

At the heart of the sidewalk

By Edmund Miller

My sidewalk-counseling partner, Alicia Wong, and I occasionally give seminars on how to provide pro-life sidewalk counseling outside of abortion facilities. While at first our presentations elicit discussion and enthusiasm, very few of those attending actually end up on the sidewalk. And when someone does give sidewalk counseling a try, for a few weeks or even a month or two, rarely will he or she stick with it. Recruiting new sidewalk counselors has been a frustrating task for us.

Perhaps our approach is all wrong. Perhaps we should describe mild days in the fresh outdoors, cheering words from passing motorists and the many honors received for being a lifesaving hero. Unfortunately, as many pro-lifers know, such scenarios are usually far from typical. Most sidewalk counseling is done under difficult circumstances, with little or no thanks. You might go days or even weeks without a success story to tell. In cold weather, you're a muffled, frozen oddball standing on the sidewalk. Sometimes even your own spouse (not mine, thank God) might begin to resent the time you spend away from home in what often seems a hopeless endeavor. But all of these sources of discouragement are, to some extent, the very reason I've been sidewalk counseling since 1987.

Movement versus stillness

I suspect that one reason we have so much difficulty in recruiting sidewalk counselors is because even ardent, Christian pro-life people have, to some extent, been affected by the ethos of the age. Our age glorifies

movement. The philosophy of movement is neatly summarized by a character named Weston in the C.S. Lewis novel *Out of the Silent Planet*. Weston explains that the goal of the human race is to speed from one planet to the next, not letting other species hinder our progress, because power is the fuel of movement and its use therefore justified for moving us on. Movement, he says, is life.

And is this not the thinking of our own time? Do we not tear down the past while we race to an undefined future? Do we not move from job to job, from house to house, from country to country, at a rate which would have confounded our ancestors? Do we not curse our computers when they fail to respond instantaneously to our bidding? In our human communication, have we not sacrificed meaning for speed? Do we not put those who cannot keep up the pace in out-of-the-way facilities? And do we not even kill some of them? Success, for us, must be a measurable thing—measured in terms of how many appointments we have recorded in our notebook and how many times each day our cell phone rings.

In the midst of all of this, sidewalk counseling is an anomaly. In the midst of the rush, sidewalk counseling is stillness. Focus and quiet are essential. Sidewalk counselors do not chat; they do not preach; they do not chant slogans; they do not bear large signs. They strive to be as unobtrusive as possible, because when they approach an abortion-minded woman or a couple, they want the moment to be one of fresh, genuine human contact.

The secret of love

Yet, there is another element to the stillness of the sidewalk counselor. He or she must be willing to suf-

fer. This is an attitude that does not allow for anger, defensive techniques, protestations or arm flailing of any sort. Of course, there will also be successes: There will be miraculous moments; moments of profound mystery and joy; moments of obvious, near-palpable grace. More often, though, there will be those times when the wind whips around you, the day is bleak and bitterly cold, the clients rush in without even bothering to become angry with you or no one listens. Then the world starts to whisper in your ear, "Is this the best use of your time? Are you really being effective?" This is the moment at which the sidewalk counselor must embrace his suffering—for in that embrace, in that acceptance, he holds the key to life.

Weston's definition of life, of course, was mostly wrong. Life is, in the beginning, a presence—an unmoving, unchanged presence, the presence of God. The only complete definition of life that one can offer is, simply, God. That's it. Obviously, then, the closer to God one is, the more one has of life. But how does one draw closer? What is the essence of God's personality? In His constant giving of Himself to us, we recognize the obvious truth that His essence is love.

To be willing to sidewalk counsel, one must be

willing to suffer. But to be willing to suffer is to be willing to love, an act which takes us to the very source of life, to the springs of its growth. Time after time, in the midst of the seemingly bleakest circumstances, Alicia and I have seen the flame of life ignite—we have seen mothers and fathers smile, thank us and leave. We have witnessed the closure of an abortion facility where we counseled for two years, its business having been so affected by our presence that the abortionist was evicted for unpaid rent. Even without these obvious signs of life, though, we go to the abortion businesses, trying to be the still presence we are called to be. As long as there is love, death can have no victory.

Edmund Miller teaches at Spiritus Sanctus Academy in Ann Arbor, Michigan and has been sidewalk counseling since 1987. For more information about his and Alicia Wong's pro-life apostolate, the Guadalupe Partners, call 734-709-4096 or visit www.guadalupepartners.org. See also "The Guadalupe Partners" in our November-December 2008 issue and on www.clmagazine.org.

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