

Courage, faith needed for change

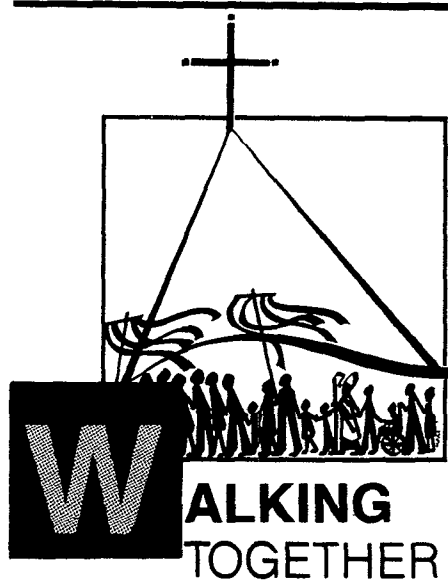
By Sister Christine Wagner
Guest contributor

It had been a horrible day. I had a bicycle accident in the morning, and a car accident two hours later on my way to the chiropractor. I was sore in body and heart and not too disposed to be forgiving.

And even though I am not superstitious, the irony did not escape me that it was Friday the 13th. Unbelievably, that afternoon, someone walked into our convent and stole \$20 out of my bedroom. The three of us who were home watched the thief run off down the street before we realized what had happened. We chalked the day up as a loss, moved on and occasionally prayed for the person who had taken the money.

Two years later, almost to the day, a young man knocked on our door and said, "I took a \$20 from your house two years ago. I was on drugs and needed money. I am off drugs now and working steadily and I want to pay back the \$20 and apologize." We told him he had been prayed for and he said very sincerely, "Thank you. It worked."

Our response to this event was interesting. Simultaneously, we were chagrined at our surprise and disbelief that indeed a turnaround had hap-



pened, and we rejoiced in the gift of grace to this man.

I have come to this event as a story of great transformation, both for the young man, for my sisters and me. His life certainly had dramatically and beautifully changed from one of desperation that included theft and self-abuse to a peace of mind that sought out right relationships.

For all of us, the transforming power of reconciliation and forgiveness were made very real and — for those of us who had prayed — the proof that prayer can redeem an

apparently hopeless situation was on our doorstep.

I believe this story of transformation is very strongly linked with the final Synod theme presented for our consideration next week ("how can we do the work of justice") for doing the work of justice means believing in the possibility of transformation, believing in the power of prayer, and believing in the action of God in our lives — even when situations appear hopeless and unredeemable.

Theme six presents what may appear to be the hopeless and the impossible. We are asked to look at the hard realities of poverty, racism, sexism, unemployment and the lack of adequate health care and housing that exist in our world. And we are asked to transform these realities.

An understandable response would be, "I'd rather not. I'd rather not think about, hear about or talk about these problems. They are too big."

The reality of these unjust situations is hard to digest and comprehend. Coming face to face with the victims of these injustices — a homeless man, a hungry child or a welfare recipient — is difficult. It would be easier to turn away or to blame. Finding ourselves in these positions and trying to maintain our self-esteem in the midst of a constant struggle for survival cre-

ates anger, depression, loneliness and despair. Really believing that these conditions can be transformed requires a depth of faith usually missing in our day-to-day spirituality.

How, then, can we approach this theme? I believe there are two things required of us as we look at theme six: courage and faith. We need individual and communal courage to look squarely at these injustices. We need courage to let ourselves feel the pain that they inflict, to ask questions about their root causes, to admit the part we may play in their continued existence, and to commit ourselves to the action required to change the reality.

Equally important, we need faith to believe that these injustices can be transformed, and that they are susceptible to God's redeeming action.

What a wonderful gift this young man was in reminding us that prayer is powerful, that actively establishing right relationships is an act of love, and that we should never presume that there is a limit to the potential for God to convert us and our world. Doing the transforming work of justice is not too big for God and ourselves if we work together.

Sister Wagner is peace and justice coordinator for the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester.

