



The Right to Dignity

The 4 October is the feast of St Francis. It is also world day for the poor. **Sr Stanislaus Kennedy** is a well-known advocate for the homeless and is a founder of Focus Ireland.

I have worked for over sixty years with the poor and vulnerable, especially those who are homeless. My experience of poor people in the homeless community in Ireland goes back to 1983, when I began researching the nature and extent of homelessness amongst women in Dublin. That piece of research developed into a major project. I had begun by wanting to gather information on homeless women, but I soon found that I wanted to know them better and to understand their lives.

I gathered a group of eight young homeless women, and, for a year, we worked together daily. We cooked and shared meals, birthday celebrations, stories, sorrows and laughs. Everyone got to know each other well, getting to understand and love each other, and just wasting time together, the way friends do.

The women I worked with over that year described in great detail their life of homelessness and what it was like for them not to be able to go home: how awful it was not to have

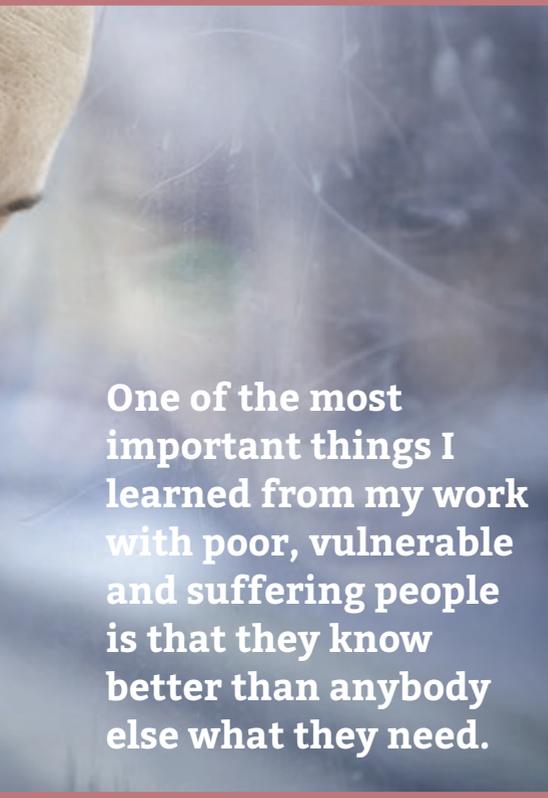


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an address, not to have a place where they could leave their things, a place to wash, to change their clothes, how awful it was not being able to shut the door behind them and have privacy.

What was even more awful was the lack of respect. They described vividly how people's faces would change when they heard the word 'homeless'. They described how hurt they felt when people looked down on them, and how rejected and dejected they felt, and how their whole sense of themselves was eroded day by day as they were treated without respect.

They did get help when they looked



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for it: clothes, food, money. They always felt, however, that what they got was second-hand, second-rate, the leftovers, what was not good enough for other people. So even as they were being helped they felt disrespected. This cry for respect, this need to be treated decently and for good and equitable relationships with other people, touched me and opened my heart. I began to discover how poor people feel they are a burden on society and a disappointment to their families, how sensitive their hearts are and how capable they are of warmth and tenderness. They are

waiting for someone who is willing to know the pain of becoming vulnerable enough to love, someone who will meet them where they are.

One of the most important things I learned from my work with poor, vulnerable and suffering people is that they know better than anybody else what they need. They are absolutely clear about this, and they can teach us what it is that they need.

It was through listening to poor people that I came to realise that anyone providing services for them needs to ensure that what we provide is of good quality and a high standard.

It is only poor people themselves who know from experience how offensive it is to be given a poor service just because they are poor, to be given broken goods because they are broken, to be given worn clothes because they are weak and worn out. From listening to poor people, I realised that for those of us who work to provide services to poor people, what we are called upon to provide is a quality service delivered with respect, so that the people using it can receive it with dignity.

Another lesson I learned was the importance of listening, and listening deeply. Deep listening is deeply empowering. It leads to wonder, and wonder is about waking up amazed. Deep listening to suffering people dissolves the distance between ourselves and others; the boundaries created by the mind simply blur and dissipate. When we listen to poor people as they articulate their needs, we hear their strength, their pain, their

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wisdom, and we learn of the potential there is for change. Listening to the poor makes us become more human, and it frees us from the need to be strong and capable, better than others, taken up with our desire for power and locked into our prejudices. That is the gift of the poor and vulnerable to us: they teach us how to loosen ourselves from our desires and to love with wisdom.

Poor and vulnerable people are loudspeakers who shout out to us our fears and insecurities, our need to protect our comfort zones and our greed. They are the voice of God, being revealed to us. They call us to change and to discover new parts of ourselves, but because we are afraid, we shut ourselves off from their voices, their truth and their wisdom, rushing from one thing to another, frightened of poor and fragile people who invite us to experience new tenderness, new trust, a new communion.

I have found that the relationship into which the poor and vulnerable call us is not sentimentality; rather it is

a call to deep trust, a mutual recognition of each other.

As a Christian I believe that at the core of our being, there is a hidden beauty, a hidden light, and a still small inner voice. It is out of that hidden inner beauty that we reach out to the other, from our heart to their heart.

From poor people I learned that everyone, even the most rejected of people, knows innately that they have within them

this beauty in the deepest part of their being. The women who described how being treated with a lack of respect eroded their sense of dignity knew that they had a right to dignity. They know that this is their right, they know it in their

heart, in their bones. I recognise that right as being based in their humanity and in what I call that hidden beauty within them. That beauty, which is of God, is in every one of us.

These insights became the cornerstone of the organisation that we named Focus Point, later Focus Ireland. ❤️

