

Legacy of Love — Part 1 of 2

Written by By Suzanne Hammons Voices of the Southwest
Friday, 09 September 2016 01:50



Mother Teresa's sisters uplift the unwanted people of Gallup

“Drunk Town, USA.” It’s a nickname that will make most residents of Gallup cringe, or roll their eyes, or shrug sadly. They didn’t ask for it, but the name, given to the town by passing motorists in the 1980s, still lingers.

You see, Gallup still has a problem: the presence of homeless, vagrant, or wandering people, mostly Native American, nearly all struggling with addiction and alcoholism.

Every year, the deaths from exposure, cold, and street injuries reach into double digits. And no one seems to have a concrete solution.

From the day Gallup received its nickname to the present day, the debate carries on. And in the meantime, you see them on the streets, alone or in groups, each and every day.

Often, you can’t run an errand without being approached and given the typical line: “Can you help me out with some change?”

But how to truly respond to the human problem presented by addiction? One group of nuns, unconcerned with the greater debate, has been opening their doors daily to the homeless of Gallup for nearly three decades.

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The Missionaries of Charity are instantly recognizable, even to non-Catholics. First founded by Mother Teresa in the slums of India, they wear simple white *saris*, in the tradition of their native country, with signature blue stripes. Mother Teresa personally founded many of the homes that are now spread in countries across the globe, and came to visit Gallup in the 1980s in order to start a soup kitchen and overnight shelter.

Recently renovated, this shelter, *Casa san Martin*, serves daily hot meals, provides showers, and has a room with five beds for women and another, larger room with over 40 beds for men. One sign on the wall instructs visitors that no weapons, alcohol, or drugs are permitted on the premises, among other hand-drawn signs on cardboard expressing various Catholic prayers. A large crucifix, flanked with the words “I Thirst,” completes the decorations in the dining hall.

There are six sisters here. Most of them are camera-shy, but after a little encouragement, two of them sit down to be interviewed.

Sister Maria Auxilia is from a small village in northern India – in fact, each of the sisters currently in Gallup come from either India or Bangladesh. Was it hard for her, coming halfway across the world to a country with a different language, culture, sights and smells?

“No, I had so much enthusiasm to go for my mission!” Sr. Auxilia assures me.

“Wherever God sends me, I am happy to come!”

She laughs, and continues to laugh, or grin, throughout the interview. This is not a nervous reaction, but her true personality, laid bare and unassuming. All of the sisters here are continually smiling, lightly teasing each other.

I ask if I can take their picture. Excitedly, they line themselves up. But before I can press the shutter, they call out “Wait, wait!” and begin to adjust the hems of their *saris*, making sure they are straight. When they catch sight of each other, prepping for the camera, they dissolve into

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laughter.

Their simple joy is infectious, and at first glance, might seem implausible. Like the people they serve, they have no possessions, save the clothes on their back, sandals on their feet, and one or two small religious items, such as a rosary or Bible.

Reportedly, they do not even have mirrors in their convents. But with the materialism of the world thus stripped away, they are free to fill their lives with prayer, the company of one another, and the needs of the poor.

Sister Auxilia found this joy when she was allowed to join the order, soon after her schooling was completed.

“I was in sixth grade. Mother [Teresa] was not then that famous. And what happened, I got Mother’s picture, like a stamp, and the picture said ‘token of love’, and she’s holding a little baby on her hand. And I had no idea what is the token of love. But I wanted to do what Mother is doing. So my desire increased...one of the sisters came, and she told me ‘I want to take you.’ And I did not tell her anything about my vocation or anything, but she said ‘I want to take you, would you like to come?’ I said, ‘Yes, Sister, I want to come with you.’ On the way she asked me ‘do you want to be a sister?’ I said ‘Yes, I have long desired to be a sister. But I don’t know how to do it.’ And she took me to the Missionaries’ house.

“So I was so happy, really happy about my vocation, because God gave that sister to read my mind, and that sister took me.”

To be continued next week

***By Suzanne Hammons
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