



23rd Annual Interfaith Thanksgiving Prayer Breakfast

Hotel Kabuki

Tuesday, November 21, 2023

Remarks by Michael G. Pappas, Executive Director

As the psalmist proclaimed, "HINE MA TOV... How good and pleasant it is for sisters and brothers to gather together in unity." My name is Michael Pappas and for the past 16 years I've had the privilege of serving as Executive Director of the San Francisco Interfaith Council... and in the spirit of the psalmists proclamation I want to welcome you to the 23rd Annual Interfaith Thanksgiving Prayer Breakfast, the first in-person gathering around these Thanksgiving tables since the outset of the COVID-19 Pandemic. This morning's coming together has, as its primary focus, honoring our founding mission, the 35th anniversary of the Interfaith Winter Shelter's service to our City.

To put this observance into context, I would submit that homelessness, in general, is neither a phenomenon nor a condition distinct to San Francisco. Travel the country over, no less the planet, and you will come face to face with it in major metropolitan areas as well as their outlying regions. The real challenge of homelessness is not its existence, but how we respond to it.

How many of you have ever heard the phrase..."There, but for the grace of God, go I?" This phrase haunts me every time I walk down the streets of our City and dare to make eye contact with one of our unhoused siblings. At those moments I think to myself, a missed paycheck, an unanticipated accident, illness or misfortune, a tragedy or trauma that takes the sort of toll, as to dash all hope, and, "there, but for the grace of God, go I."

Back in the early 1980's a favorite cousin of mine, a student at Columbia School of Journalism, opted to move into Tompkins Square Park, in Manhattan's East Village, for a week, to gather content for her masters thesis. In that homeless tent community who do you think she encountered? Some very unlikely souls who had fallen through life's cracks; a Wall Street stock broker, a former Episcopal Priest, a civil servant

and so many others... all born mothers' children, all children of the almighty deserving of love, dignity, food and shelter. The lessons learned by this cousin of mine were far greater than the content needed for her thesis; so basic and simple, yet at the same time so powerful and profound. By taking the time to come into their presence, their precious little space, uninterrupted, mostly in silence, to meet them as equals on life's playing field, she was able to better appreciate, comprehend and experience their humanity. It was for her a transfiguring experience.

Not long after that, myself, an Investment Banker then, just out of college, after a late night party, made the mistake of stepping onto a New York City Subway that happened to be going in the wrong direction; perhaps a metaphor for my state in life at that time. When realizing that I needed to change trains, I found myself on the platform of what was then the World Trade Center station. No sooner did I exit the train than I heard the shrill yelling of a man whose hands were flailing and, much to my misfortune, came into contact with my ribs. At that point I found myself face down in a puddle on that platform having lost my wind. For a young person, losing one's wind is the first realization of one's mortality. Fortunately, there was a guard present who saw what had happened. With a look of sad resignation he uttered "Sir, I don't know what to say to you. President Reagan believes that if this man takes his medication he'll be fine; the problem is, he lives down here. That critical moment, what some might call a crisis of consciousness, forced me to take stock, not only of the life I was leading, but more importantly, the life I wanted to lead. It was that encounter that prompted my departure from the comfort and riches of the life to which I had become accustomed and, without a second thought, answering God's call to service, a ministry which, in every chapter, has given me sacred occasions to serve those in the greatest of need. I share this very personal testimony with you as a backdrop for what was happening on the other side of the country, in San Francisco, at precisely that same moment. At that time, 35 years ago, for all the same reasons, a homeless crisis was emerging here in our City. Then Mayor Art Agnos, invited faith leaders into his office and appealed to them, saying, "There are people sleeping on the steps of City Hall... Civic Center Plaza is being called Camp Agnos...you are faith leaders, you have a moral obligation, if not a responsibility to help respond. Open your doors and do what you do best, give them a warm, dry and safe place to sleep, a home cooked meal, some dignity and love, just during the coldest and rainiest months of the year...and the rest is history... What was anticipated to be just a one year emergency Winter Shelter has, this past Monday, commenced its 35th year of service to our City and will offer needed hope and respite for up to 80 of our unhoused siblings nightly through the end of March.

In the spirit of that legendary African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child," credit for the longevity and success of our child, the Interfaith Winter Shelter, is deservedly shared. To illustrate this, I am going to ask you to rise when your affiliation is recognized and remain standing...Operational funding for the Interfaith Winter Shelter is provided by the City & County of San Francisco through its Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing (Mayor, BOS, Department Heads, HSH please

rise). Oversight, contracting and staffing is provided by Episcopal Community Services, a ministry of the Episcopal Diocese of California (ECS/DIOCAL please rise). The San Francisco Interfaith Council is responsible for securing and scheduling the four host sites, each of which sacrificially provides critical shelter. These sites include Episcopal Community Services' Canon Kip Senior Center, First Unitarian Universalist Society of San Francisco (please rise), St. Mark's Lutheran Church (please rise/Bishop Elect Jeff Johnson), the Archdiocesan Cathedral of St. Mary of the Assumption (Archdiocese/St. Mary's please rise), the over 50 congregations and organizations that prepare and serve meals (if you or your community has ever prepared meals and served at the Interfaith Winter Shelter please rise)... and finally anyone who has ever donated to the Interfaith Winter Shelter, supported or participated in the Winterfaith Shelter Walk that raises funds for the shelter (please rise). Here before you is our village that nurtures and makes possible the Interfaith Winter Shelter. THANK YOU! You may please be seated.

In addition to those just recognized, present here today are the leaders of the faith based social service agencies who, 24 hours a day/seven days a week, collectively, provide the safety net for San Francisco's most vulnerable residents... Moreover, joining us at these tables are congregations who host food pantries as well as their own shelters, not to mention the countless people of faith who volunteer for causes near and dear to their hearts; all of this giving affirmation to the fact that it's in the DNA of communities of faith and religious institutions to respond to those in the greatest of need.

I'm going to close these remarks where I started them... by suggesting that the real challenge of homelessness is not its existence, but how we respond to it. It's very easy to sit on the sidelines and to criticize perceived social failures. It takes a lot more courage, time, energy and commitment to be part of the solution. In this season of Thanksgiving, the San Francisco Interfaith Council says a heartfelt THANK YOU to each and every one of you! We lift you up and recognize you not only for your service, but as shining models for others to emulate.

At this time, I would invite San Francisco Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing Director Shireen McSpaden forward to offer thanks on behalf of her department, along with the Rt. Reverend Dr. Marc Handley Andrus, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of California representing Episcopal Community Services, Paige Hosking, SFIC Interfaith Winter Shelter Coordinator and Member of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints, and the senior leadership of our Interfaith Winter Shelter host sites, Reverend Vanessa Southern, Senior Minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Society of San Francisco, Rev. Lyle Beckman, Interim Pastor of St. Mark's Lutheran Church and Fr. Kevin Kennedy, Priest of the Cathedral of St. Mary of the Assumption, who will offer prayers for our City's homeless residents and be presented with a gift from the San Francisco Interfaith Council on the occasion of the Shelter's 35th Anniversary.