

“Here I Am, Lord”

The Story of Dining with Dignity

BY: CHRISTINE DIFATO



Photo Credit: Don Burk

One evening, Al and Olivia Deinhart were helping to serve a meal to the homeless in the historic district of St. Augustine, Florida. It was an outdoor event in a gazebo, with the Catholic Cathedral Basilica on one side and Trinity Episcopal Church on the other.

As they worked, another volunteer—an Episcopal bishop—turned to Al and said, “What’s wrong with this picture? People from my church are here every Sunday, but where is the Catholic community?”

The question touched something deep inside Al. That night, he did not sleep very well. As he tossed and turned, the well-known hymn “Here I Am, Lord” played in his mind. “God was talking to me,” Al realized. It was a call that he had begun sensing some years before.

“I Will Go, Lord.” Like many Floridians, the Deinharts had moved to the state in their retirement years. After raising six children and serving in their parish, community, and in the Cursillo movement, they fled the northern winters and were ready to relax and enjoy Florida’s beaches and beauties.

But Al soon became restless, so he took a part-time job delivering prescriptions for a local pharmacy. His route showed him another side of the Sunshine State. The contrast between the rich, touristy areas and the extremely poor ones struck the first chords in his heart.

Some time later, when their parish hosted a thirty-week program on Catholic social teaching, Al and Olivia signed up. Called “JustFaith,” the program explores themes such as the dignity of the human person, the impact of public policy on poverty, and global issues like war and human trafficking. Through reading, dialogue, and immersion experiences, participants are awakened to their neighbors’ needs and become motivated and equipped to respond.

Gradually, that’s what happened to Al. As he read the encyclicals, studied the assigned books, and watched the videos on poverty, immigration, and the death penalty, his old ideas were confronted. “I read, heard other people’s perspective, prayed about it, and my ideas changed.” So did his attitude toward the poor. “Not everyone has the same breaks I did,” he came to see.

United for Service. And so, when the Episcopal bishop asked his question, it pierced Al’s heart. Spurred into action, he got twelve other Catholics to serve the homeless one Sunday a month. Soon the group had more than doubled and was serving meals two evenings a month. As Al coordinated their efforts, what had been a somewhat haphazard and disorganized outreach became consistent, providing daily meals for all comers and involving many more volunteers. But Al was troubled by the fact that diners had to sit on the ground. This was undignified, even unsanitary— inconsistent with what the JustFaith course had shown him about the dignity of the person. Others agreed, and the group began setting up folding chairs and card tables for each meal. Local restaurants helped out, and various musicians volunteered to provide dinner music. The outreach soon became known as “Dining with Dignity.”

Today it provides up to a hundred people a full, balanced meal every evening. It’s a community effort, supported by donations of food and funds from individuals, organizations, grocery stores, and restaurants. Olivia oversees the logistics of the food preparation, putting in many hours of shopping, cooking, and scheduling. Since there is no electricity at the site, meals are prepared in homes and church kitchens and brought to the parking lot where the event now takes place.

It’s a labor-intensive effort, yet there is no lack of volunteers. Dining with Dignity has attracted the attention of many churches and organizations—so many, in fact, that some groups have been asked to serve less so as to give others a chance.

This growth is God’s doing, Al believes. And one sign of it, he says, is the fact that Dining with Dignity is “a truly ecumenical effort,” involving Episcopalians, Methodists, Presbyterians, and

Christians from community churches, as well as Catholics. “No one is saying, ‘My church is the true Church, and yours isn’t.’ We’re all called to serve our brothers, and this is what we’re doing.”

Big Needs, Big Dreams. Among the groups serving is River Oaks Community Church, where Paul Johnson is involved. Paul himself is homeless, as of about a year ago. Like many people hit by the economic downturn, he had a steady job in the northern United States but was suddenly let go when the company wanted to reduce costs. “Everything fell apart,” he said, “and then it started to get cold, so I decided to come to Florida.”

He described the great diversity within the community that Dining with Dignity serves. Some are “fully homeless,” living in the woods or wherever they can find some shelter. Others are on a fixed income and simply can’t afford to eat. Dining with Dignity doesn’t ask questions.

“Whoever shows up in that line, that’s who we serve,” says volunteer Nancy O’Byrne, who is the JustFaith coordinator for the Diocese of St. Augustine. She told of a mother of four children who often runs low on money toward the end of the month. They are not technically homeless—they have a roof over their heads—but they’re struggling. Others might have a car and some furniture but have lost their home in the recession. Regardless of their situation, all are welcome to come and eat.

Still, these men, women, and children need much more than a daily meal. For example, Paul explained, he knows of only one shower in St. Johns County that is available to the homeless community, “only one washing machine that we can use for a dollar.” Illness, alcoholism, and early death are harsh realities for many; they need counseling, consolation, and friendship, as well as material help.

Responding to these needs has become a passion for the Deinharts and other Dining with Dignity volunteers. Some donate clothing and personal care items; others make themselves available for counseling or for simply reading Scripture with anyone who is interested.

But more ambitious plans are underway. Now under the umbrella of Home Again St. Johns, a coalition of organizations assisting the homeless, Dining with Dignity is helping to develop a one-stop center that will provide dining and laundry facilities, medical treatment, employment help, and other services. Stressing the need for group collaboration, Home Again vice president Mike Davis works at “drawing people to see that we can do more together than individually.” If everyone checks their egos at the door, he says, “we have a chance of succeeding.”

Becoming Poor in Spirit. Working with the homeless has changed Al. It has made him increasingly open about his faith, he explained. When he meets people who are lonely or discouraged, he is bolder about sharing the meaning of the cross he always wears around his neck. He even looks different now that he wears his hair in a ponytail so as to fit in better with the homeless men he serves!

More fundamentally for both Al and Olivia, holding the homeless community in their heart has meant an increased commitment to prayer and a deepening relationship with the Lord. They have taken seriously the counsel of two priests with whom they shared about Dining with Dignity some time ago, while visiting family in New York state. “Pray specifically for this so that God takes charge of it,” said one—“He shows you what he wants you to do and takes you out of the picture.” Said the other: “You have to become poor in spirit and be like the people you serve.”

Since then, Al and Olivia have grown intent on seeing their service become “more God’s and less ours.” They set aside a half hour one morning a week to pray for the homeless and related issues. And all throughout the day—at home, in the car, or delivering prescriptions—Al has learned to talk with God to present needs, seek direction, and listen for inspiration. Then he watches to see where doors will open.

It’s exciting, he says. “God is awesome! He is really taking charge of this.”

A Calling from God. Even as they learn to let God take the lead, Al and Olivia can’t help hoping that more hearts will be opened to the needs of the poor and that Dining with Dignity will inspire similar initiatives in other cities. “This is not about us,” says Al. “It’s about a group of people working together, a call from God that we’re all answering in different ways.” As the Deinharts discovered, that call can come anytime—even when you’re ready to settle down for some leisure years after a busy life. It’s never too late to respond, and there is something for each of us to do.

Christine Difato lives in St. Augustine, Florida. Information on Dining with Dignity is at www.homeagainstjohns.org. For the JustFaith program, visit www.justfaith.org.