

Celebration of Hope 2019 – Deacon Richard Birkel comments on Resilience

An Enormous amount of Research during the past thirty years, perhaps because of a growing existential concern about the very survival of our species, has focused on "human resilience" - the rather remarkable fact that people overcome enormous adversity, trauma, injury and often come back stronger.

Human development scientists, genomic researchers, physicians, psychologists and social workers around the world have found that resilience is more the norm than the exception... It is BOTH so common AND so mysterious that researchers in the field have come up with a shorthand for their findings... **resilience, they say, is "ORDINARY MAGIC"**.

I would like to share three short reflections on resilience deriving from our shared work at Catholic Charities... consider this a report to the annual meeting of investors...

1) The first reflection begins in John's Gospel ... which presents Jesus the Christ as the "INCARNATE LOGOS".. the word made flesh, the BLUEPRINT for all of creation.

"In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God."

"And all things came to be through him and without him, nothing came to be"

So the template for who we are, and all of Creation ... is Christ... and the ultimate message -the most essential teaching and the foundation for all Christianity - is THE RESURRECTION - "the undoing of Death".

Rebirth and Renewal are in our DNA - resilience is the core foundational principle underlying of ALL CREATION.. we see the rebirth of nature at Spring time.. we see people recover and thrive when given help, WE SEE COMMUNITIES BOUNCE BACK FROM UNTHINKABLE TRAGEDY AND TRAUMA

So, I ask you - **what is Resilience if NOT Rebirth**... and what person OR ORGANIZATION is outside of the power of resilience and rebirth?

2) Second Reflection

I would like to dispel a common cultural stereotype ... Despite what popular culture celebrates, there ARE NO RUGGED INDIVIDUALS. Really - all people exist in a web of relations...so there are resilient couples , resilient families, communities, parishes, institutions. In which INDIVIDUALS can renew their lives.. begin again--- be reborn.

But outside of relationship.. people cease to thrive... they may even cease to exist.

Relationship is so important / fundamental to our Resilience that God gives us ten commandments about how to live.... and they are ALL ABOUT PRESERVING RELATIONSHIPS. PROHIBITIONS AGAINST STEALING, LYING, MURDER, ADULTERY - ALL VIOLATIONS OF RELATIONSHIPS.

The Commandments also instruct us to honor family relations, neighbor relations and most of all - our sacred relation with God...

How important are other people to our well-being... ?

Fr. Dan Groody a theologian from Notre Dame told us a story when he visited last Fall about his years of work with immigrants and migrants at the southern border. He asked what was the hardest part of their journey? One person responded:

"I crossed the desert of the American southwest and almost baked to death. I've crossed over mountains in the snow and almost froze to death; I've ridden in the baggage compartment of a bus and almost suffocated to death; I've gone days and sometimes weeks without food and occasional water, and nearly died, and ALL that was hard..."

But the hardest part about being a migrant is when people treat you like you are a dog. Like you are no one to anyone. Like you don't even belong here. That's the hardest part."

In our city and state we recognize painfully that there are people who are homeless who are treated like animals. There are people who are immigrants and refugees who we call ALIENS. There are people struggling with mental illness who feel like they are nobody; their life does not matter to anyone.

So - to conclude my second reflection... **I THINK IT IS FAIR TO SAY THAT LOVE IS WHAT ignites and FUELS RESILIENCE... AND THAT IS WHAT GOD INTENDED from the beginning-**

3) Finally, my *third reflection*....

IF ... 1) we and all creation are wired for resilience.... and 2) LOVE is what triggers resilience - the growth and adaptation of a PERSON OR A system... that is, ITS REBIRTH... then what does it say that we have intractable problems of homelessness, untreated mental illness and addictions in our midst?

If we cannot say (because it is not true) that "some people are beyond hope"... and we cannot say (because it is untrue) that "they choose to live that way"...

If we know in our heart that these things are NOT true... what would we do differently? Here I want to refer back to THE GOSPELS one last time. In three Gospels, Jesus tells a parable in which he explains to John's disciples.. that it is unwise and not productive to put new wine in old wineskins.... the new wine is bubbly and fizzy during fermentation and old wineskins are hard and inelastic and they will break and everything will be lost. What is needed is a new, flexible, supple container that can expand and take on new forms.

**So, If God wants to pour out his Spirit and address homelessness in our community - the very visible suffering of his people - WHAT IS NEEDED?
WE NEED TO PROVIDE HIM WITH NEW CONTAINERS**

When the Church in Oregon was confronted by the great depression in the 1930s - it set about building orphanages, schools for abandoned children, family support programs, work training, and foster care systems... some still exist today.

Today, I believe, we are called as a church to Shelter the Homeless. A new study issued yesterday reports that Oregon far exceeds the nation in percent of homeless. not just Portland.... Oregon

Although many of us and many others in this community are all working hard to address homelessness... .. it will get worse unless we try some new things and redouble our efforts. And so I am so proud to acknowledge / announce a new partnership between CATHOLIC CHARITIES, PROVIDENCE HEALTH SYSTEM (that includes both Providence Health and Services and Providence Health Plan) , AND THE ARCHDIOCES OF PORTLAND IN OREGON - and its 126 parishes that will build a new container for our shared efforts to address homelessness both now.. and in the future.

This initiative will in no way replace or conflict with other initiatives we are all engaged in .. along with government, foundation and business partners. Our aim is to augment those efforts... Many parishes throughout the Archdiocese are already doing wonderful ministry to address homelessness. Catholic charities works with more than 1000 homeless individuals and families every year and has a remarkable record of placing them successfully in permanent housing, Providence Health System serves everyone who comes in need - including many people who require health care, but have nowhere to be discharged to.

The **Healthy Housing Initiative** is designed to integrate, support and build on these efforts .. and increase our shared capacity to move unhoused people into permanent housing. And there is a role for everyone... and we invite all our partners - St Vincent DePaul, Knights of Columbus, High schools and colleges, our sister health care partners at Peace Health, Kaiser, Cambia, Care Oregon, etc.

The primary focus of Healthy Housing initiative is to find new, shared ways of providing affordable, supported housing... housing with services to strengthen the continuum of services for those who are unhoused... NOW, and those who will be unhoused in the future including a large number of seniors who are at increasing risk. It is our intent to work with any parish, any faith community, within the Archdiocese to find ways that we can work together to make sure that:

Homelessness in Oregon is RARE, BRIEF AND SOLVED QUICKLY WHEN IT HAPPENS.

Thank you and God Bless you.