



Life on the streets near the Fools Court in San Francisco's Tenderloin District.

Challenged and enraged by what we witness

Sister Carmen Barsody

I heard a voice say inside me, "I never want to wake up where this reality is not before me."

It was an early morning in Nicaragua when I awoke and looked out into the neighborhood in which we lived. My eyes fell on the barbed wire fences, on the houses made of tin or slabs of wood and those made of concrete blocks. I noticed the sounds of people who were beginning to start their day. I heard the rhythm of someone's hand making tortillas, and I could hear someone bathing, using a bowl to splash water from a plastic barrel they had filled a couple of nights ago when running water made one of its rare appearances. We were all accustomed to rationing water because we never knew when it would come again. As I stood looking out, I began thinking of the ones who were working hard in sweatshops and in the markets yet didn't have enough to eat. I found myself thinking of the many who were navigating the effects of trauma from years of war. I wondered what kept people getting up each day amidst so many struggles. As my eyes and heart took in the scene, I heard a voice say inside me, "I never want to wake up where this reality is not before me."

Fast forward 23 years and I awaken looking out the windows of the Fool's Court into the streets of the Tenderloin of San Francisco. I see tents zipped up as some people are still sleeping. I look across the street and see people laying on the sidewalk unprotected by a tent or blanket, while others lean against the building after being awake all night. There are street cleaners rolling their big plastic cans down the sidewalk helping to keep the neighborhood clean. A few people are wearing masks, but it takes a special effort to remember to do so. For most of our neighbors, the threat from this new virus is not much different than any of the other threats they and their parents and grandparents have lived with for decades.

Inside the Fools Court, Sam and I begin our day. We notice a bit of weariness in our own energy. We, like the folks on the streets, know that fundamentally things have not changed much since the beginning of the pandemic. We are more than eight weeks into "shelter in place" and there



Sister Carmen, Michelle, Sam and Jazmine receive a foodbank delivery from Merida Wilson, a Franciscan Associate and former Faithful Fools intern. Her service ensures people have food during this pandemic.

are still no garbage cans or bathrooms or potable water on our block, just like every other day of the year. No streets have been closed or lanes blocked off as have been done in other neighborhoods to provide space to get fresh air with appropriate social distancing. Here we navigate narrow sidewalks filled with tents and crowds of people.

Jazmine, a woman I have known for years, came to the door today to check in. She tells me she was just released from the hospital back to the streets. The city is paying for emergency hotel rooms, one of which she would be happy to have even for a short respite, but they are reserved for COVID-19 positive and at-risk individuals. Jasmine's health issues don't meet the criteria, so she is back on the streets. Last week nurses and social workers did a laydown

protest in front of the mayor's home. They are angry and heartbroken when they have to discharge people onto the streets, now or any time. For people who give their lives to be healers, sending people back to the streets is devastating.

It is heart wrenching and overwhelming to see the decades of social and racial inequalities being laid bare across the globe during this pandemic. It was an intentional choice for our Franciscan community to live in the marginalized barrios of Nicaragua, and it is an intentional choice of Faithful Fools to live in the Tenderloin District of San Francisco. As Jesus and Francis were challenged and enraged by what they witnessed, so are we enraged and challenged to speak and to act, wherever we find ourselves.