

"Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion"

by Gregory Boyle SJ

How about a ringside seat at one of the most challenging, and therefore potentially most rewarding, ministries on the face of the earth? Step a little closer and try to keep up with a Jesuit pastor of Dolores Mission in LA. "The church had been in Boyle Heights for some forty years, nestled in the middle of two large public-housing projects, Pico Gardens and Aliso Village. Together they comprised the largest grouping of public housing west of the Mississippi."

The author, Fr. Gregory Boyle, who is simply called "G." by the homies in his flock, was assigned there in 1986. His book is about "the who" and "the what" that has changed his life ever since. "When I arrived," G continues, "we had eight active gangs, seven Latino and one African-American. The projects were 25 percent African American back in 1986 and are now 99.9 percent Latino."

He tells story after story of his day-to-day episodes in the hood. The pastor is hard on his readers. He sometimes goes to great lengths introducing us to a timid twelve year-old or a young man fresh out of prison. Within paragraphs we are running with G, out of breath, to find our new friends gunned down. I don't think the author purposely set us up. I think he wanted to give us a glimpse of powerlessness in a ministry where worlds collide and their citizens live closer to tragedy than seems possible.

He quotes his poets and his heroes throughout the book. He wrote that Mother Theresa described the world's ills this way: "We've just forgotten that we belong to each other." (Those words gave me pause.) And it seems that as often as G reflects on the nuts and bolts of his ministry, we are reminded of our own. We are tattooed by the frank dialogue, by a mother's grief, by a survivor's loneliness, and by a pastor's resolve.

Father Boyle is asked to speak about his

ministry, a lot. On one occasion, he was invited to receive an award from the Education Department of Loyola Marymount University on the same evening he had a speaking engagement elsewhere. The LMU people agreed to G's request to send one of the workers. He chose Elias.

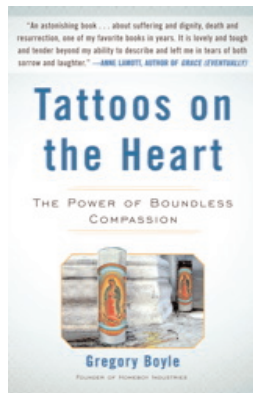
"Could you go to this event and accept this award on my behalf?" G asked him. "Course I will." News that Elias would have to give a little acceptance speech is greeted with wide eyes and raw anxiety. On the way to the event, a senior staff person, Cara, is trying to calm Elias down. "Look," she says, "they always say that if you're nervous speaking in front of people, just image your entire audience is stark naked." Elias turns on her. "I CAN'T DO THAT - I'd be staring the whole time."

At the appointed time, Elias makes his way to the podium and reads his speech off the yellow lined paper. He finishes big: "Because Father Greg and Homeboy Industries believed in me, I decided to believe in myself. And the best way I can think of payin' 'em back is by changing my life. And that's exactly what I've decided to do. Thank you."

The auditorium erupts in applause. They go nuts. A prolonged ovation, Kleenex everywhere, and feet are stomping. Even after Elias has found his seat, the audience goes on and on. "Damn, they're sure clappin' a lot for G," he says to Cara who is still on her feet, applauding. Cara crouches toward him, "Oye, *menso*, they're not clappin' for G - they're clappin' for YOU."

The story of Elias captures what G hopes for, prays for, struggles for at Homeboy and the Dolores Mission. His greatest joy comes when his homies begin to see themselves as God sees them. "We happen to be God's joy," Boyle writes. "That takes some getting used to."

"You stand with the belligerent, the surly, and the badly behaved until bad behavior is recognized for the language that it is: the vocabulary of the deeply wounded and of those whose burdens are more than they can bear." More than once G describes that moment when machismo struts into



his office only to surrender to what they choose to bear no longer. You will share their tears before you can turn the page.

“Tattoos” is a testimony to what Boyle calls “the slow work of God” that gets done if we are faithful. It's never just up to the minister. Ministry is always a dialogue. And Fr. Greg sj is who he is, twenty-five years after he became the youngest pastor ever at Dolores Mission, precisely because he dialogues so well.

It is a short book. Two-and-a-half decades feels like too much to cram into barely two hundred pages. But he chronicles the tragedies gracefully and cushions them with just enough humor and “short stories” of redemption. It is eye-opening and heart-wrenching. It is intimidating and provocative. It is gospel, applied, and applied again.

There are lots of Spanish phrases in each of the chapters. The back and forth helps us appreciate the struggle that confronts many of these young souls as they search for their place. And the litany of fallen is nearly as long as that of the survivors. But there is hope, too. Lots and lots of hope. Not the kind that guarantees success, but the kind that validates the effort. A hope that may have only the unexpected blessings of the day before to build on.

The Homeboy Industries founder cultivates the reader well for the invitation in the final chapter. By the end of the book it is clear that he is doing more than just serving the needs of the war zone that is his parish. “Serving others is good,” G writes. “It's a start. But it's just the hallway that leads to the Grand Ballroom.” “Go into the ballroom,” he told his audience at John Carroll University this past October. Kinship is “not serving the other, but being one with the other. Jesus was not 'a man for others'; he was one with them. There is a world of difference in that.”

“A spacious and undefended heart finds room for everything you are and carves a space for everybody else.” That is the power of God's grace.

It is a defenseless heart that wrote this book. Buy the book. I'd loan you mine but G said to tell you to “get your own damn book.” Homeboy Industries needs the money.

+++ *You can buy the book, make a donation, or buy products and services on their web site: www.homeboy-industries.org. I did some of my Christmas shopping there just last week.* +++

AN APPEALING THOUGHT . . .

The end of this year is so close to the beginning of something new . . .

We have always been able to adjust to the market demand and these days are calling for more creative ways to address bullying in our schools. We know that bullying succeeds only where solidarity and compassion fall short, so we are developing new approaches for parochial and public schools, for students and adults alike. We are reaching for the Gospel and common sense. Beacon Street is doing its part.

We are hoping that new offerings through Young Audiences of Northeast Ohio will attract the attention of schools struggling with unwanted behaviors. YANEO has relied on us for “Right to Read” programming for the last decade. Now bullying prevention is on the horizon.

Budgets are bullying some of our regular clients, too. The economy seems to hit schools first, if not hardest. So this new initiative comes at a good time. We just need help till the requests start coming in.

In the meantime, nothing bolsters our ministry hearts more than to hear from clients we have served for many years. Cardinal Mooney HS in Youngstown asked us back for their 170 sophomores for an all-day retreat. “Exactly what we needed. Never a disappointment,” their evaluation read. “The kids loved Bob.” And Mary Hart of Clague Road UCC asked me to accompany 100 of her friends on the Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad to celebrate her wedding anniversary. “Always professional,” was her comment for the “clown in training.”

So the message is still strong and we hope that new opportunities will help us turn the page. Beacon Street is still the most flexible and affordable arts ministry in town. Thank you for sustaining us year after year. And thank you for considering a donation now to help us beat bullying in our schools.

Blessings of the Season,

