Voices of Sisters
Horizons
Ministry
Spirituality



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One of the first lessons of ministry is the importance of presence. If we are to be engaged with others, to win hearts and souls, and to find God in it all, we need to be actively present to the people in front of us. Our job is to hear their stories, offer respite to the weary, make space to breathe, and provide companionship, if only but for a moment, to those to whom we minister. In so doing, we walk together, share life and ultimately reveal love.

Such a prospect seems simple, right? Yet when we probe more deeply into the practice of ministry of presence, we discover that what seems to be simple is, in reality, rather complex.

This is a lesson, however, we only learn in living.

As a college freshman, I thought I knew what ministry of presence was. That is, I thought I knew until I encountered a call to presence far more complex that I ever could have imagined.

A group of classmates and I had been sent to serve the Tuesday morning meal at a local soup kitchen. We were instructed to be fully present to the people we met there. "Listen to their stories," our guide told us, "Give the gift of your presence."

Upon arrival, my friends all garnered jobs on the front line, distributing a warm meal to those who came in off the streets. Meanwhile, I found myself relegated to a side room. My only companions were an industrial dishwasher and a small window that diners could pass their dirty dishes through for me to clean. Listening to the sounds of the dining room, I waited for people to finish their breakfast and come into sight.

Soon hands began to poke through the window, but no one stayed long enough for me to really be present to them. As dishes piled up, I forgot about the instruction to be present and instead got down to the work at hand. As I worked my way through the stacks of dishes before me, I noticed someone standing at the window. The man dressed in a dark blue flannel handed his coffee cup to me.

"Thank you," he uttered.

"Oh, you're welcome," I replied, turning to put the cup into the dishwasher rack I'd been filling. Spraying the dishes down, I turned back to see him still standing there.

"Thank you," he said, looking intently at me. His eyes, a rich chestnut color, seemed to peer deep into my soul. "Thank you," he repeated with a gentle nod of his head.

I nodded my head in return. "Thank you."

For a few still moments, we silently looked at one another, before he nodded again and walked back to the busy dining room. Staring at the now empty window, I wondered what exactly had just happened.

On the car ride home, my companions shared the stories they had gathered while serving. Each one of them buzzing with the energy of encounter. I, meanwhile, sat silently in the back seat. When asked what stories I had gathered, I sheepishly stammered that I hadn't gathered any. I had seen and been seen.

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The conversation quickly turned to other things, but I remained in that space, both comfortable and uncomfortable. The look. The nod. The knowing. All Presence.

From time to time, that moment returns to me in my memory. It is a reminder that whatever I think presence might look like, there is always more to learn.

This realization is itself a lesson. A ministry of presence makes space for the other, giving them the space to be heard, to be seen, and to be loved. In that space we discover what unites us and, if we are lucky, we encounter God in the person in front of us and the act of being present. Our hope is that it does the same for the other people involved, too.

The temptation of a ministry of presence is to make it about us. If we aren't careful, it can easily devolve into a self-serving ministry; we can selfishly serve to enrich ourselves, treating presence as an avenue to self-congratulations and achievement rather than humility and openness.

Yet to truly be present is to find Divine Presence in the presence we offer and receive. As such, we recognize that a ministry of presence is, in fact, a ministry of learning. We learn that we can make space but can't force grace. We discover that curiosity is best used in the service of seeking the One who seeks us. And we realize that gratitude is the greatest response to all that Presence offers us.

If we approach our encounters with others with these grounding values — humility, openness, curiosity and gratitude — we create a space where no matter what happens we have the potential to receive it, to be taught by it, to expand our vision, and to grow in the process.

This, of course, requires us to let go of set outcomes, expectations and desires. When we meet disappointment or frustration in our encounters, it would do us well to honestly ask if we were holding too tightly to one of these factors, limiting our freedom and constricting our ability to truly be present.

Practicing such presence is a lifelong process. While we might become better at offering a ministry of presence, it is a ministry constantly developing, showing us new facets of the Divine and ourselves in relationship. Called to be students of life, we have the opportunity to learn and to grow in moments of presence expected and unexpected. In those moments, no lesson is too big, no encounter too small. For this, we should be grateful.

Years later, I still recall that moment standing face-to-face with the man with the chestnut eyes at the soup kitchen. That encounter surely wasn't what I expected my ministry of presence to look like that day. So often that is the case. We are surprised. God works wonders. Our call is to recognize those wonders and embrace them. And sometimes embracing them looks just like a look, a nod and a thank you.