The Cup We Become

What Thirty Years of Accompaniment Has Taught Me

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When I was a young minister, my friend Lucy gave me a story about a man named David and a cup. In the story, David risks the acceptance of his community by opening his home and his life to a stranger whom others would rather keep at a distance. Only after the stranger has gone and the community begins to return does David take up the cup again. After all he had been through, he finally sees the words written around its rim:

"A stranger is just a friend you haven't met yet."

I liked the story then. I am not sure I understood it.

More than thirty years of ministry later, I think I am beginning to.
The relationships of my life have stretched me, challenged me, sometimes made me uncomfortable, and ultimately taught me to see differently.
People I might once have encountered as strangers became friends, companions, teachers—and, again and again, places where I encountered the Divine.

Perhaps that is what legacy means to me now: some things can only be understood after they have been lived.

Stay in the tension.

Don't decide too quickly who someone i**s.**

Much of my ministry has been spent walking with people whose lives and experiences were different from my own: immigrant communities, many undocumented; young adults negotiating more than one culture; LGBTQ+ Catholics; people who found themselves on the margins of the Church or society.

I learned that accompaniment sometimes means simply staying.

Stay when you don't understand. Stay when another person's experience challenges your assumptions. Stay when there is no easy answer. Stay at the table when it would be easier to walk away.

If we remain in relationship long enough, something can happen. Judgment can give way to curiosity, curiosity to understanding, and understanding to friendship.

Listen before deciding what someone needs.

Juan Miguel Alvarez, in America Magazine, asks an important question about ministry with young Hispanic Catholics: Are we providing answers to questions they aren't asking, or are we actually listening?

I wish I had understood earlier just how important that distinction is.

Tell me your story.

What is happening in your world?

What matters to you?

And then listen—not so that I can formulate my answer, but because another person's story may contain something I need to hear.

Sometimes the person I think I am accompanying is accompanying me.

Allow yourself to belong.

I grew up in rural Minnesota. Yet much of my ministry has unfolded among cultures and communities different from the one that formed me. People invited me into their homes. They fed me. They trusted me with their stories. I celebrated with their

families and grieved with them. Slowly, something happened that no pastoral program could manufacture:

They allowed me to belong to them.

We talk a great deal in the Church about welcoming others. We should. But accompaniment eventually asks something more difficult.

Am I willing not only to welcome you into my world, but to enter yours?

Am I willing to receive your hospitality, your wisdom, your story?

Am I willing to be changed?

Let the stranger fill your cup.

Years ago, when I was pastor at St. Agnes in Los Angeles, people experiencing homelessness regularly slept on the porch of the church. There were legitimate concerns about safety and cleanliness, as well as questions about what we should do.

But we stayed in relationship.

Gradually, “the homeless” became people with names. People with stories. People I knew. Some became friends. Some even began to watch over the parish and look out for us.

At first, I thought we were making room for them.

Looking back, I realize **they were making room for me.**

People whose cups appeared cracked or empty were filling mine.

That lesson has followed me throughout ministry. Never assume you know who the giver is and who the receiver is. The stranger may be carrying something you need. And if you remain long enough to receive it, you may discover the Divine in someone you once thought you were there to help.

Give people more than a chair. Give them a voice.

Alvarez describes young adults invited into ministry but then limited to setting up chairs, passing out materials, and occupying secondary roles instead of being trusted to envision and lead.

Belonging without agency is not enough.

My years of accompanying young adults have taught me that if I really believe the Spirit is alive in them, eventually I have to ask:

What do you see that I don't?

What is the Spirit saying to you?

Where do you think we need to go?

And then I have to be willing to hear the answer.

Sometimes accompaniment means saying, "**You lead. I'll walk with you**."

Receive the wisdom—and discern together.

Every generation receives something precious: Scripture, tradition, stories, spirituality, wisdom, wounds, failures, and dreams.

We don't honor that inheritance by locking it away. Neither do we honor the next generation by handing it to them and saying, *Here is what we built. Now preserve it*.

Alvarez describes young Latinos as *gente puente*—bridge people—living between cultures and generations, tradition and innovation, authority and synodality, theology and the demands of justice.

But my task is not to help them cross the bridge.

The relationship itself becomes the bridge.

I bring the stories and wisdom entrusted to me. They bring the stories and wisdom entrusted to them. Together we receive the tradition. Together we listen. And together we ask: *What does the Spirit want us to become?*

That, for me, has become one of the deepest expressions of Precious Blood spirituality: relationship that does not leave either person unchanged.

Be gentle with your own cracked cup.

Perhaps this is what I most wish I could tell my younger self.

I spent too much time wondering whether
I was adequate. Did I know enough? Was I good enough? Was I doing ministry correctly?

After all these years, I have learned something simpler:
Everything I am in the moment that I am walking with somebody is all God calls me to be in that moment.

That doesn't mean I stop learning or changing. It means I can stop waiting to become perfect before allowing God to use me. We are redeemed sinners accompanying redeemed sinners.

Sometimes my cup has been full. Sometimes empty. Sometimes cracked. And sometimes I have needed somebody else to fill it. That, too, is grace.

Pour out the cup.

I think again of Lucy and the story she gave me all those years ago:
"A stranger is just a friend you haven't met yet."

I couldn't have known then how many strangers would eventually become friends—or how profoundly those relationships would change the way I see.

My cup today contains the lives of so many people: wise women who taught me, brother priests who walked with me, immigrant families who welcomed me, young adults who trusted me, LGBTQ+ Catholics who shared their stories, people sleeping on church porches who became friends, and countless others who allowed me to belong to them.

They filled my cup.

And I hope I have poured something of myself into theirs.

Perhaps that is why the image of the cup has stayed with me throughout my life as a Missionary of the Precious Blood. A cup is not meant simply to be filled and preserved.

Jesus shows us another way.

Receive the cup.

Don't be afraid of its cracks.

Let others fill it.

And when the time comes, pour it out.

Maybe that is what legacy finally means to me. Not simply what I leave behind, but what I have learned to see: **the stranger becoming friend, the friend becoming companion, the companion becoming teacher—and, again and again, the Divine revealed in the person standing before me.**

Questions for Reflection:

- When have you been challenged to remain in relationship with someone whose experiences or perspectives differed from your own? How did that encounter change you?

- When has someone you expected to accompany or help become a source of wisdom, grace, or healing in your own life?

- What gifts have you received through your journey with Precious Blood spirituality, and how are you passing those gifts on to future generations?