

Photographs from a Captivated Heart

BY HEIDI J. HORNIK

Gerard Straub's powerful images draw us to a moment of recognition—of the face of Christ in the poor, and the ministry of Christ in the ministry to the hungry.

Gerard Straub left his Hollywood-television-producer lifestyle behind when he landed in Calcutta on October 26, 1999, to spend two years with the poor. He wanted to portray in his art the context of their poverty, rather than the emblematic child posed for a relief poster. The product of his journey was his book, *When Did I See You Hungry?* (Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2002, 274 pp., \$29.95), and companion film narrated by his friend, actor Martin Sheen.[†]

Straub's personal transformation began in 1995 as he was researching a novel in Italy; there he learned of St. Francis of Assisi (c. 1181-1226), who made poverty a way of life. Though an atheist at the time, Straub explains, "Francis captivated my heart and mind; the powerful story of his life, with its unconditional and unrestricted response to God, turned my life upside down" (p. 1). He never finished the novel, but spent the next four years studying the lives of St. Francis and his friend, St. Clare of Assisi. Later he lived in the slums of Philadelphia with Franciscan friars and sisters who feed more than five hundred people each day. Creating a documentary film on their work, *We Have a Table for Four Ready: The Saint Francis Inn*, changed his view of the poor—and of his calling in life.

The photographs reprinted here are from "A Meditation in Images and Words," the second part of *When Did I See You Hungry?*, which records the artist's life among the poor in the U.S., Canada, Italy, Kenya, Brazil, India, Mexico, the Philippines, and Jamaica. In addition to photographs titled only by their location, the "Meditation" uses short passages from Straub's personal journal, as well as words from Jesus, St. Theresa, the Book of Tobit, and others. I've included some of these passages in italics under his photographs on the next pages. Yet his powerful images speak for themselves.



Gerard Thomas Straub. PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

The widespread existence of hunger is a massive violation of human rights bordering on epidemic proportions (p. 36).

We are tempted to pass quickly over this image of a man in a Philadelphia soup kitchen because he is so familiar to us. We flash back to when we volunteered at a Salvation Army gathering around Thanksgiving or Christmas, primarily to feel good about ourselves. On closer viewing, however, the lines on the man's face, the texture of his skin and graying hair, and the years of age evident in the turn of his hands, bring him closer to us. His eyes are downcast naturally as he eats. This is his world. The photograph captures an individual, not a "type" of man who represents the indigent.



Gerard Thomas Straub. RIVERTON GARBAGE DUMP, KINGSTON, JAMAICA

Every day, hundreds of people rummage through the garbage dump in the Riverton section of Kingston searching for anything they can salvage and sell (p. 104).

Every year we produce a huge amount of trash in America and little of it is recycled. In a series of photographs, the artist records people who are not adding to the Riverton garbage dump in Kingston, Jamaica, but searching for something valuable to use or sell. It's a startlingly different take on recycling. The views are nondescript (as dumps tend to be) except for the people in the compositions. Here a young man, standing before an abandoned car frame, holds an object of some kind. An askew baseball cap shields his head from the Jamaican sun and gives him a bit of a personality. He's not angry or even aware of the camera. The image captures the young man's world, his context, an instant in his day, and offers a challenge: "What do we do? More importantly: What do I do?"



Gerard Thomas Straub. KINGSTON, JAMAICA

A young girl looks directly into the lens or “eye” of the camera. Her eyes are not pleading in desperation for food, and her stomach is not uncovered and bloated. Rather she and her doll, which she holds dearly to her face, welcome us into their private space. In her room, or her family’s room, she sits on a bed with a torn comforter. It is a place of calm and peace, a haven from the outside world. She is resting and secure, though around her are nondescript objects of her poverty. Straub invites us to look at her and be calm with her. Yet we wonder how she will maintain this calm as she begins to mature and understand, as the artist has come to understand, the poverty in which she lives.

And what you hate, do not do to anyone. Give some of your food to the hungry, and some of your clothing to the naked.
Tobit 4:15a,16

Straub's photographs draw us toward a moment of recognition that is not unlike, though it may be less obvious than, that of Caravaggio's *Supper at Emmaus*. We recognize the face of Christ in the poor, and the ministry of Christ in the ministry to the poor and hungry.

Next to another image of a man living on the streets of Philadelphia, that 'city of brotherly love,' the artist writes, "The essence of Jesus' message is: Make every stranger, no matter how poor and dirty, no matter how weak or unlovable, your neighbor. Tough message" (p. 38).

NOTE

† We thank Mr. Straub for allowing us to publish these images from *When Did I See You Hungry?* Citations to this book are in the text. We also thank Matthew Wohlert and The San Damiano Foundation for their assistance. Mr. Straub's documentaries are available through The San Damiano Foundation (www.sandamianofoundation.org), which "produces films that showcase the active and contemplative dimensions of the spirituality of St. Francis and Clare of Assisi, along with the Franciscan concern for social justice, peace and non-violence."



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