and grace of the Good Samaritans of the Streets...

Pace e Bene

Done in the Joy of the Gospel

by Anna Horen

Some time ago I came to understand that God is present in the people and the ways you least expect. However, being with the poor, the marginalized, and the suffering makes that understanding real with an intensity that I do not normally experience in the course of my everyday life. This is not because these persons are somehow better, more spiritually advanced people; many of them have made poor life choices that contribute to their misery. Rather, the reason why the encounter with God is so arresting in these situations is cognitive dissonance. I expect God to be present in people who are successful according to the norms of our society. But it is always a surprise to find God speaking to me through those whom our society views as

failures at best, and as morally depraved at worst.



These encounters give substance Jesus' words, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (Matt 9:12b-13) God's mission is one of special care for those who most need compassion and mercy. And so it should be with us, who dare to call ourselves Christians.

But the biggest shift in my perceptions of God experience has come in my new understanding of its urgency. God's mission cannot wait for us to get around to it, or to deal with issues of social justice in our parishes as an afterthought, once we have taken care of the pastoral needs of "our own." As we go about our daily lives, pondering

our approach, and planning for the right time to undertake some new initiative, people are locked in a deadly struggle to survive each day. When I was growing up, my mother would tell me, after reading some article in Maryknoll magazine (and yes, my family donated and subscribed for years), or watching an ad for a charity on TV featuring pictures of suffering people, "You know, when we die and are judged by God, He's going to call us to account for this, and explain how we let this happen." My mother was definitely onto something. The time is now, not next week or next month.

This week I was evangelized by the dedication and joy of all the volunteers we met, and the gratitude of those we served. I think of the volunteers on the serving line singing and dancing in place to the music of Motown. I think of the joy of someone like Alicia who lights up a room by her very presence. Most of all, I think of the quiet dignity and humble thanks of many of the guests, and their own joy as they too sang along to the music. The music in the dining room, for me, was like the Holy Spirit: it comforted, it energized, and it brought us together. When I met the eyes of a guest singing the same lyrics as me as I went about my tasks, for a brief moment all barriers between us came down and there was mutual recognition, a mutual that often was expressed in a wordless nod or brief smile. Feeding the homeless and other inhabitants of this neighborhood could be a grim task, done in judgement and frustration; instead it was done in joy, in the joy of the Gospel.

My take away from all that I experienced this week is three-fold. First, as I already mentioned, the time is now. Second, that the needs of our world, cannot be adequately described: they must be experienced. Third, that my role as future clergy is not just to “preach it” to my congregation humility and respect, but to also bring about opportunities where those in my spiritual care can discover and experience for themselves how things are in realities different from their own. Instead of lecturing folks on their white privilege and getting resistance and even hostility in return, my task, with the help of God’s grace, is to help provide thoughtful, eye-opening experiences, so they can come on their own to see their privilege and the pressing need for action. That is my hope and my prayer.

Mr. Cellophane

by Ven Garcia

Cellophane, Mr. Cellophane shoulda been my name
Mr. Cellophane 'cause you can look right through me
Walk right by me and never know I'm there.

This song played and replayed in my head throughout our Tenderloin mission immersion trip. Mr. Cellophane, the invisible, inconsequential man in the Broadway musical Chicago is everywhere and nowhere in the streets of San Francisco. He is panhandling on the sidewalks, sleeping in the public library and lounging on the grass at Civic Center Plaza. Most people look the other way, immune to their plight. But there is no ignoring Mr. Cellophane in his home turf, the thirty blocks shaped like a wedge triangle called the Tenderloin. He has stories to tell, scars to show, lessons to teach. So, off to the Tenderloin I went with my fellow pilgrims to experience

mission and encounter Jesus in His many disguises.



And that is the first thing that becomes readily apparent about Mr. Cellophane. He is male, female and transgender, young, old and a baby in a stroller, different nationalities and mixed races, various religious faiths or none at all, in good health, poor health or poorer health. All ended up at the Tenderloin “and there but for fortune”, but for the grace of God “go you or I”.

This week, I had to overcome some fears and confront some subconscious

prejudices that bubbled up to the surface. I expected Mr. Cellophane to behave badly at St. Anthony’s dining hall. I was proven wrong: they waited their turn in the lines, raised their hands and waited patiently to be served, smiled and said thank you when I handed them their food tray. I expected Mr. Cellophane to hit me up for money, but not one of them did. I was initially hesitant and insecure to initiate table conversations with complete strangers, but most responded graciously and even enthusiastically.

