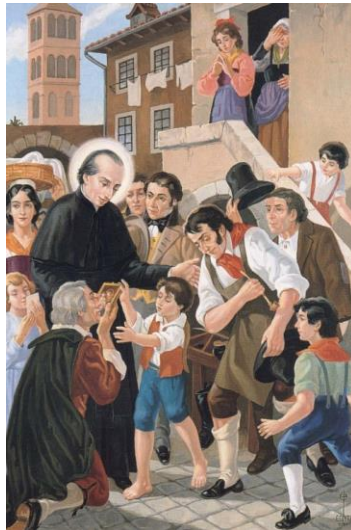




SIEBENQUELL

Carve your name on hearts, not tombstones



PALLOTTINE FATHERS AND BROTHERS: MOTHER OF GOD PROVINCE MILWAUKEE, WI

When the feast of our Founder, St. Vincent Pallotti takes place on January 22, I always have two reactions. The first is joy that we have an opportunity to call to mind the man in whom God gave us the birthplace of our charism. The second is sadness, because we do not speak well of the Founder.

Before you panic and think I am accusing people of speaking poorly or ill of Vincent Pallotti, I wish to clarify that remark. I do not know even one person in the Pallottine family who speaks derogatively or pejoratively about our Founder. But that does not mean that we speak well of him, because we seldom tell stories about him. We read his writings and letters, analyse his thought and quote his ideas, but we do not tell the stories of his life. Therefore, the attractive quality of his life is sorely neglected, that entire way of living and loving that drew people to him. Delving into his words and thought has often touched us, but the encounter with the man himself, the speaker and the thinker and the bearer of these words and thoughts has more power to move us than we have been willing to tap. If we know the stories about Vincent Pallotti we can ask a different question than the one that accompanies the study of his words. There we ask: Do you understand this? But the stories of the man raise a different question: Do we know his experience, and, if so, where and with whom? When we encounter the streets and alleys he walked, the people and their struggles he encountered and the times and places of his life, we can ask

ourselves a new question. Do we know where these streets and alleys are to be found in our time? Are we encountering these people, in this manner, and in our time? Are we opening these times and places up so that they can become for us, in our time, privileged places for the encounter with and the experience of God?

Let me give you one example. When Vincent Pallotti was appointed the rector of the church Spirito Santo dei Napolitani, he undertook a difficult and painful task. The parish church had a poor reputation. It was frequented by the poorer people of the populace and would be considered lower class by many. The building itself was in a state of dreadful disrepair, even being referred to as a »dirty cave«. But far more telling was the pastoral and spiritual neglect of the people. For the most part the church doors were locked and people had few opportunities to celebrate the sacraments and hear the word of God, let alone have a personal pastoral encounter with the clergy of the parish. Moreover, the clergy kept their distance from the very people who were entrusted to their care. They were not to be found walking their streets, entering their homes, visiting their sick and speaking to them about their daily lives in the very midst of those lives.

When Pallotti arrived to take over the parish, the place became a magnet to the people. He thoroughly cleaned the building and made it an attractive and inviting place to celebrate the encounter with the living God. And he filled the place with words and the opportunity for encounter. He preached every opportunity he had, filling with the church with people hungry for the word that is life. He heard confessions there for hours on end, making the church a place where people could bring their burdens and know someone was present and willing to listen, guide, console and accompany them. Faced with considerable clerical envy by the other priests, Pallotti did not allow a clerical mindset to become more important than the service to the people of God. He knew their streets, because he walked them. He knew the people, because he talked to them about the most pressing issues to their lives. He knew their homes, because he entered their dwelling places, touched their sick and wounded, assuaged their worries and dwelt in their midst.

I love this story, which is considerably richer and exceedingly more dramatic than the abbreviated version I have recounted for you. I also find it to be a story of deep and abiding relevance to us in the Church of our day. Do we not know this story today? During the months of the pandemic I have watched that story play itself out in many ways. I have witnessed parishes that simply shut their doors and closed everything up for months on end, leaving their people with no access to the building or any form of pastoral care. Even when I tried to hold a funeral for a man whose family could reach no one at their parish for 10 days, I received no answer to my phone calls, emails and messages left on the answering machine. And I watched the parish dwindle away, the people dispirited and repulsed by the locked doors and unavailability of their pastor.

When people came to me to lament this sorry situation; I told them this story about Vincent Pallotti. Then I told them, that he also taught the people that they were just as qualified and capable and called as he was to live the Gospel in this manner. I witnessed so much creativity where people simply did what they could to help. Groceries were bought and delivered for neighbours isolated by the pandemic. Entire groups of lay people wrote letters and reflections for people without spiritual sustenance. They filled the empty spaces created by Corona with words and found ways of encounter, be it through open windows to the courtyard of a nursing home, or via Zoom and telephone calls and all the opportunities of virtual presence. They walked the streets, touched the lives, and knew the stories of the people.

Pope Francis likes to say that the shepherds should have the smell of the sheep about them. When people ask me what that means concretely, I tell them the story of my founder and his parish of Spirito Santo dei Napolitani. It is my way of speaking well of him. Or, as Shannon Alder so eloquently suggests: »Carve your name on hearts, not tombstones. A legacy is etched into the minds of others and the stories they share about you.«

Erik Riechers SAC

Vallendar, January 20th, 2022