Opinion

NCR Voices



Volunteers offer information and a Metro card to a homeless man outside of the Martin Luther King Jr. Library in Washington, D.C., on Aug. 14, 2025. (NCR photo/James V. Grimaldi)



by James V. Grimaldi

Executive Editor

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"The Son of God came into this world as a homeless person," Pope Francis said.

The comments of Pope Francis, made here in Washington in 2015, came to mind recently as the National Catholic Reporter was working, as it does every day, toward its mission of connecting Catholics to the common good with independent news.

And that part of our mission is more urgent than ever when we witness what's going on in the United States and here in the District of Columbia, where the president has federalized the police force and called in the National Guard.

To justify a so-called takeover, President Donald Trump declared a crime emergency. The Washington Post reported on Aug. 18 that 120 of the approximately 300 arrests to date targeted undocumented immigrants, and White House Deputy Chief of Staff Stephen Miller said the feds had zeroed in on more than 70 homeless encampments.

Trump's stated reasons are largely unjustified, says our guest columnist, Catholic University of America Law Professor Mary Graw Leary. Yes, Leary writes, we have crime like any city, but it is plummeting, not increasing.

There are a lot of theatrics that stir more fear and anxiety than true security. Many of us are getting texts from family and friends: "Are you OK?" Yes, we are. However beware food-delivery gig workers. The Post came across six agents of unidentified federal agencies tackling a man emerging from a coffee shop. At traffic checkpoints, federal agents who ordinarily investigate terrorism, organized crime or drug cartels have been deployed to write tickets for busted brake lights, seatbelt violations and fake license plates. So far, the impact seems negligible.



National Guard vehicles and members of the Guard were posted in front of Union Station and the Thurgood Marshall Federal Judiciary Building in Washington, D.C., on Aug. 17, 2025. (NCR photo/H. Betts)

A resident or visitor could go all day and see no evidence of the supposed takeover. Those who do aren't happy. A man threw a Subway sandwich at an officer and was arrested. An online poster called it assault with a deli weapon.

Washington these days is a pretty well-to-do city, with homes out of reach for many, and $50,000 vehicles parked on the streets in my Capitol Hill neighborhood. The middle-class are fine, thank you, and tourists arrive every day to enjoy our sites and world-class museums.

The disruptions are affecting the most vulnerable among us, migrants and homeless. For a city our size, we actually don't have a lot of homeless — about 5,100 men and women without permanent homes, according to a recent survey by the district.

The news for NCR is multifold. There's the story itself. Then, NCR always looks to see how Catholics respond to events, and our news editor Carol Zimmermann, always on the lookout, thought there would be a good story about Catholics aiding the homeless. The top agencies in Washington that provide food, services and shelter to those living on the streets are Catholic.

Carol tapped one of NCR's Washington-based freelancers, Allison Prang, who knew there were a number of homeless living under an overhang at the Martin Luther King Jr. Library downtown. Allison headed downtown to interview a few homeless men. She also talked to two agencies linked to the now-deceased Jesuit Fr. Horace McKenna, "the priest of the poor." She spoke to the McKenna Center and the spokesperson said the problem is that there is no plan to resettle those rousted into homes.

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After I posted Allison's story online Thursday, I decided to go over and take a look for myself. A few homeless remained, but most had scattered. You could see them on stoops and doorsteps of stores and offices rather than in large encampments that would be easy for the federal sweeps.

The library, a modernist building designed by Bauhaus architect Mies Van Der Rohe, stands in contrast to the limestone facade across the street, site of St. Patrick's in the City, one of the oldest Catholic parishes in Washington and home to Catholic Charities.

Noting the contrast, I recalled Pope Francis' visit compared with the dystopian episode unfolding in D.C. It was 10 years ago. The pope of the poor, the pontiff who took the name Francis, graced St. Patrick's for a meeting and lunch with homeless people, who were invited to meet with the leader of the Roman Catholic Church.

Francis had just met with power brokers on Capitol Hill for a joint address to Congress. He seemed happier at St. Patrick's, as he was always more comfortable with people on the margins and the vulnerable. His homily that day is a message worth recounting.

Francis began by telling the homeless that they reminded him of St. Joseph. "Joseph had to face some difficult situations in his life. One of them was the time when Mary

was about to give birth, to have Jesus."

You know the story: No place to go, they went to a manger.



On Sept. 24, 2015, Pope Francis is greeted as he arrives at a lunch for homeless people who are regularly fed by Catholic Charities, at St. Patrick's Church in Washington, D.C. (L'Osservatore Romano/Pool Photo via AP)

"I can imagine Joseph, with his wife about to have a child, with no shelter, no home, no place to stay," Francis said.

Joseph faced the same questions the homeless might ask today, Francis said.

"Why are we homeless, why don't we have housing? These are questions which many of you may ask, and do ask, every day. Like St. Joseph, you may ask: Why are we homeless, without a place to live?"

Here's the part that someone should read to the president or his deputy chief of staff.

"And those of us who do have a home, a roof over our heads, would also do well to ask: Why do these, our brothers and sisters, have no place to live? Why are these brothers and sisters of ours homeless?"

Perhaps the newly baptized Catholic vice president could circulate copies. Or better yet, a copy of the Gospel of Luke. Then, maybe, our government could see that homeless encampments are not just eyesores alongside Trump motorcade routes. They are the very vision of Jesus in our midst.

Remember, Francis said, "The Son of God came into this world as a homeless person. The Son of God knew what it was to start life without a roof over his head."

Read this next: Trump's flawed DC takeover lacks factual, legal rationale