



WORKSHOPS – C3.2 TITLE : CCR CLOSE TO THE POOR AND NEEDY	SPEAKER : JAMES MURPHY
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Dear brothers and sisters;

It is such a pleasure to speak with you today on this very important topic. I also am so happy to have the opportunity to share this time with my esteemed collaborator, Brother James Sin. What he has already shared with us is so important!

Building on the foundation which he has already laid, I would like to share with you a few practical aspects of working with the poor and needy.

I have the privilege of leading a mission project in Mexico City. It is sponsored by renewal Ministries. Our work includes visiting an orphanage, visiting a home for the elderly, and spending a few days in a garbage dump near the airport. I have done other projects in other countries as well, but this is one of the main projects I am working on at this time.

What I would like to share with you today are some of the insights I have gained as I have done this work. As I said, Brother James Sin has laid a wonderful foundation for us.....I would simply like to share with you a few things I have learned along the way.

When I think of working with those in need, I am more interested in attitude rather than technique. The needy cannot be placed in one group. They are as unique as each one of us. They live in different parts of the world. They face different challenges. They struggle in different ways. I cannot give you a plan that will work for all those in need. Rather, I would like to examine general principles that can be applied in most situations.

ENTER IN: When we see a person in need, there is a desire to save them from their pain, from their circumstances. Sometimes we can concretely make their situation better..... many times we cannot. We often have a desire, almost a compulsion to “fix” a person who is in need.

One of the things that Jesus did so well during His public ministry is that He connected with people in their circumstances. This is often difficult for us, because we may be uncomfortable with the circumstances the needy find themselves in. Perhaps the environment, the smells, the bad behavior is very upsetting for us. We find ourselves put off by these things. We want to serve people...but on our terms.

Many times, when we see the desperate plight of people, we are simply overwhelmed by the tragedy of their lives. It almost crushes us. We realize we cannot fix the problem. We want to flee.



When I first went to the garbage dumps, I was overwhelmed by the struggles and the sheer enormity of the difficulties these people faced. I was so focused on the problems, I could not see the people! I did not know how to help them...so I wanted to avoid them. If I could not make their life better.....why was I even there? I had a plan that I wanted to accomplish. I had a standard that I wanted to achieve.

I came to realize later that even though I could not fix all the problems, the people appreciated me just being with them. They knew we could not fix everything. They didn't expect us to! They appreciated that we came....and came back again...and keep coming to be with them. A few things in their situation are better.... many things are not. But we come together. We pray and work together. We play games with the children. We talk to the old women. We laugh....and cry together. We are trying to enter into their world...because you cannot change anything until you enter into it, until you become a part of it.,

GET TO EYE LEVEL: The first time we gave food out in the dump, I made a big mistake. We were making lunches on the bus, and handing the food out the windows of the bus to the people who were standing outside. Of course, the bus was taller than the people, so they had to reach up to the windows where we were handing out the food. I stepped outside the bus to watch the line. Our team was so far above them! It made us into two different groups! I never used that method again. Now we bring the bread, the meat, the fruit. We put it on a table in the dump. Some of my team and some people from the dump make the sandwiches together. After we pray over the food, we walk among the people handing out the sandwiches together. One group is not reaching down and another group reaching up...now we are all reaching out.....to one another.

There is a little boy in the orphanage who is afraid of loud noises and confusion. When my team comes to the orphanage and starts to play with the children, my little friend becomes nervous and hides underneath his bed. In order to see him, I get on the floor and crawl half-way under the bed. He smiles at me and we just look into each other's eyes. If I want to see my friend, I have to get down on the floor...because that is where he is at. We cannot serve the needy from "on high." We must be at the same level with them. St John tell us in the prologue of his gospel "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Perhaps a more accurate translation puts it this way He "Pitched His tent among our tents." In other words, God did not remain on high to save us. He came to eye level....crawling under the bed of our frail and broken humanity, and finding us there, looked us in the eye....as one of our own. The best way to truly see a person is to look at them at eye level.

SOMETHING MORE THAN FOOD: When you see people in dire straits, you focus on the most obvious needs; food, clothing, medical care. While all of these are so important, there is another element that is intangible...but essential...perhaps even more important than the others. That ingredient is **DIGNITY**.

I recently heard an amazing story that comes out of the tragic siege of Sarajevo which went on from 1992-1996. A Serbian militia had surrounded the city, trapping thousands of citizens, often attacking with mortars, artillery and sniper rifles. One aid worker managed to sneak through the siege, and



into the city. She did what she could to help the people. As she was about to be smuggled back out, she asked a group of women..... if she could make it back in..... was there anything she could bring back for them? Perhaps some special medicines? Maybe some types of food? One woman spoke up "If you make it back in, could you please bring us some lipstick?" The aid worker was dumbfounded. "Lipstick! You want lipstick? Surely there must be something else that you need more!" The woman replied with the nodding heads of all the other women "We want lipstick! Tomorrow we could be killed by a sniper. If a sniper has me in his rifle scope, I want him to see, want him to know, want him to understand that he is about to kill a beautiful woman."

