

May 23, 2007

**Fr. David Kirk
RIP May 22, 2007**

In his 1998 Christmas letter Fr. David wrote,

“Phillip, living in the last stage of AIDS, knocked on my door. He came in and suddenly he had to vomit. I took him to the bathroom and held him while he vomited and I realized he just wanted to be held...Phillip had lived on the street since he was five; abused, exploited, and now dying...I took care of him personally, washing him, dressing him, and telling him of the great adventure with God up ahead. He slept at the foot of my bed on a little mattress. ‘I’m afraid I’ll die alone,’ he said. (He did die and we buried him like a King.)”

And last evening Fr. David Kirk founder of Emmaus House Harlem and a beloved Madonna House associate priest died alone in his sleep. But David often told me he was not afraid to die alone!

He had been in dire health for a long time due to kidney failure and other health complications so that by 2002 it was obvious that he could not live much longer. Mercifully the Lord came to him in his sleep and we do not need to fantasize that moment between them: “Come and inherit the kingdom, David...I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me to drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, sick and you visited me...I tell you solemnly, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers (and sisters) of mine, you did it to me.”

Of his own life David writes in a form letter which he sent to many of us back in the mid 90’s.

*“My conversion to Jesus Christ in the Church, 1953, came in the midst of violence and race riots at the University of Alabama...After my baptism and chrismation I studied Scriptures with Fr. (later Archbishop) Joseph Raya and...**Mt. 25 and Lk.4 struck me like lightning.** (all bold emphasis here are his.) ... I was lonely in Mobile for brothers who shared the same radical vision of the Gospel. I was about to accept a teaching job, get married and buy a car. But the gospel stuck like a grape in my throat. In one day I left my family, **I left everything** and caught a train to New York. I got off the train with \$10 in my pocket and there happened to be a Catholic Worker selling papers at the station. **He took me home to Dorothy.** There I served in the Bowery for 2 years while completing my MA in Social Thought at Columbia University.*

In 1960 I left Dorothy and the CW to study for the priesthood in Rome. Dorothy came to Rome and together we met Patriarch Maximos and

explained her work and the context of my future ministry. The Patriarch sponsored me for studies for the Patriarchal clergy for the United States of America with the condition that I work, not in a parish, but in a ministry for the poor. ('You are studying and you are being ordained a priest for the poor.')

In Jerusalem on the Feast of Transfiguration 1964 (also Hiroshima Day) I was ordained a priest for the poor at the Melkite Basilica of St. Ann. I chose this Feast because it stated how humanity could either be destroyed or transformed...My first liturgy was in the **Chapel of Christ Weeping Over The City** on the Mount of Olives, and a proper place to begin a diakonia to the poor, weeping by Harlem, the river.

In 1964 I served my pastoral year in Birmingham, Alabama with Fr. Raya's encouragement, while working on Martin Luther King Jr.'s team in Birmingham, Selma and Montgomery..."

And then, in 1965 Fr. David began the Emmaus House ministry in Harlem. The rest is history. (You might want to Google *Emmaus House* and see its vast world-wide mission!)

I first remember David in 1960 at *The Institute For Non-violence* at Notre Dame University in South Bend, Indiana when he was still a layman. And though I do not know exactly when he began to visit MH I remember him here in the late 70's. He became an associate in August of 1985. In his last letter to me he wrote, "I dream (daydream) of MH all the time and depend so much on the spirit of Catherine and the prayers of my brothers and sisters there." When he and I would talk by phone and I would ask him how he was, he often quoted me a line from one of Bob Dylan's songs, "Lone Ranger and Tonto comin' down the line, fixin' everybody's trouble, everybody 'cept mine. Guess I'm doin' fine." Over the years it surprised me to discover how vast David's sense of music, literature, poetry and drama was. And he was like a kid in a candy store if ever he got a chance to go to Madison Square Garden for "Bob Dylan Live" -- who, incidentally, often gave \$1000.00 checks to Emmaus House.

Yes, Fr. David Kirk was indeed a very special man. And it is fitting that his heroic life ended as it did there in Harlem among those whom he loved with all sorts of loose ends and unresolved things -- not the least of which was his overwhelming agony over the future of Emmaus House Harlem. But Fr. David was never unresolved or overwhelmed by his love and identification with the poor in Christ. It was his life!

"O Jesus, send someone to take his place there. Please!"

Fr. Pat McNulty