The two senior centers that we visited presented some communication challenges. Cantonese was the language of the day. And just like that, the roles reversed. I became Mr. Cellophane as I went around the room and received blank stares from many residents. However, the smiles, the Cantonese Good Morning “Jo san”, the dominoes, karaoke and the Macarena saved the day.

God was everywhere in the Tenderloin but I strongly felt His presence upon entering St. Boniface Church. Serenity descended on me, everything else receded into the background. I honored the sacredness of those sleeping on the church pews at the back – “to sleep, perchance to dream”, perchance to heal, perchance to hope, perchance to cope. I can’t imagine how anyone would want to deny them this sanctuary. My feeling was: This is right, this is as it should be - God is here! And silently, I asked our Father to lead our Tenderloin brothers and sisters to the “restful waters to revive their drooping spirits.”

God invited me to respond as part of a community of love, support and healing. We are, indeed, the people of God, called to love one another, especially those who are in need. The truth is, we all have great need for each other.

God Waits

by Noe Tuason

How my experiences of this week reinforced my understanding of God and His mission:

Our God is the God of all. But the poor, the most vulnerable in our society, has a special place in His heart. My encounter with those poor of the Tenderloin District of San Francisco has given me a better understanding of God's mission on earth and, correspondingly, my own mission as His disciple and deacon.



The Tenderloin is a sore thumb in the beautiful and affluent City by the Bay. In this district, the poorest people of the city—those without food, those without home, and, in most cases, those without family, come to this seemingly forsaken “little acre” for survival. Here they find various services—free food, medical care for the infirm, home and activities for the seniors, free clothes, and many others, to help lighten the burden of their lives. Here they find, above all else, love and caring.

I know that God is everywhere but, it is in this place that His love is most alive. It is in this place that His arms, His legs, His heart are most visible through all the volunteers who serve the guests in various capacities. It is in this place that God parks Himself.

I became a small part of more than 10,000 people who volunteer there per year. The tasks were tiring. After three days, my feet were sore and my back hurt, but, by the end of each day, I found fulfillment in knowing that I have served the hungry, helped clothe the naked, and brought joy to the least of His people in my own small ways.

Some of the stories of how I experienced the Gospel this week:

I worked few blocks from St. Anthony's for two years. I have seen many homeless people when I walked past them, from and to the BART station. At that time, they were just a bunch of faceless people with dirty smelly clothes. But, after meeting many of them this week, serving them, eating the same food with them, talking to them, entertaining them, sorting clothes for

them, I realized that each of them had a face, a name, and once upon a time in their lives, a dream.

Once person that I talked to, while we were eating lunch together, was a Hungarian man from Budapest, probably undocumented. He has been in San Francisco for many years. His life in San Francisco was obviously very difficult. He was lonely and wanted to return home. He said he needed money to fly back, but how could he? He could barely feed himself. Many of the people there are like him: immigrants, not only from other countries, but also from other states. They came to California for a better life and some wound up in the streets homeless, or at senior citizens' center alone and lonely. They spend their day going from food service to food service, waiting in line to be served. Some are able to eat only once a day. By late afternoon, they start looking for a place that would provide them with some shelter from the elements, and from being hurt or killed. Those who are elderly and physically challenged are placed in a senior center, hoping not only to be fed, but to be entertained in some ways. Day after day, they are there, sitting around with few breaks, basically waiting to die. They long for home and family but they are trapped in their poverty. They are like the Jews exiled in Babylon. Psalm 137 says: "By the rivers of Babylon there we sat weeping when we remembered Zion. ..For there our captors asked us for the words of a song; our tormentors, for joy. 'Sing for us a song of Zion!' But how could we sing a song of the LORD in a foreign land?"

More than any other place, Tenderloin is where the Good News of love lives, not in words but in action. It does not take much to give love. Often, a friendly smile, a handshake, a caring gesture is enough. An excerpt from a poem written by Hector Lee, who, like many other homeless, found rest and refuge in St. Boniface church of Tenderloin by allowing them to sleep on the pews, says:

...Here one smells poverty and weariness,
one smells not enough sleep and lack of privacy,
and one smells the great humble efforts
of pride and human dignity.
My mouth fills with the sweetness
for the smell of God envelopes me.
There is no need for incense
to carry my prayers to heaven.
God is here."