This woman was not speaking from vanity, but in the midst of a brutal and dehumanizing war, simply wanted to keep some fragment of her dignity as a woman.

Sometimes in the garbage dump, we set up a hair cutting shop. We wash and cut hair. Sometimes we do nails. We often braid and put ribbons in the girl's hair. Sometimes we give them pretty dresses, which have no practical use in a dump....but are cherished by the girls....because for at least a little while, they are beautiful, they are special, they have at least some of the dignity that is theirs....because they are the children of God.

To take my hat off and bow to an old woman, whose clothes are stained from garbage, gives her a reminder of her inherent dignity. When we in the dump, we always defer to the people there; "Is this a good time to distribute the food? At what hour should we have Mass? Where would you like us to set up the games for the children?" By having the local people make the decisions we are honoring them as our hosts. We do not treat them like children, thinking we know what is best. They are our collaborators, our co-workers.

On one occasion, I was asked to speak at a parish in the evening. My Spanish is quite poor and so I needed a translator....but could not find one. I went to the senior home where very poor elderly men live. Their conditions are quite difficult. One of the men living there, Carlos, spoke English. I asked him if he could be my interpreter for a parish program that evening. "You want me to help you?" he asked in disbelief. "Yes, if you don't mind, I could really use your help." He got all dressed up. We took him out for dinner on the way to the Church. That night at the parish, I introduced Carlos as my coworker and started my talk. Carlos was fantastic. He was a very good looking older gentleman, and after my talk was over, all the elderly women in the parish practically knocked me over, getting in line to talk to Carlos! He was in his glory! Years later, Carlos brought that night up. He paused for a moment, with tears in his eyes and told me "That night was the happiest night of my entire life."

My experience is that people crave to be shown a basic human dignity. They need it for their survival. They need it to thrive. Sometimes, poverty, illness, imprisonment can take away a person's dignity. We need to help them get it back.

THE POOR LIKE FRAPACINOS...WITH EXTRA MILK! One day, a coworker and I were walking down a street in Mexico City.....on our way to Starbucks coffee. A woman was sitting on the sidewalk, holding a baby, with her hand extended out to us. Rather than simply place a coin in her hand, my



coworker got down to eye level with her and told her we were going to Starbucks and asked if we could bring her something back. She looked at us both like we were making a joke, but when my friend reassured her that we were sincere, she smiled and whispered “I would like a Frappuccino...with extra milk.” We smiled and went to get her coffee. When we came back to her, we discussed the pros and cons of how much milk should be in the drink. For a few moments, it wasn’t an “us” and “them.” We were three friends discussing coffee! It is a reminder to us that the poor are people just like us, with their own tastes and preferences. The poor are not a “group” where “one size fits all.” They are unique, wonderful individuals who need to be treated as individuals whenever possible.

DON’T DO THINGS FOR THEM, DO THINGS WITH THEM: When we set up our tent for the medical clinic we run, we always ask for the help of the people in the dump to help us set things up. When we prepare for Mass, we always ask the local people to help prepare things. When we distribute food, we ask them to actually do the distribution. We find that people want to help. It gives them a share in the project. They are a part of what is going on. It makes us a team. We try not to do things for people if it is possible to do things with people. Involvement is essential when working with the needy.

YOU CAN NEVER BE SURE WHO THE TRULY POOR ARE. It is natural, I suppose, that we tend to focus on people who have the most obvious needs; poverty, hunger, illness, victims of war and violence. This surely is a poverty. Sometimes we can be so focused on the obvious that we neglect the greater needs; loneliness, despair, sin. These are the things that are not seen, yet are still great needs. To care for a person’s obvious needs is, of course an important first step, but the hidden needs also require attention. We want to care for the whole person, not just their body. Friendship, prayer, sacraments, proclamation of the Word, ministry may be what people need more than food or blankets. It is not one or the other. It is both.

Sometimes we don’t realize that a person who does not have a material problem, may still have some need. Let’s be discerning enough to recognize a person’s real need....even if it is hidden, and do what we can to help them.

THEY DON’T NEED US, BUT WE SURE NEED THEM: When you begin to work with the needy, sometimes you feel as though you were doing them a great favor. You have the illusion that they need you and the things you are bringing. You can feel pretty good about yourself.

You come to realize eventually, that this is not a situation where you have everything and they have nothing. Rather, you have something to give and they have something to give. Yes, they have needs....but so do you. It becomes an exchange, a sharing.

When you spend a little more time with the poor, you realize that you have given so little...and received so much in return.



One of my coworkers said it best “You know, these people really don’t need us. But we sure need them. They will find a way to survive if we were not here.....but could we really survive, could we really be who we are meant to be, if we did not have them in our lives?”

In conclusion, my dear friends, joining with those in need, entering into their lives is one of the greatest adventures of your life. If you really want to experience the riches of life, find them among the poor.

Thank you so much.