

Living, dying and redemption

By LODOVICO BALDUCCI

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"When they brought her here she was so malnourished that she could fit into two palms," the Rev. Aldo Trento says of the jolly 3-year-old with frosted blond hair and a halo of marmalade around her lips. She clings to the leg of the priest like a vine to a pole, determined to divert his attention from the other children roaming the floor. "She has AIDS, and we don't know how long she will live."

In another location, a middle-aged woman with hands fissured from



The Rev. Aldo Trento comforts Ramoncito, a leukemia patient brought to the mission after being refused hospital care because he couldn't pay for it. Photos by CRISTIAN CANTERINI

decades of manual work and two teenagers surround the wasted corpse of a man. "He had arrived the day before yesterday, from the prison where he was spending a lifetime for selling drugs. I sent the policeman away:

In the house of God, security forces are not needed," the priest explained. "AIDS had consumed his flesh to the point that he could not even talk. From his bedside I asked him: If you know that God loves you, raise a finger. He did, with tears in his eyes. Before dying he was able to reconcile with his wife and his two children that he had abandoned more than 10 years ago."

Aldo Trento comforts and cares for the forsaken at the mission he built around San Rafael Parish in Asuncion, the capital of Paraguay. The priest initially began sheltering homeless terminal patients whom hospitals were unable or unwilling to care for, but he has become the solution to all unsolvable social problems of Asuncion.

Battered women, street children, homeless old men without identities, victims of rape and abuse are delivered to his care. Sometimes he must interrupt services to come to the aid of someone desperately in need of help.

In six years, the operation has expanded from a small hospice house to six buildings, including an elementary school for 300 dispossessed children. Trento recently refurbished a farm as a summer house for adolescents.

How he could manage this growth is a puzzle to everyone, himself included. But he is comfortable with it.

"Only when you accept to belong to the mystery, you are able to find yourself and your freedom," he stresses. Mystery in Latin is *mysterium*, meaning a living experience that cannot be confined by words or thoughts.

Despite daily reminders of suffering and death, there are many indications of life here. There are altars in each house, and artistic creativity is encouraged. Walls are decorated with paintings by guests and volunteers, and reproductions of masterpieces serve as inspiration. Musical instruments, from simple strings to pianos and violins, are scattered throughout the compound.

The mission is situated in one of the more dilapidated barrios of Asuncion, with dead animals, putrid vegetables, used syringes, cigarette butts and excrement sullyng the street. In contrast, inside the mission, one smells fresh flowers, and floors and walls reflect the wholesome sunlight.

Life and love

As a young priest in northern Italy in the early '70s, Trento suffered bouts of severe depression. During one of these episodes he fell in love with a young widow, and his affection was earnestly reciprocated. But the contrast between this earthly affection and his priestly vows only augmented his confusion and sense of worthlessness.

"It is time for you to change life," said his spiritual director, the Rev. Luigi Giussani, who founded Communion and Liberation, a movement spread to more than 30 countries. "Join a friend of mine who is a priest in Asuncion."



Trento left the comfort of Belluno to discover his own mystery.

"My depression has represented the opportunity to find my mission, my uniqueness," he tells visitors eager to hear his journey through faith. He takes medications to control mood, but his life is full of meaning. Through the love of others he learned to love himself.

Volunteers from all over the world come to follow his steps, to overcome self-loathing through the love of others.

Three levels of redemption

Trento's experience can be summed up with a single word: redemption. The priest's work is based in three levels of redemption: personal, societal and ecclesiastic.

At the personal level, he was faced with a choice: to use his depression as a germ to contaminate others and console his shortcomings with their destruction or to use it as a venue to find love by delivering love.

At the societal level, his mission offers the opportunity to those in the so-called developed world to transform a wasteful lifestyle into a fruitful one. And lastly, Trento, a scholar of Jesuit history in South America, intends to help redeem the church that he loves from the more astounding sins of greed, cowardice and poor judgment.

Although redemption stems from Christian inspiration in Trento's case, other thinkers have identified redemption as the noblest goal of humanity, even in the absence of religious faith.

In his collection of essays, "Labyrinth of Solitude," Octavio Paz issues a hymn to redemption when he finds the greatness of humanity in making beautiful and lasting works of art.

Through the mouth of Dr. Roux in his masterpiece "The Plague," Albert Camus wonders whether it is possible to dedicate one's life to the service of others even when it is impossible to believe in a deity.

The aspiration to love oneself through the service of others transcends all creeds.

Lodovico Balducci is a professor of oncology and medicine at the University of South Florida's College of Medicine. He traveled to Paraguay as a visiting professor for a Latin American conference on internal medicine.