

STUMBLING STONES: HISTORY AT OUR FEET TO HONOR HUMANITY, CONFRONT THE PAST

In 1992, German artist Gunter Demnig conceived an art project as part of an initiative to honor Roma and Sinti victims of the Holocaust. In German, the project was called Stolpersteine, or “Stumbling Stones” in English.¹ The idea was to give recognition to the lives of ordinary people who were killed as part of the Holocaust.



**BRIAN
KANE**

Memorials have been present for much of human history. In Rome, for example, there are memorials to events, to groups of people and to individuals, in that order. For Rome, the emphasis was on the social order and not the individual.

Christianity changed that slowly. The Christian emphasis on the dignity of the person took centuries to be rooted. Today,

we reap the benefits of this emphasis when we talk about individual rights.

To understand Demnig’s memorial, we can look at it in the context of other remembrances of significant people we have experienced. From an American perspective, people who were influential in our history have been memorialized in lifelike and/or awe-inspiring sculptures. The examples that come to mind are in Washington, D.C.: the Lincoln Memorial and the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial, both for individuals, and one for a group of people, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial by American architect, designer and sculptor Maya Lin.

These memorials are significant because they give us an invitation to understand other people. They are encounters. They ask us, “Why remember them? Why now?” They also ask us to ponder, “What do their lives have to do with ours?”

MAKING THE ORDINARY EXTRAORDINARY

Demnig’s Stolpersteine try to directly answer these questions. In most of Europe, the city streets are made from cobblestones, which measure



Photo by Brian Kane

There are Stolpersteine or “Stumbling Stones” in at least 1,200 places in Europe. This memorial in the Trastevere neighborhood in Rome remembers the Citoni family of five: a mother, father and three children aged 7, 5 and 3.

roughly 4 inches by 4 inches. Demnig’s project was designed to replace ordinary cobblestones with “stumbling stones” that are brass replicas of them.



Photo by Larry Gertner, HMdb.org

A Catholic “stumbling stone” pays tribute to the Sisters of Charity of New York at the New York City AIDS Memorial Park in St. Vincent’s Triangle.

The intention of the Stolpersteine is to disrupt our experience of the ordinary. Demnig wants to interrupt our attention as we walk along a street or plaza, causing us to think about the layers of history that are at our feet, quite literally.

Each of these brass “stones” is inscribed with the names of those who were arrested from their homes, and, the date of their death and final resting place, if those details were known. He uses the language of the stone’s location so that the memory resonates with those who live in that area and would ordinarily walk past it. An example from the Roman neighborhood Trastevere is shown on page 63.

Notice the words on each of these stones. “Qui abitava,” which means “Here lived.” Then follows the name of the person and their year of birth, “nato,” or “nata,” depending on whether they were male or female. This is followed by “arrestato(a),” the date of their arrest, and “deportato(a),” the location to which they were sent. In this case, this entire family was sent to Auschwitz. Lastly, a notation is included on where they died. Here, the parents are listed as “in lugo ignoto(a),” meaning

“no known place,” while their three children are remembered as being “assassinato(a),” murdered, at Auschwitz.

This memorial remembers the Citoni family of five: a mother, father and three children aged 7, 5 and 3. These stumbling stones are meant to make us think about the people inscribed on the stones, and the tragic circumstances of their lives and deaths. I am certain that without this memorial, none of us who have walked past this building in Rome would have known about these lives. So, we stumble on them and the memories of those lives as we continue to live.

Memorials invite us into other people’s lives so that our own experiences might be strengthened. A memorial makes the past present.²

TURNING TO THE PAST TO UNDERSTAND HUMANITY

Demnig’s vision for his project has some historical resonance, as those of us who have visited European churches might remember. In London’s Westminster Abbey, for example, the floor is covered in stones commemorating those buried there.³ Demnig transformed that experience

by honoring the forgotten, the people who were persecuted, rather than those who were famous. He remembered those who were dead but had no grave.

So where are the “stumbling stones” of Catholicism that remain true to Demnig’s vision? I have experienced many, and I am sure that there are many more that I have not yet encountered. I will mention one place that will serve to demonstrate the spirit of Demnig’s vision.

Starting in the mid-19th century, the Sisters of Charity of New York served the people of New York City. They cared for the poor, survivors of the Titanic, and more recently, those with AIDS at St. Vincent’s Hospital in New York City’s Greenwich Village until it closed in 2010.⁴ The sisters were a positive force for change in New York City.

One can find a “stumbling stone” to the Sisters of Charity at the New York City AIDS Memorial Park at St. Vincent’s Triangle (shown on page 64). The memorial recognizes the sisters’ contribution to the care of all New York City citizens.

This is a Catholic stumbling stone. It is a moment in time that should give us pause and a moment to remember these sisters. As you reflect on your past journeys and set out on any new ones ahead, ask yourself: What are the other stumbling stones of Catholic health care?

BRIAN M. KANE, PhD, is senior director, ethics, for the Catholic Health Association, St. Louis.

NOTES

1. The Roma are colloquially known as “Travellers” or sometimes “Gypsies,” but these are considered derogatory terms. They are an itinerant population that originally migrated from India. They settled in Germany, then migrated to other parts of Europe. During the Holocaust,

they were one of the groups targeted by the Germans as being inferior. Adolf Eichmann often referred to the “Gypsy Problem” alongside the “Jewish Problem.” The Sinti are a subgroup of the Roma, most of who remained in Germany. See: Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Ipermann, *The Racial State: Germany 1933–1945* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 122.

Also, note that the word “Stolpersteine” refers to the plural “Stumbling Stones.” The singular is “Stolperstein.” Please see Gunter Demnig’s website on this project at <https://www.stolpersteine.eu/en/home>. I’d like to also recognize my daughter, Caitilin, who made me aware of this memorial.

2. Theologically, for Catholics, this description of making the past present is Eucharistic. The Mass makes Jesus’ sacrifice present for us today. It is the same gift to God, forever.

3. “Famous People/Organizations,” Westminster Abbey, <https://www.westminster-abbey.org/history/famous-people-organisations>.

In a similar way, Demnig’s Stolpersteine recall the places where evil occurred by emphasizing the humanity of those who were murdered. This follows a long tradition of Jewish and Christian tradition that equates the speaking of words, and especially names, as a blessed act. Encountering the stones acknowledges their lives.

4. “NYC AIDS Memorial Park at St. Vincent’s Triangle,” NYC Parks, <https://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/nyc-aids-memorial-park-at-st-vincent-s-triangle>; Michael J. O’Loughlin, “The Secret History of Catholic Caregivers and the AIDS Epidemic,” *America: The Jesuit Review*, June 10, 2019, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2019/05/31/catholic-hospital-pioneered-aids-care-podcast-plague-234101>;

Michael O’Loughlin, *Hidden Mercy: AIDS, Catholics and the Untold Stories of Compassion in the Face of Fear* (Broadleaf Books, 2021).

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