

Where 'I' fit in with those serving poor

Father John W. Crossin, OSFS/CNS

How to treat "street people" always has been a dilemma for me. Should I give alms? Or should I contribute to a parish project that helps those in need?

At one point a few years ago, I decided I only would give to organizations. After all, studies tell us that most homeless people suffer from addiction or mental illness or both. I thought it was better to pay for an effective program that might provide long-term assistance with their difficult problems. Still, I wondered if I was the priest who "walked by" in the Good Samaritan parable.

With a friend's help, I discerned my current solution: I carry \$1 in my pocket. The first person who asks for alms gets the dollar. My significant contributions go to organizations that have a more lasting impact.

The critical issue here is our decisions. Poverty and hunger in the midst of plenty call us to adopt new ways of thinking and choosing.

We might recall that:

- Most of the poor are not homeless. Homeless people in city streets are visible. Poor people in our midst often aren't known. Many may not want us to know they are poor.

- Our respect for life includes love for the poor.

- Concern for the poor and hungry involves social systems. It is a matter of society's common good, not only of individual acts of charity.

- Public problems call for public solutions.

Each person has gifts that can be used to serve those in need. Some have hands-on gifts such as my



Karen Callaway/CNS

Wally Bukowski helps construct a Habitat for Humanity house on land owned by the Diocese of Gary, Ind. "Each person has gifts that can be used to serve those in need," writes Oblate Father John W. Crossin.

friends Tony and Peggy, who volunteered in a soup kitchen. Others have organizational gifts that can bring services together. Still others have political gifts to move civil society toward just aid for the poor.

We must listen for the Holy Spirit's guidance. Instead of making decisions based solely on results, we need to ask for divine guidance.

Two years ago a friend called and asked me to help put together a group to reflect on the theological foundations for making decisions on poverty issues.

I wondered if I was called to participate in the group or whether I

should help in the search for others.

After some discernment, I decided participating was the Spirit's call.

In some small way we all can serve the poor. We may be led by the Spirit to give monetary donations or pray daily or work for just structures or write letters to our representatives or provide direct service.

Most important, I think, is to listen for divine guidance. To be truly effective, our work must be inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Oblate Father Crossin is executive director of the Washington Theological Consortium.

Living one paycheck away from poverty

Brian T. Olszewski/CNS

"Each of us is one paycheck away from needing the help of St. Vincent de Paul," Diane McKern used to tell those from whom she solicited assistance during six years as district council president of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul for the Diocese of Gary, Ind.

Working closely with township trustees, other churches, and private and government agencies, St. Vincent de Paul helps more than 20,000 people yearly in four counties.

The society raises and spends approximately \$400,000 annually to help the poor and volunteers more than 81,000 hours to distribute items.

McKern said St. Vincent de Paul often is the Band-Aid providing people with food, clothing, overnight lodging or assistance in paying util-

ity bills or purchasing prescriptions. "For long-term assistance, we know where to send people," she said.

The diocese began providing the longer-term help three years ago when it entered a partnership with Habitat for Humanity. That relationship and the houses it built "generated a lot of enthusiasm," said Jesuit Father Thomas Gannon, the diocese's liaison to Habitat.

The Gary Diocese purchased two lots across from Holy Angels Cathedral, donating them to Habitat. Through two loose-change collections in the parishes, Catholics contributed \$50,000 toward building each house.

When the federal government cut off supervised-housing funds in 1985, Father Stephen Vrabely, pastor of St. Joseph Parish in Hammond, Ind., provided soup and a

sandwich three days a week to anyone who came to the rectory.

Then, said Sue Hermann, "When the (steel) mills went down, that was the clincher."

Father Vrabely asked Hermann by early 1986 to coordinate a five-day-a-week, interfaith lunch program at the parish. The parish provides the facility; members of prayer groups and other denominations volunteer their time and donate food and paper products, as do local businesses.

Hermann, now parish secretary, said that anywhere from 8 to 15 people volunteer each day to serve the 200 people who start lining up an hour before the soup kitchen opens.

Olszewski is editor of the *Northwest Indiana Catholic* of the Diocese of Gary.

Faith Alive!

This month's adult-education package addresses poverty and hunger in a world of abundance. Do we know the poor in our communities? And what choices can we make that will make a difference for the poor?

Food for thought

People who suffer from poverty often are regarded as a problem. Or they're just anonymous, a statistic. Or they're forgotten, ignored.

For Jesus the poor were real people. They were welcome and respected — and heard.

In his apostolic letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* ("At the Beginning of the New Millennium"), Pope John Paul II wrote that "now is the time for a new 'creativity' in charity."

The pope said this new charity should involve "getting close" to those who suffer so that the hand that helps is seen not as a humiliating handout but as a sharing between brothers and sisters.

Think about it — about the poor as sisters and brothers, real people who feel at home in our communities.

D. Gibson, Editor, Faith Alive!

Faith in the Marketplace

Earlier this year, Faith Alive! posed this question to readers around the country: What does the church in your community do that seriously confronts the realities of poverty?

Selected reader responses:

"Many of our parishioners (St. Charles Borromeo Church) volunteer at the nearby Catholic Charities office. We have a monthly food collection that goes to Catholic Charities. We run a monthly hot casserole program in support of Catholic Charities as well. Additionally, we have a monthly collection for First Way, an organization serving the needs of pregnant women." — Deacon William Sepich, Cinnaminson, N.J.

"We (Blessed Sacrament Church, Cocoa, Fla.) have an outreach program. We run a thrift shop, and all proceeds go to help people in need." — Geraldine Leger, Port St. John, Fla.

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