Don't turn away from difficult people

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

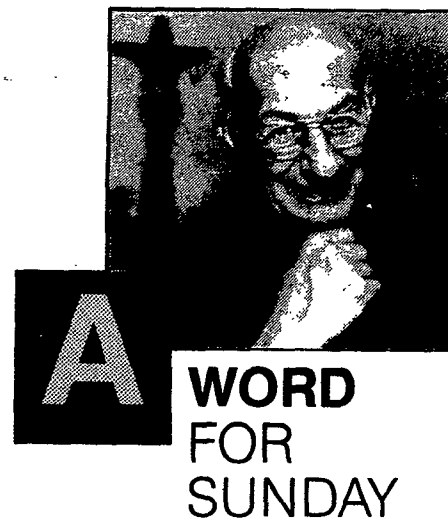
Sunday's Readings: (R3) John 4:5-42; (R1) Exodus 17:3-7; (R2) Romans 5:1-2, 5-8.

Water is the theme of Sunday's readings. Moses had led God's people out of Egypt. During the journey they ran out of water, so they grumbled against Moses. If ever there were a difficult people, it was the ones Moses led out of Egypt. They were always grumbling after all God and Moses had done for them.

Imagine, Egypt being plagued by God for their sakes, their being freed from slavery, the Egyptian's firstborn and their whole army being destroyed so that they would be totally free. And still, they grumbled. In fact they grumbled so much that the book of the Bible that tells of their 40 years in the desert — the Book of Numbers — is also called the Book of Murmurings.

Again and again they grumbled against Moses. They even threatened to stone him. When God in anger wanted to wipe them out and build up a new nation for Moses to lead, Moses begged God not to do this.

Sirach said that Moses was the meekest of all men who ever walked



the Earth. His response to these difficult people was to pray for them. And God heard his prayers so often that Moses described God as merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and rich and kind in fidelity.

What a lesson for us. How do we cope with difficult people? Husbands with wives, wives with husbands, parents with children, children with parents? Francis de Sales wrote that a drop of honey gets more flies than a barrel of vinegar. He was known as

the gentle saint.

One of de Sales' greatest admirers was St. John Bosco, founder of the Salesian Order, so called because it was based on de Sales' teachings.

Don Bosco founded the first Boys-town in Turin, Italy. He reclaimed thousands of wild and unruly boys by one rule: kindness. Bosco had a dream when he was 9 years old. When he saw a gang of rowdies cursing and swearing, he envisioned himself trying to correct them by fighting with them. Our Lord appeared and said to Bosco: "Not with blows will you help these boys, but with goodness and kindness."

Hence Bosco founded an educational system called "the preventive system," that is, a system of education that would prevent boys from becoming bad through reason and religion, understanding and prayer.

As the mirror reflects the image before it, so love begets love.

Jesus taught the same lesson in the Gospel. He was a people's man. He put people before anything else, even rules and regulations. He met a Samaritan. Jews weren't supposed to talk to Samaritans, but Jesus did. The Samaritan was a woman. Rabbis weren't supposed to talk to women in

public, but Jesus did. He went even further when He asked her for a drink. Even she wondered, "You, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan?"

Jesus thirsted for her soul and offered her more than she could give him — living water. She begged for it. To her living water meant fresh, running water as against stagnant water. Jesus meant by living water the Holy Spirit whom He would pour out upon souls washed in the waters of baptism. Her wayward life prevented her from receiving it. So Jesus told her to call her husband in order to put her moral life in order. She no doubt did, for even now she received faith: first she called him Jew, then Sir, then Prophet, then Messiah.

Many times we try to solve difficult people's problems by getting rid of them or avoiding them.

When people became difficult in the desert, God gave them what they needed — a drink.

When the Samaritan woman got fresh, Jesus got kinder and won her.

People — especially difficult people — need love, patience, kindness and understanding. "If today you hear His voice, harden not your hearts" against people, your brothers and sisters. And you will win them to God.

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