

Major News Announcement from Gerry Straub

Dear Friends and Supporters,

On August 16th, *The New York Times* carried a front page story on the perils of ministers whose dedication caused them to rarely take a break from the Lord's work. One pastor had not taken a vacation in 18 years. The story detailed how ministers from many Christian denominations had succumbed to a host of bad habits, such as eating and drinking too much, as a result of not taking adequate time off to restore and rejuvenate themselves. The article was a confirmation of a decision I had made. For nearly a decade my entire focus has been on helping the poor, and in the process I had neglected myself and as a result I had made a mess out of my personal life. It was time to take myself in for repairs and renewal.

It is with great sadness that I inform you of a very difficult and painful decision, one which has been brewing for a long time.

Due to a host of personal reasons, I have resigned from the San Damiano Foundation, which is practically like resigning from myself. My pastor recently told me that I had lost myself in SDF and that I needed to withdraw and take care of myself...so that I could continue to better care for the marginalized and impoverished in the future. Not long ago, Tom Roberts of National Catholic Reporter asked me during a speaking engagement in Kansas City what I did for fun. I had no answer. I have three grandchildren whom I rarely see, because I'm always on the road speaking or filming, or I'm locked up in a dark editing room in Burbank working on a film.

I have poured my life into this ministry, but now I am on the verge of exhaustion and struggling to cope with a severe case of post traumatic stress disorder. Nightmares of starving people often wake me up. I am simply unable to continue. I cannot shut out the horrors I saw in Haiti immediately after the earthquake...the corpses of children and the endless parade of people with amputated limbs haunt me and are rarely far from my consciousness. I cry often, rarely without any warning.

I have worked tirelessly for more than eight years, without a vacation and rarely taking a full weekend off. A typical work day was at least eleven hours long, and much longer when I was actually filming. Plus there were untold hours spent at home actually writing the film scripts. I do not know how I am still standing. By God's unmerited grace I have not had one sick day in more than eight years...unless you count the three days in Uganda when I was sidelined by malaria and still actually tried to film on one of those days until I was forced to be taken to a hospital. I simply must take time to rejuvenate myself. Close friends and family have become increasingly concerned about my health and are strongly urging I take a serious break. The stress of running the foundation, with all the public speaking (over 150 events in the last five years all across the U.S. and in Italy and France) and the nonstop fundraising, not to mention filming in places like war-torn Uganda and post-earthquake Haiti has taken a toll on me and I need to stop, look at my own life and make some changes.

I am sorry if I have disappointed any of you with this announcement. This decision has been many months in the making and has the full support of those who helped me reach

it. In feeding others, I had failed to feed myself and take the time needed to prevent burnout. My life has been out of balance. To everything there is a season, and now is the time for personal restoration.

I thank you from the bottom of my heart for all your love and support. Together we made a little difference in the lives of some of the poor, and many viewers of the films were motivated to volunteer at ministries featured in our films. And it is an undeniable fact that we saved the lives of at least two kids in Uganda. Dr. Tony Lazzara, who was featured in my film *The Patients of the Saint*, had advance notice of this announcement. He responded with these kind words: “You have been our ambassador to the poor and you will ever remain so. Gerry, I cannot thank you enough for all that you have done for us and the poor of the world. The Villa La Paz Foundation is able to meet all its needs thanks to *The Patients of a Saint*. Please keep in touch and pray for me.” Dr. Tony is my hero, and being with him changed my life.

The Board of Directors of the San Damiano Foundation is going to continue the work I began by finding independent filmmakers to artistically express their concern for the poor. And I am happy that the Board has selected Steve McIntire to watch over the day to day operation of SDF. Steve is a good friend of mine; we worked together 30 years ago at ABC on *General Hospital*. Steve most recent position at ABC was executive in charge of production in the west coast bureau of *Good Morning, America*.

As I move into this new phase of my life, I ask for your prayers. I plan on spending a little time working directly with the poor in Peru, Haiti and Zanzibar in the not too distant future. I really want to focus my energies on writing and speaking. The physical grind of making films, along with raising all the funds required, is just too much at my age. In March, I spent my 63rd birthday in Haiti. I think at this stage in my life, I can be more effective with my pen and voice, than with my video camera. For me, my focus in the future will be twofold: exploring the depths and necessity of mysticism and mercy.

I have begun work a new book (*Still Life, with Movement: A Memoir of a Journey to Weakness*), which looks back at my experience of being with the poor these past eight years; the book stresses the importance of balancing action with contemplation. And I am determined to finish a book I began years ago when I was graced with the rare opportunity to spend a week in Thomas Merton’s hermitage in the woods on the grounds of the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky.

Our lives are marked by the numerous transitions we make, some huge, some minor. The word transition comes from two Latin words: *trans* which means “across” and *itus* which is the fourth principal part of the verb *ire*, meaning “to go.” Every transition we make in life means we are leaving something familiar and are crossing over into unfamiliar territory. The bigger the transition we make, the more unpredictable the outcome. In each transition we make, we need to remember God is with us in the crossing.

In a famous prayer, which I include here because I need to hear it and pray it, Thomas Merton wrote: *My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road before me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing*

so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me through the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my peril alone."

Everything in the world speaks of God. To hear you need to be attentive to what is happening around you...and mindful of what is happening within you. What is happening within me is a cry for a little break followed by a new way to serve the poor, a way that gives me more space to also take care of myself, to deal with my own inner doubts, confusions and contradictions...and also find a way to enjoy a little fun with my grandkids. I have made fifteen films for SDF...now I need to write, which I believe is my true vocation.

Please keep me in your prayers.

Peace and blessings,

Gerry Straub