

MY EXPERIENCE OF A PARISH WHEN IT LIVES OUR JESUIT IDENTITY OF A FAITH THAT DOES JUSTICE

Michael Kennedy, S.J.

*Prison Ministry
Culver City, CA, USA*

The History

It was October 8, 2000. Some members of our parish of Dolores Mission Church in East Los Angeles had just returned from a retreat. I was returning to our house after dropping off some of the members who lived in our neighborhood when the phone rang. I picked up the phone and there was a hysterical voice on the other end communicating that there had been a drive by shooting and two people were hit. I rushed over to the street where the shooting had occurred and one of our staff members had just brought a young girl, Stephanie, to the hospital. Soon I was standing over the bloody body of a young eight-year old girl, and her parents were crying without consolation. We prayed over her. The nurse pulled the sheet over her body, but her mother, Norma, would not let go of her. After an endless period of time trying to comfort the family, I realized that this killing would affect this family, and this community, for many years.

That afternoon, in the midst of so much grieving, I asked myself what could we as a parish do in response to this tragedy? I could not sleep that night, and all night long the shouts of grieving parents shot through my body. I sometimes wonder about the effectiveness of the all accompaniment we do of so many who have lost innocent

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family members to senseless killing. The next morning the parish leaders met and we spoke of what we needed to do to bring some peace and comfort to so many members of the Church who felt traumatized by the violence.

Clearly there were two levels in which to respond: one was pastoral care to the family and the other was related to the collective trauma of the larger community.

That night we gathered in the Church with Norma and her family.

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We broke up into small groups and used a meditation about Mary receiving the body of her Son from the cross. There was a feeling of collective grief with many of the parents who had also lost children to violence. Directly behind where we were praying, there was a statue of our Mother of Sorrows, the name of our parish. Mothers weeping in sorrow together, praying together, and comforting each

other gave birth to new life: a project.

Before we finished our prayer, some of the fifty immigrant men who sleep in the church every night joined us in the prayer. They were aware of what happened since Stephanie was killed right behind the Church where they stay at night. There was tenderness in their arrival as they could relate to these women in their anguish. The lives of these men are taken up trying to find work and they are stepped on by so many. They are away from their families and they worry about their own survival while they pound the street looking for work.

Step 1: Planning Together

The next day we as a community met again. We had been strengthened by the healing experience of the night before and we spoke of how our section of Los Angeles is totally forgotten by the powerful of the city. It was clear to us how they are blind to our issues. Moved by our faith, we vowed not to remain passive but to put our faith into action.

We began a movement in our Parish that changed it irrevocably. This tragedy had brought the community together, and it had strengthened

us to demand from the City some basic necessities such as better lighting, speed bumps, and street drainage that actually worked.

Since the death of Stephanie there have been other killings. But what is different now is that our Parish is not content just to pray but has experienced the power of our God moving us to live with dignity and to struggle for our basic rights.

This story of Stephanie contains many elements of what my parish experience has been in poor parishes in many different parts of the world. Stephanie's story speaks concretely of how a Jesuit parish lives a faith that does justice.

Step 2: Small Church Base Communities

The two components of faith and justice have been lived out in the experience of CEB's (small ecclesial base communities). In every parish I have worked in over the years, CEB's have played an essential role in the living out of our Jesuit mission as a parish.

The CEB's allow the parish to have an experience of "church" in the many homes of all parts of the community: moments of reflection, prayer and putting the Word of God into practice.

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Because of the experience of CEB's at Dolores Mission, we were prepared to move to a deeper level of commitment as a Parish community to deal with the crisis of Stephanie's death. As a parish we were accustomed to put our faith into action but only to certain level.

Step 3: Ignatian Prayer

As a Jesuit parish, we have attempted to implement our way of praying found in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius: Ignatian Contemplation.

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Over the years, I believe our way of praying as a parish has helped form us into a Jesuit Parish. Concretely what does this mean? It means, for example, that when Stephanie died and we all came together, we all were accustomed to opening ourselves up to God through Ignatian Contemplative Prayer. This way of praying also opened us to the healing power of God.

Our Ignatian prayer has also been incorporated into our Sunday liturgies and other liturgical celebrations. Once a month we have a liturgy in which we use Ignatian contemplation. Everyone in the community closes their eyes and enters into the Gospel scene. During the contemplation, the leaders of the CEB's anoint with non-sacramental oil a sign of the cross in the palm of anyone who feels the need of healing. This is a way in which we allow people to enter into their own religious experience rather than just being talked at in a homily.

Step 4: Five Years Later

It is now five years since Stephanie was killed. When I ask myself why pastoral work gives me so much life, I realize that it has to do with being connected to a community of faith with people like Norma, her family, and others who have worked and prayed together. Being thrust into the life and death struggles of people like Stephanie and Norma is a profound privilege that is one of the inestimable gifts of being a pastor.

When we as Jesuit parishes really try to live our lives with a faith that does justice, I think we become clearer signs of God's presence in a dark world. When we do that, we witness to that Presence in ways more deep and profound than what we can imagine.