

## The Impact of Vianney Justin, OFM

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The fine profile of jubilant Vianney Justin, OFM, in *HNP Today* inspired me to add some details to this remarkable friar's story. His journey reminds me of another Franciscan, Capuchin Solanus Casey, who like Vianney, was not deemed appropriate for priestly ministry. Though Casey was ordained to the priesthood, he was never allowed to exercise that role and lived his life working as porter at the Capuchin friary in Detroit. The cases are similar in that Vianney and Solanus touched countless souls in what those around them might consider menial work. So wide-reaching was Casey's influence that his cause for beatification and sainthood is now progressing through the various stages of that process.

As someone who has had the privilege of walking with Vianney during several periods of his life, I would like to mention a few highlights of that journey. I believe they will rival the works of Solanus Casey a century ago.

There is mention in the profile of Vianney's great love for the mission of our Province in Bolivia. What should be added is his crucial role in reorienting our approach to mission there from a strictly sacramental emphasis to the much more fundamental need for instruction in the Faith. He and several others established a wonderful network of indigenous lay catechists in the various centers of that extensive area. Those of us who had preceded him in Bolivia with an exclusive sacramental mentality saw in Vianney's approach the absolute need for what then was called "pre-evangelization".

Bolivian reality, while so dear to Vianney's heart, was the reason ultimately for his return to the U.S. and a major factor in the health challenges mentioned in this profile. That mission presented physical, emotional and even spiritual problems which several sensitive friars like Vianney found overwhelming. They literally "gave their lives" to the people of Bolivia and paid a heavy price for their good will.

Later, I came into contact with Vianney in the wonderful friar-community of East Boston. He was a beloved member of that remarkable group, an initiative that could serve us now as a model for other non-parochial ministries in poor areas. Most of our community in East Boston consisted of non-ordained friars, and our impact on the local parish and surrounding neighborhood was incalculable.

Next, I had the good fortune to live with Vianney for some 15 years in our Washington-based Assisi Community. This is where I came to a much deeper appreciation of how Franciscan this man is.

As noted in his story, he worked for several years at Gift of Peace, the center for dying indigent women and men, run by Mother Theresa's Missionaries of Charity. As a practical nurse, Vianney was enormously helpful in providing both spiritual and medical assistance to those "least of the brethren" who were dying there.

Unmentioned in his profile are the retreats he conducted nearly every weekend for street people of this city. He found a wonderful Catholic Worker center some distance away and would take six to eight homeless folks there for two or three days of sharing stories and enjoying the beautiful Virginia countryside, so distant from their gritty and unfriendly city environment. He always had dramatic, often tragic, stories to share with us at our morning prayer after such a weekend.

In addition, Vianney had great skill as the maintenance man for the community's two rickety row houses in inner city Washington. I often marveled at how he kept a roof over our heads seemingly with duct tape and glue, which he so often used creatively in a variety of maintenance challenges. During that decade and a half, he was a pillar of this remarkable group of women and men striving to live an alternative

(Franciscan) life style. Vianney was beloved by all who lived with us at Assisi for however long or short a period of time and all whom he encountered in DC. It wasn't unusual to see him greeted by street people as we moved around Washington. I was extremely proud to be his brother.

More recently, as noted in his bio, Vianney has ministered to needy people in Buffalo, again choosing those most in need of assistance. In particular he chauffeured the families of incarcerated men and women taking them to visit their loved ones – people who otherwise would find such visits nearly impossible. Once more, Vianney Listened compassionately to countless stories of pain and tragedy as he took them to and from the “correctional facilities” at a distance from Buffalo.

All of Vianney's life speaks clearly of that eminently Franciscan virtue, the preferential option for the poor. I give thanks to God that I have had the grace to witness a part of his dedicated life and it would not be surprising if one day he joins the humble Solanus Casey among the acknowledged saints of our time.