

CONVERSATIO MORUM

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Thoughts for a Monday Morning

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BARNABAS AND THE BYSTANDER EFFECT

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PFI Vice President Soren Johnson contributes this week's Conversatio Morum

The age-old story never fails to haunt us.

In recent months, surveillance cameras have captured images of human suffering—and the indifference of passers by. A woman in a New York hospital waiting room falls to the floor and dies after being ignored by caretakers and fellow patients. Elsewhere, an elderly man hit by a car lies motionless in the middle of the road as traffic passes and pedestrians look from the sidewalk. All the while, the cameras witness what psychologists have called the “bystander effect.” And no Samaritan saves the day.

“If no one else is moving,” as one commentator explains the phenomenon, “individuals have a tendency to mimic the unmoving crowd.... Deep inside, we are herd animals, conformists... Most of us do the right thing only when others are doing the right things. Real heroes are the ones who break out of the group norm. The predominant cultural impulse is for people to transfer responsibility.”ⁱ

Prison ministry enables me to observe a particularly virulent strain of the “bystander effect.” Societies the world over share a well-documented ability to stand by as the ex-prisoner—some 700,000 in the United States alone will leave prison this year—knocks on the door of our communities, attempting to begin a new life. Their debt to society ostensibly paid, these men and women too often find no one to offer them credit, a job, to say nothing of forgiveness.

Encouraging examples to the contrary—of halfway houses, aftercare programs and churches which meet ex-inmates with open arms—exist, but staggering recidivism rates gauge, like barometers, our own widespread indifference and inability to forgive.

I recently stumbled across a man—almost hidden in the pages of scripture—whose life offers a compelling antidote to the bystander effect. He is Barnabas, or in the original Hebrew, “son of encouragement.” And like many who encourage others, Barnabas seemed content to work in the shadows.

In Acts we read that Paul, on fire with the power of his recent conversion on the road to Damascus, quickly met with threats against his life. He fled in the middle of the night and set off to meet with the apostles in Jerusalem. The “ex-offender” against the early Christians wanted to go to church.

“And when he had come to Jerusalem,” we read, “he attempted to join the disciples.”ⁱⁱ We can picture Paul—hungry, exhausted, standing at the door in the dark. His past chases him. We might think that the early church was inspired to open wide its doors to this “chosen instrument”ⁱⁱⁱ of God who was desperate for shelter and safety.

Instead we read, “[T]hey were all afraid of him, for they did not believe he was a disciple.”^{iv} Fear seized the community, eclipsing a moment of possible reconciliation. Peter and the other disciples likely peered from the upstairs window aghast. *Is that who I think it is?* The door remained locked.

Before we judge the disciples for their indifference, let us recall that the man at the door is, after all, Paul, the one who so recently “breathed threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.”^v Like the thousands of ex-offenders who will complete their prison term today, Paul had a record that was hard to shake. Our communities, like the early church, have a long memory for crime.

Into this gap steps Barnabas. “But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him...”^{vi} Barnabas stood with Paul, vouching for him within the church and the community. The rest is history.

If there had been no Barnabas, would there have been the great missionary Paul? Would Paul, despised by Jews and Christians, have survived on the streets of Jerusalem? Rejected by the church, would he have been tempted to dismiss his recent dreamlike conversion and become a recidivist—returning to the life he knew?

Impossible to say. But as we read Acts, we find that the future ministry of God’s “chosen instrument...to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel” hung for a moment in the quiet balance of one man’s heart.

But Barnabas took him. These four words might serve as a simple motto for our duty to step out of the crowd and physically *take* another into a new life of transformation and reconciliation. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, we read that the Samaritan likewise “put the man on his donkey” and “*took him* to an inn.”

“The Christian’s program,” Benedict XVI recently wrote, “the program of the Good Samaritan, the program of Jesus—is a ‘heart which sees.’ This heart sees where love is needed and acts accordingly.”^{vii}

Barnabas—and his contemporary collaborators—break the grip of the bystander effect because they have hearts which see. Will we see and act accordingly?

ⁱ DeNeen Brown, “The Impassive Bystander,” *The Washington Post*, July 16, 2008.

ⁱⁱ Acts 9:26

ⁱⁱⁱ Acts 8:15

^{iv} Acts 9:16

^v Acts 8:1

^{vi} Acts 9:27

^{vii} Benedict XVI, *God is Love* (2006), 31.

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