Voices of Sisters
Spirituality

Mercy Sr. Eileen Sizer with some of the people who teach her to pray (Courtesy of Eileen Sizer)

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Prayer has been built into my life for as long as I can remember. Most recently, through my ministry with women and men who experience homelessness, I have learned more than I could ever imagine.

As a child, my parents taught us to kneel beside our beds to say our night prayers. We prayed to be safe and we blessed all our loved ones. Similarly, when we gathered for meals, we marked this special time with prayer.

When staying overnight with my Granny, we knelt in the evening to pray the rosary. Because I so loved being with her, I didn't mind the length of time, and later in my life realized how her faith influenced mine.

Attending Catholic school, we started and ended the day with prayer and often blessed the hour. Of course, Mass and processions and Stations of the Cross were part of our religious formation and shaped our spiritual imaginations.

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Becoming a Sister of Mercy provided me with wonderful role models and opportunities for learning. Formation classes, retreats, theological reflections and spiritual direction increased my thirst for prayer.

And then I met the homeless community. The quality of their prayer has drenched my spirit. Most recently, I coordinated a program and was joined by men and women who have experienced so many life challenges — including poverty, mental illness, substance abuse, incarceration, homelessness and other issues.

We gather for several hours each day with the intention of forming a welcoming space. The spirit is contagious. Ideas are discussed and opinions are shared. No one is made to feel unimportant. Each person is valued and celebrated. Tears are sometimes shed, music is heard and joy abounds. Individuals set goals, support is given and growth is evident.

The end result: Meaningful relationships are born and a caring community is formed. At the suggestion of the members, we begin our discussion time with a prayer. These men and women come before God and before all of us in the circle, with

complete sincerity, trust, honesty and — most of all — gratitude.

"God, thank you for waking me up this morning!" In the beginning I thought it was just a rote statement because so many folks say it, but I learned it's not. And they don't just say it, they pray it! If I had slept on the street the previous night, I might pray, "God, why didn't you take me during the night?!" But now I know that these wonderful people still have so much to teach us about hope.

I think of Bill, who stands right up when it's his turn to pray. Hands clasped before him and eyes cast down. "Good morning, God. Good morning, Sir." He prays with deep respect. He then begs God's blessing on all the people and situations in the world that are important to him, from those living on the street to the police commissioner to the children of the world. It's quite a litany.

I cherish my memory of young Jerome. His deformed little body makes it difficult for him to walk, but he drags his feet to the middle of the circle and struggles to kneel on the hard floor with his head bowed. He has spent many nights in the tunnels of the subway system. I can barely listen to his words, as I am so overwhelmed and brought to tears by the image before me. I sense the awe and reverence of everyone present.

I recall Randy. Without fail, he enters the room and immediately begins writing his thoughts. His prayer is always in the form of a poem. One he calls "If We Look at Another Like Family, Together We'll Grow":

As soon as we see Sister Eileen's face, we should feel at home.

Forget the sins of the past; opinions of others; no excuses for where our minds seem to roam.

Today is a great day if you were awakened by God … we have work to do!

If we mentally get out of our own way, we'll eventually see You (God)!

When we enter this room, the joy of unconditional love should show

So, if we look at another like family, we'll begin to grow!

I think back to Chuck. He shared with me part of his life story, which was shattered when his partner, John, died from AIDS. His depression kept him isolated for a very long time. He has not yet recovered from alcohol addiction and life on the streets, but he approaches God without any pretense as he prays, "Hello Louie, yeah it’s me again." And then he continues as honestly as if he were speaking to his friend, John.

My mind turns to Violet. Her speech is difficult to understand due to a brain injury caused by an accident. She invites those of us gathered to "clear all minds and hearts before we move into prayer." Yes: to realize we are in the presence of God. And who can deny that God is present within and among these amazing men and women?

There’s a tug at my heart as I think of elderly Miss Shirley. So soft spoken behind her mask, with multiple piercings in her ears and nose. One of the tattoos on her face is a rather large cross on her forehead. On the day of a member's funeral memorial, she calmly told us that she saw and spoke with the deceased that morning and he wanted us to know that he was at peace. Was this conversation the result of Miss Shirley's schizophrenia symptoms? I believe that those of us sitting there trusted Miss Shirley's message with all our hearts.

And our delightful 85-year-old blue's singer and guitarist, Mr. Joe! He belts out a spiritual with so much energy that it causes everyone to clap their hands and stomp their feet.

Oh, the inspiration and gifts before me! May my own prayer deepen having been in the presence of

Bill's inclusive heart

and Jerome's utter selflessness

and Randy's desire to grow

and Chuck's courageous honesty

and Violet's spirit filled awareness

and Miss Shirley's prophetic witness

and Mr. Joe's vibrant energy.

Joy and praise and gratitude abound when in the presence of these, my teachers of prayer! Amen!