

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

January 3, 2012 at 9:54am

I was blind, then I saw

by Alice Camille

Soul Seeing

I saw him from a block away. He perched precariously in a motorized chair, his body slight like a child's, hardly weighing 50 pounds in his maturity. I counted three serpentine bends in the arm that reached out to guide his odyssey, and my heart sank at the writhing distress that was this man's whole existence. His limbs twisted like a contortionist's. Even his face was beyond his control, gripped by grimaces many times a minute.

I wondered what it would be like not to be able to smile.

Religion primes us to contemplate exalted ideas like the Incarnation. In the books, Incarnation makes the things of eternity present and tangible. But on the street, Incarnation is rarely so kind. It seldom includes divine infants pitched softly into a bed of straw or heavenly hosts crooning sweet Glorias. There may have been one holy night when stars were brightly shining; there are uncounted unholy ones, where the darkness is doubly dark. Incarnation, as we learn to live with it, too often looks more like this: solitary suffering on a street devoid of angel song.

Perhaps this is why, much of the time, making eternity tangible is the least of our concerns. We may even prefer the reverse phenomenon: to make the tactile world considerably less concrete. It's hard to see past the walls of our isolating realities. And when that reality is painful, life is a prison. The physical routinely prejudices, intimidates or defeats us before we say hello. Yet we follow a guide who saw past 'tax collector' and 'prostitute' to the man and woman struggling behind these masks. Even male and female isn't supposed to matter anymore -- or insider, outsider, free or in chains. Liberation begins in the eyes, if those old stories mean anything. Genuine sight is something we can't do without. Yet it's also something we're blind to -- until someone, with great affection, smears mud on our eyes.

Standing there on the street that day, I was resolved *not* to see. The thought of meeting this man was an affliction. Such complete suffering was intolerable to witness. I didn't want to risk even the casual encounter of passing him on the sidewalk. I decided to cross to the other side of the street, which would have been simple enough to do. It would have seemed innocent. More than that, it would preserve my innocence from contact with a stranger's misery. I wouldn't risk meeting his eyes, or sharing even for an instant his reality. I did not want to know more about such anguish than was visible from a distance.

Moral cowardice isn't something we like to admit about ourselves. So, as the impulse to avoid this man engulfed me, I wrestled with it. He wasn't asking for anything. All we owe to each other in this world is the recognition of our common humanity. Passing a man on the street would take but a moment. Could I not give a fellow human being one instant of respect?

My heart trembling, I walked forward. And as this stranger and I entered that delicate zone of closeness where people acknowledge each other, I looked into his eyes and managed a small greeting, a timid smile. It was then that the kingdom of God broke through. This stranger, with his labored movements, attempted a smile out of one corner of his mouth. A crooked little half grin zigzagged across his face like a dancing sun peeping out from behind a cloud. The warmth, joy and delight spreading across his features transfigured him before my eyes. Or perhaps I changed. Suddenly I recognized his humor, his twinkling eyes and his excruciating beauty as a fellow traveler in the world. Light poured out from him and over me and into the street until it covered the whole scene like a radiant blanket. It took no more than an instant, a quick smile and a greeting, but as he passed by and the sound of his motorized chair buzzed further down the street, I broke into tears. I nearly knelt on the sidewalk. *O my God, it was Jesus* -- and I almost missed him.

[Alice Camille is the author of *Listening to God's Word* and other titles available at www.alicecamille.com.]

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