

Brother Louis and authentic holiness

Tom Roberts | Jun. 8, 2010 NCR Today

It wasn't long after my wife and I moved to Kansas City, Mo., 16 years ago that we met Brother Louis Rodemann. He is a short man, lean and wiry with enormous hands and ready smile. He has the strength of someone who for decades has carried cases of No. 10 cans of everything from the parking lot to the basement and back to the first floor.

He has lived for decades where most of us rarely visit. "The poor" is not an abstraction to him; he is one of those for whom biblical reality is not some proof-texting exercise or a trip into layers of interpretation.

The reality for him ([Josh McElwee writes about him here](#)) [1] has been a call to unrelenting service to some of the most marginalized in our culture. He's taking a well-deserved sabbatical.

One summer I regularly spent evenings helping out with the crowd that arrives for dinner most nights at the Holy Family Catholic Worker House (shortened by most guests when they refer to it as "the Holy House," a not inaccurate description). Even that brief exposure stripped me of any romantic notion of poverty and the poor.

Poverty in America is awful. It is a degrading, grinding slog, filled with despair and addiction. Its horror are increased immeasurably when it includes children. Redemption stories are rare. I came to know two men that year. They were each my age. They looked ancient, ravaged by alcoholism and lousy food and living intermittently on the streets. Within a year both were dead.

Louis was their brother. Advocated for them to get apartments; separated them in their feuds; kept their bank accounts; oversaw much of their lives; watched them sink deeper and deeper into their addictions and neuroses; and found ways to love them. They were just two that I knew something about of the hundreds upon hundreds over decades.

One night while I stood in the serving line, a man junked up on something started raving and threatening the peace and orderliness of dinner time at Holy House. Everyone froze, no one knew what to do. There was a rule, you see, that anyone who was openly drunk or abusing at dinner time had to stay outside and receive food through the back door. This guy had obviously made it through Holy House's thin security. The ranting continued. There were kids and women and all of a sudden a lot of uncertainty. It was a circumstance where you find yourself not knowing what might happen next but sensing that what's next will hold nothing good. Louis showed up. He put his arm around the man and asked the most disarming question. Looking straight in his eyes, he asked the man: "What's your name?"

And the man told him as Louis gently but firmly guided him toward the back door, promising him food if he'd just sit out here.

As surely as he guided that man and managed the house for so long, Brother Louis can also connect the dots outside the dimensions of Holy House, the dots that tie greed, extreme individualism, isolation, violence and the cultural choices that feed militarism and starve the common good to the world he's known for so long. He

knows better than most the cost of such choices. For years he's walked with the people who have paid the heaviest price.

Holiness has many faces. I've always thought Brother Louis showed one of its most authentic.

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