

Our Daily Bread

A letter from the Netherlands



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A meal in the women's psychiatric ward. What treatment can you give when the first question is: "Doctor, can you give me some bread?"

Laurent Nouwen

Henri Nouwen Stichting,
Rotterdam, the Netherlands

Poverty has many faces around the world. Sometimes it looks at you with vitality and hope, sometimes with indifference and passivity, and sometimes – as when recently visiting a dilapidated building packed with hundreds of psychiatric patients in Ukraine – with despair and abandonment. But the common characteristic on the face of poverty is the painful expression of hunger and malnutrition.

As a small charitable organization, the Rotterdam-based Henri Nouwen Stichting (Foundation) trucked in at our own ex-

pense mattresses for the bare iron-sprung bedsteads, bed linen to replace the worn-out rags on the beds, and some better cooking equipment to replace the rusted, leaking pots that were in use. We even provided training in human-oriented therapies as an alternative preferable to the continuous sedation of patients. But what difference does it make when the authorities lower the daily budget for food to less than EUR 0.24 per patient – just enough for a cup of watery borscht (beetroot soup) and a chunk of bread? What can you do with all your good intentions to bring human dignity to locked-up patients, when by government decree the bread ration is first reduced from 300 grams a day to 200 grams, and then again to 150 grams? What treatment can you give when the first question is: "Doctor, can you give me some bread?" What therapy can you give hypertrophic patients

in the morning who have been unable to sleep through the night because they were so hungry? What can Andrey, a young psychiatric doctor, do but – on the way to work – buy some bread for the patients himself? But Andrey cannot feed all 60 patients in his ward, let alone the 500 in the entire overcrowded barracks. Underpaid himself, he goes to neighboring Poland to work in the fields during harvest-time in order to earn enough money to survive the long winters.

What can one do, when all of this is too little?

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In mid-February 2018, Klaus Kraemer, a volunteer, and I drove from the city of Lviv in western Ukraine to the middle of a cold snowy nowhere, the trunk of our car loaded with boxes of MixMe, a vitamin and mineral food supplement donated by *Sight and Life*. Doctor Andrey had sent us some alarming findings of anemia levels in his patients. Within an hour of our arrival, Klaus was ready to begin, outlining a 100-day pilot project on a ward housing 60 women. To see the Managing Director of *Sight and*



Klaus Kraemer distributes soup

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Life serving bowls of food to patients in such a godforsaken place (sorry, God!) moved me deeply with gratitude. To “improve the lives of the world’s most vulnerable populations,” as the *Sight and Life* mission statement goes, takes caring, practical hands. Thank you, *Sight and Life*, for helping with our deepest human responsibility – to provide others with their “daily bread.”

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Klaus Kraemer, Managing Director of *Sight and Life*, serves food to patients in the psychiatric ward of a hospital in Ukraine