

### **Beggars, Neighbours and Changing the World**

My various involvements have found me travelling a number of times this year, and I have just returned from a visit to Italy, co-leading a Pilgrimage group to particular sites in Northern Italy and Rome. I enjoy these opportunities to travel, but it also brings its challenges. For me, one of the challenges is to be open to different ways of being and doing and the questions this raises in the face of personal assumptions and expectations.

We don't often see beggars sitting on street corners or in the entrances to churches here in Australia. In Italy, however, they are a fairly common sight. Perhaps there are fewer these days than in the past, but the encounter with people begging is frequent enough to raise concerns which niggle away in the back of the mind and cause a degree of discomfort.

For our group of pilgrims, the most significant of these experiences happened in a small town just outside Rome towards the end of our trip. We had gone in different directions to some of the little pizzerias and bars out of the main square to find some lunch. And then we had wandered the interesting lanes and alleyways of this old town. And yet, as we returned to the bus, we each had a story of an encounter with one particular man. He wasn't an old, bedraggled person sitting in a doorway, looking helpless and hopeless with a tin dish in front of him and his hand out, hoping for whatever coins passers-by might deign to toss towards him. No, this person was cleanly dressed, articulate, spoke good English, and actively engaged in trying to find a bit of cash. He had armfuls of socks and underwear, and he approached the tourist with a confident sales pitch.

What unsettled each of us was his response when we refused to buy his goods. For him there was no meek turning away and moving on, respectfully, from yet another politely disinterested customer. I offered my usual "No thanks, sorry." He went on to ask how I could possibly say I was sorry when I offered him nothing. I had money because I was eating my lunch. So I was not at all sorry about his situation! He needed food, and I had food. If I was at all "sorry" for him, I would be helping him. I had money, I had good health and good food, and he didn't have any of these things. I wasn't sorry about that, so why lie and say I was!

Others who thanked him as they also refused to purchase his goods received a similar response. What were they thanking him for? Why should they thank him when they had done nothing for him, or he for them. They weren't grateful at all. If they were, they would share a little of what they had with him.

His response was disarming. It was easier to close our eyes and hearts to the beggars who diffidently opened the church doors in the hope of being given a few coins, than it was to ignore this young man with his 'in-your-face' approach. I was tempted to offer to share my lunch with him. In the end I cleared the coins out of my purse and gave him those, with my best wishes for the rest of his day. Perhaps I was taken down; perhaps he turned the corner laughing at me. Perhaps my coins were added to his bulging money box in his reasonably comfortable home. But the haunted look in his eyes and the desperate tone of his voice were enough to convince me that he was genuine in his quest for survival in a country in which he was obviously seeking refuge.

As we travelled back to Rome in our comfortable, air-conditioned coach, we had lots of conversation about this young man, his situation, and his unorthodox methods. This was evidence enough that he had disturbed our thinking. My encounter with him raised yet again some of those unanswerable questions we must continue to ponder - How do we best deal with inequity? What is the most effective way of sharing our resources?

What is the responsibility of governments for those to whom they offer refuge? How can poverty and homelessness continue to exist in affluent societies? Who is my neighbour?

My few Euros that day, and those of my friends did not change that man's life so much, and they certainly didn't change the world. But he certainly got us talking about things that matter. Perhaps he was more of a neighbour to us that day, than we were to him!