

MOMENTS OF MERCY

HOW CAN THERE BE MERCY IN A WAR ZONE?

by Mary Bittner, OFS

I'd like to tell you a true story. It was told to me by a hospital chaplain, who some years ago had been stationed with U.S. troops in Beirut.

Our story opens at a time when tensions were running high between the American troops and the local population, a few days after a series of severe bombing attacks had driven the tension level even higher.

One afternoon, several soldiers on guard duty noticed an old woman hobbling slowly up the road toward them, pulling a cart that carried a strange contraption. The day was hot and dusty, and the cart was assuredly heavy, for the old woman moved very, very slowly.

When she finally reached the soldiers, the woman stopped, detached a teapot from the apparatus, poured herself a cup of tea, and drank it in silence. She next unearthed from her cart several cups, and proceeded to offer cups of tea to the soldiers. A couple of them, including my chaplain acquaintance, accepted her invitation and drank. She then nodded and headed her cart back down the dusty road.

The next day she and her tea cart were back, and this time several of the men were willing to drink her tea. The following day even more men were waiting, and the old woman was accompanied by several of her own friends.

This went on. Each day the old woman made tea, and the men drank tea with her. Her friends started bringing food—little Middle Eastern pastries and delicacies—which they shared with the soldiers.

After a time, one of the men followed the old woman to see where she lived—a bombed-out building with no roof. The soldiers went back and repaired her house... now she had a roof over her head. And each day she and the soldiers continued to share tea.

What had happened there, on a dusty street in war-torn Beirut? Mercy given. Mercy received. Mercy.

A FUTURE NOT OUR OWN

It helps now and then to step back and take a long view.

The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.

Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith.

No confession brings perfection, no pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No program accomplishes the Church's mission. No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water the seeds already planted knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing this.

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

This reflection prayer was recently shared at the Saint Junipero Serra Regional Visitation Chapter by Fr. Christopher Panagoplos, TOR, National Spiritual Assistant, who was the national pastoral visitor at the Chapter.

The prayer was composed by Bishop Ken Untener of Saginaw, drafted for a homily by Cardinal John Dearden in Nov. 1979 for a celebration of departed priests. As a reflection on the anniversary of the martyrdom of Bishop Romero, Bishop Untener included in a reflection book a passage titled "The mystery of the Romero Prayer." The mystery is that the words of the prayer are attributed to Oscar Romero, but they were never spoken by him.

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