Take away from the experience:

Most often, where we live is where we feel most comfortable. We have our "living space" there—where our family and friends live, where we worship, where we shop, where we play. We are comfortable there because we are familiar with almost everything there, almost like a second nature. By being too familiar and comfortable, however, we tend to overlook places beyond the boundaries of that living space. As disciples and missionaries of God, to which we

have been commissioned at our baptism, we must be able to go beyond that familiar space, out of our comfort zone, and visit the places where God is most needed..

To me, it is essential that I am able to live out my baptismal commissioning and my diaconal commitment to serve the people of God. I cannot fulfill my commitment fully by staying and simply moving around my living space. The least of God's people, the poor, the sick, and the homeless are not within that space. I need to reach out to them. The mission/immersion this week gave me the opportunity to be with them once again, and rekindle both my baptismal and diaconal commitments. At Tenderloin is where God made Himself visible to me once again, amidst the smell of urine, amidst people with dirty clothes and unkempt hair, amidst people sleeping in the sidewalk, in queues of people waiting and waiting for God to come. For those who had only one meal a day, God was the food tray served at St. Anthony's Hall or Glide Memorial. For others, who have been deprived of sleep at night for fear of being robbed or mobbed, God was St. Boniface church where they could take a day nap without fear. For the lonely, God was someone who visited and brought good cheer. For the physically abused, God was a kind word and a gentle touch. For me, God was the faces of the impoverished people there and the volunteers who tried to lift their bodies and uplift their souls.

These reflections, I will bring with me in my mind and in my heart to share with those in my living space, to disturb them and, hopefully, transform them. I can share with them through my homilies, presentations, meetings, and conversations. I can also share with them, day after day, not just in what I say, but also, more importantly, by what I do. They do not need to go to the Tenderloin to see God. They will also see God among those served by the St. Vincent de Paul Society, Catholic Charities, and Catholic workers. Or, they could also see God at Fairmont hospital in San Leandro or the homebound parishioners of their parish. All it needs is to peer beyond the lights of their living space. Into the darkness of its boundaries God waits.

If There is a Poor Man Among You

by Tom Nangle

"To love God and neighbor is not something abstract, but profoundly concrete: it means seeing in every person and face of the Lord to be served, to serve him concretely. And you are, dear brothers and sisters, in the face of Jesus." Pope Francis, Address during Visit at the Homeless Shelter obsessions and procedures." –Pope Francis



As I reflected back upon this week and looked at God's mission for myself and really all of us is that we are all called to serve and to be good stewards of our time and talents but also to follow in the words that were so well spoken by Pope Francis.

"I prefer a church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security," he wrote. "I do not want a church concerned with being at the center and then ends up by being caught up in a web of

After spending a week in the Tenderloin who as a spectator driving by were in so many ways a visual stereotype that in my heart felt for, but never took the time to allow myself to move beyond what was comfortable to me. After just a few interactions my heart began to ache for them as fellow children of God. It was all I could do on the first day not to cry as I looked out at the groups streaming in to receive what could be their only meal. At that moment the concept of having my heart broken was suddenly very real to me. It was truly the spirit of those who served and the thank you's of the guests that lifted me up that day. The example that was set for me by my fellow missionaries, as well as all those who served the many people of the Tenderloin through their inspirational words and endless acts of God's love were constant examples of how we are called to evangelize God's message through our words, actions, and love for one another. I have come to more deeply understand how important it is to incorporate that evangelization of God's message and the importance of the integration of our faith into all that we do which was delivered to us so passionately in our message from Nick. It is so important as I leave this week to maintain the fire that has been lit within me to serve others and as we were told during our closing ceremony that if the candle goes out, we just need to find a way to light it again. As I walk away this Friday, I know I do so with a clear vision of my call to serve others selflessly, without fear, and with love and respect. I am called to challenge myself to

serve those that are on the fringe and to find God's presence and love in that challenging encounter. God has truly blessed me with this experience and the memories, friends, and call to action that has come from it.

Deut. 15:7. If there is a poor man among you, one of your brothers, in any of the towns of the land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand to your poor brother; but you shall freely open your hand to him, and generously lend him sufficient for his need in whatever he lacks.

God's People

by Yvonne Dilling



Scripture tells us “I have called you by name.” This week it occurred to me that God’s mission is that I also call others “by name” which means drawing near enough to know them. This has happened in a small way. My prayer category of “the mentally ill who have no health care services” has faces and names now. Many other of the “categories” in my prayers now have faces, circumstances, and names.”

I am renewed in working on God’s ongoing transformation in me, so that I may more fully and continually be a channel of God’s love to others. My ongoing interior work includes working to suspend judgement, to fully focus on the other, to extend love in all circumstances.

I take with me many names to include in prayer.... Melissa, Jayden, Jonathan, Israel, Vera, Iris, Maria, and even more faces. As I do my part to advocate for just wages, affordable housing, mental health care as a right, (not a privilege for only those with insurance), I will remember many faces. Also, my mental image of “God’s people” is more concretely multi cultural. It includes those whose names are a challenge for me to pronounce, whose faces look nothing like mine.

Thank you God, for surprising me again and again, for renewing my call to participate in your mission of love, just as you renew your mercies with the dawn of each new day.

Evangelized by my community of Missionary Disciples

by Nick van Santen

It is with great sadness that i am unable to attend your final sharing. I would have loved to hear from you all. I thank God for your presence in my life this week. In fact, it is you who really help me answer question #1.



I know immersions are meant to engage a population or issue with integrity and I certainly feel like that happened. But perhaps on a more personal level. I have seen God through you all. As I shared the other night during my talk, things with my dad are not well. I think one of the things this week really highlighted for me is a sub-conscious distrust of that (my dad's) generation. I think of them as closed off, selfish, and largely uninterested in anything beyond themselves. It's my own form of ageism and one that I perhaps have never examined.

But this week God evangelized me. God showed me a wonderful group of people who were open and honest about their own “stuff” about wanting to learn and engage even if it meant dealing with themselves. working with students, I largely never see adult faith formation. Thank you for showing me God and that his mission continues throughout all stages of life.

Tom, thanks for your winsome spirit and continual desire to learn more, trust more. You showed me Christ as a man and father that is making that choice even though you don't have to.

Yvonne, your wisdom I will cherish and your insight into justice taught me that God gives us all passions and yours is still huge to this day. and thank you to Jackie for showing me a humble presence. Jose, for your sense of humor. The list goes on and you probably weren't expecting an affirmation moment. But I wanted to be honest about the questions. :)

The stories of Bennett, Sean, Lia, Carmelita I will carry forward. Truly they are saints in their own rights. But God's love working through you has reminded me to pray for my family with renewed energy and hope. It has taught me of my own dissonance and issue in which I must work on moving forward around the people I surround myself and the additional healing that God must/needs to provide.

This Road is no Place for Strangers

by Madeline van Santen

"This road is no place for strangers." This quote is a beautiful metaphor for what I experienced over this week as a participant in the immersion. I am still trying to understand how I can better see the unseen and serve them underserved; however, this week God really revealed himself to me.



I think more than anything, I better understand the Lord's heart for the homeless after this week of serving. Despite the fact that it was not always easy to step into various areas of discomfort, I learned that suffering with the guests and people we served was the only way I could really live out compassion. The Lord is aware of their needs and pain and this was a small way for me to enter into His knowledge and care. Also, God's mission for these homeless people was revealed to me through the Gubbio

project. It was a perfect example of what they deserve - the most beautiful home. I saw the Lord's work in this.

I was surprised by hope throughout this week. Stories such as a family of four that have stayed together to fight this fight. And their 5 year old daughter's love for education and communication. also, our time spent with Lia, our Salvation Army host, revealed to me the importance of intentionality. It was only through questions and company that made her feel so loved and hopeful for the future. In addition, an initial conversation with a faithful man in the dining room gave me a desire to be more passionate and open with my faith. The Lord's love was revealed to me throughout these experiences and I hope to integrate their stories into my own story.

This experience has peeled away my old eyes and has given me the eyes of the Lord when encountering strangers and homeless people. But mostly, this experience has given me context to my dreams as a school counselor in an urban setting. Through moments like I had with little Ania, I know that I can reach a need of homeless people through education and counseling.

The Lord revealed to me where I can be used years ago, and this trip made that place of where He wants to use me come alive.

I am grateful for my time with this team as I learned so much from everyone's hearts, minds, and actions. I dreamed in new ways, laughed authentically and developed a better sense of hope. I grew in my faith because of this team of servants, and for that I am grateful. I thank God for this group of role models. I look forward to how the Lord chooses to use us after this trip. -